

# Facilitating the Development of Students to Become Self-Directed Learners

One of the aims of education is to develop lifelong learners. This means that we aim to equip our students with the necessary learning skills so that they continue to learn and develop in the workplace and in life.

However, this is quite difficult to do in traditional classroom lecturing contexts. Think about it. The lecturer prepares a course outline that structures the work that students must cover and the things they must do on a weekly basis. Next, lecturers present the most important content and elaborate on it in a lecture. The lecturer also structures out-of-class online learning on Moodle by setting activities for students to work through and telling them what to prepare for the next lecture.

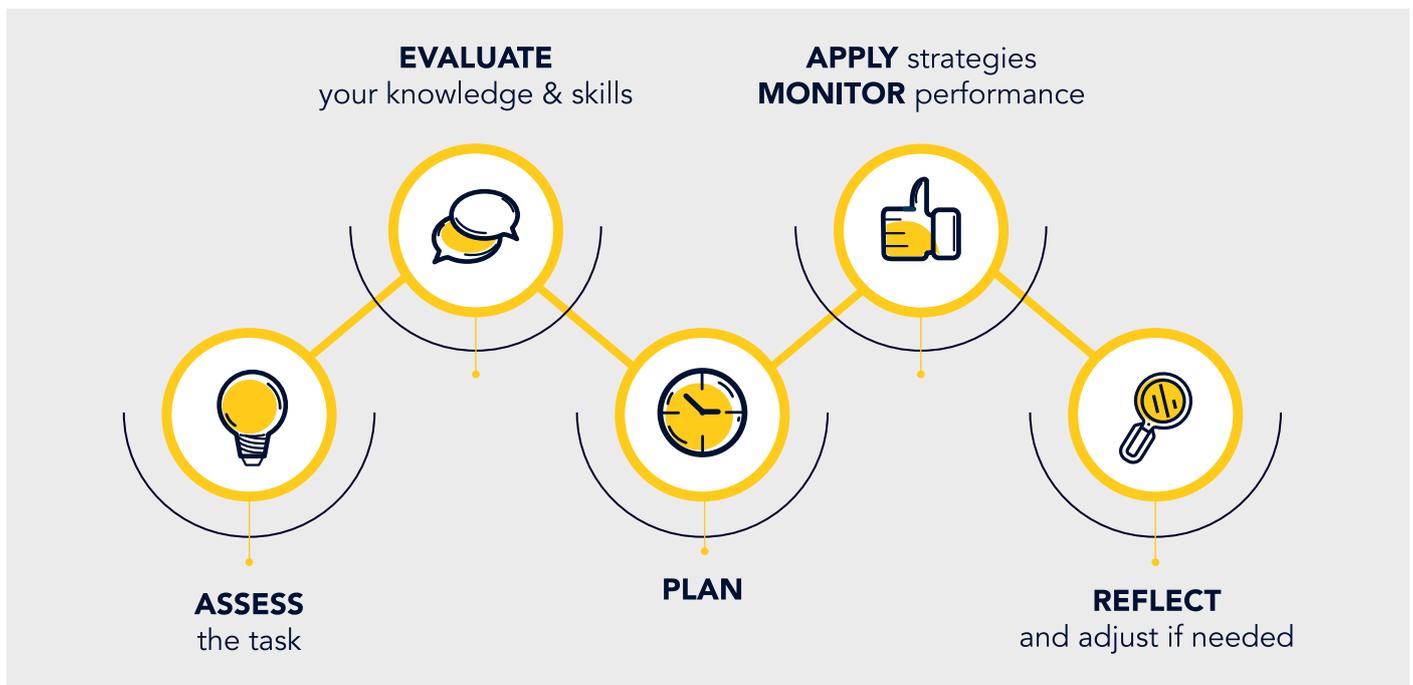
This means that students get few opportunities in traditional teaching contexts to develop and take responsibility for their learning themselves. A good thing about online learning is that while the lecturer develops all the online activities and guides students how to navigate through them, the student has to take overall responsibility for their learning. The student has to develop the necessary learning habits to learn online. In this time of disruption, students have a wonderful opportunity to invest in their futures by developing critical skills needed in the workplace and life. As the futurist, Alvin Toffler says, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn".



Ambrose et al. (2010, p.192) argue that:

"To become self-directed learners, students must learn to assess the demands of the task, evaluate their own knowledge and skills, plan their approach, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as needed".

## Cycle of Self-directed Learning



Adapted from Ambrose et al. (2010), p. 193

A guide has been developed to provide students with tips how to develop as self-directed learning by using the cycle of self-directed learning in online and remote contexts. By drawing extensively from Ambrose et al. (2010, p.203-213) and using the above cycle, below are some ways that a lecturer can assist and scaffold students to develop as self-directed learners.

## 1. For students to assess what is required in an assessment task, it assists if lecturers can:

- **Be more explicit than you think is necessary** to minimize students wrongly assessing or assuming what is needed. It might be useful to articulate what students need to do to meet the objectives of the assessment task, for example.
- **Tell students what you do not want.** For example, in a writing task share writing samples that highlight weak and appropriate features or arguments.
- **Check students' understanding of the task.** Help students to assess more accurately what the task is about by getting them to articulate what they think the task is in their own words and then giving them feedback and suggestions. Students can post their thoughts online. After a period, the lecturer can compile a memo stressing the main aspects of what the assessment task is about and ask students to check their assessment of the task with the memo. It does not have to take a lot of extra time to give each student insight into the accuracy of their understanding of a task.
- **Provide performance criteria.** Distributing the assessment rubric with the assignment can help students to assess what is required.

## 2. As students have a tendency to over-estimate their abilities, to assist them to judge their knowledge and skills more accurately:

- Provide formative assessment tasks (e.g., quizzes) together with feedback in terms of the answers. These enable students to assess where there are gaps in their knowledge.
- Provide opportunities for self-assessment. For example, ask students to write down how they would define key concepts in the module. Once they post this, provide them with a memo and ask them to use this to assess their own work. Alternatively, having provided the questions, ask students to develop and share the memo that will be used to mark the answers.

## 3. As students often spend too little time planning or make plans that do not match the required task, lecturers can assist students to plan more appropriately by:

- **Providing students with a plan to implement.** For example, for an assignment that spans 6 weeks indicate what a student needs to have achieved every two weeks to be on track. This models appropriate ways to plan for students from which they can learn so that they develop appropriate planning skills before they have to plan on their own.
- **Ask students to develop their own plan.** For large, complex assignments, ask senior students to submit their plan before starting the assignment and provide feedback.

- **Make planning the goal of an assignment.** For example, ask students to use design thinking to find solutions to a problem or problems and to write this up. This allows students to think the problem through and to plan an appropriate solution.

#### 4. To assist students to monitor their progress and performance:

- **Provide guided self-assessment opportunities.** For example, ask senior students to assess their essay against the assessment rubric.
- **Require students to reflect on their own work.** For example, senior students can develop a reflective note on the various iterations of their essay or design and the choices they made at certain points about what to include or exclude.
- **Use peer assessment** where classmates review each other's work and provide feedback. Peer reviewers need specific criteria about what to evaluate and how to do this (e.g., by following a rubric).

#### 5. To assist students to reflect on and adjust their strategy(ies):

- **Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their strategies.** Include a section at the end of an assignment or project where students respond to questions such as "What worked and why?" "What did not work and why?" "Is there another strategy I could have used?"
- **Create assignments that focus on strategizing rather than implementation.** Ask students to suggest a range of strategies to tackle or solve a problem and analyse their advantages and disadvantages rather than actually choosing and implementing one in an assignment. This provides students with the opportunity to practice evaluating different strategies that broadens the range of strategies that they can consider in future when they have to choose and implement an appropriate one.

##### References

Ambrose, S., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C. & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How Learning Works: 7 Research-based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.