

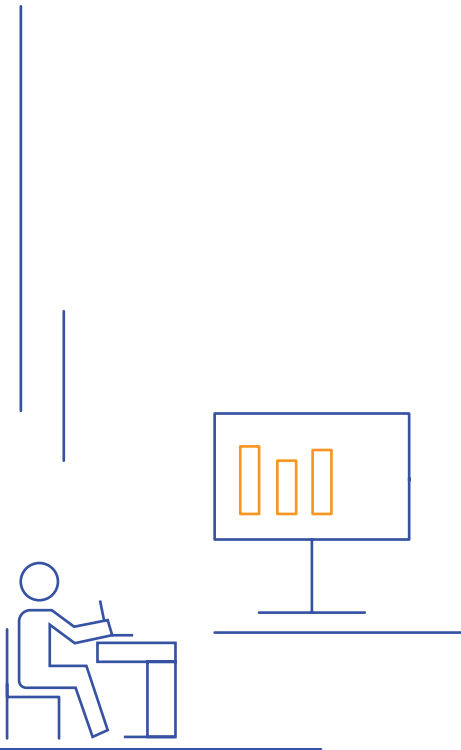


Self-learning

Concepts, Principles and Strategies

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	03
Foreword	04
An Introduction	06
The Background	11
The Problem Statement	14
What is Self-learning?	16
Characteristics of a Self-learner	18
Values that Guide Self-learning	20
Factors that Influence Self-learning	29
Deconstructing the Self-learning Environment	36
Acquiring 21st Century Skills	48
Blended Learning: Enabling Self-learning through Technology	51
Challenges and Limitations	55
Women and Self-learning	57
Mythbusters	60
Conclusion	61
Credits	63
References	64



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The updated version of this paper resulted from more secondary research along with primary data collection. It might take a document of its own to give credit to all those who have contributed to the making of this paper. But for the sake of brevity, we have listed organizations and individuals who have helped us sharpen our understanding of Self-learning. We hope you will benefit from exploring their models and approach to Self-learning. We submit our sincere gratitude to all those who have helped us craft this paper.

Aarohi, Hosur, Tamil Nadu
Alliance for Self Directed Education (ASDE)
Anthill Creations, Bengaluru, Karnataka
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Patna, Bihar
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Dream A Dream, Bengaluru, Karnataka
Learning Economy
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Ravi J Mathai Center for Educational Innovations
Project Defy, Bengaluru, Karnataka
Project Potential, Kishanganj, Bihar
Self Organized Learning Environments (SOLE)
Shikshantar, Udaipur, Rajasthan
Swaraj University, Udaipur, Rajasthan
Tamarind Tree, Dahanu, Maharashtra
Udaipur as a learning city
Vigyan Ashram, Pune, Maharashtra

Foreword

At the time of writing this foreword, India is in the midst of its second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As new variants emerge and the healthcare crisis continues, the long term effects on learning and education in a VUCA world continue to unfold at an alarming rate.

For a second year in a row, education has floundered as institutions have had to shut their doors and shift operations from physical spaces to digital platforms.

An estimated 32 crore children have been affected¹ by the restrictions and nation-wide lockdowns due to the pandemic. Access to digital learning remains problematic. Only 4.4% of households in rural India have a computer as compared to 23.4% in urban India, while only 15% of households in rural India have an internet facility as compared to 42% in urban India (MOSPI, 2019). More specifically, only 8% of households with children in the 5-24 years age group have both a computer and an internet connection. With access to internet, equipment and even

electricity² being woefully inadequate, the pandemic has created a deep wedge in education and career opportunities for rural communities. UNICEF reported that only 37.6 million children (out of 320 million affected) across 16 states are continuing education through various initiatives such as online classrooms, radio programmes etc³.

The core tenants of India's education system - standardised curriculum and exams - a yardstick to measure learning, have had to be let go, while socio-cultural factors like the digital divide, poor infrastructure, cramped living spaces and deeply entrenched gender biases towards learning and domestic responsibilities exacerbate the situation.

India's education ecosystem is largely rooted in the traditional-industrial model, characterised by consistency and uniformity. It was designed to ensure the demands of industry were met by ensuring standardised training at scale, which in turn yielded a homogeneous, efficiently functioning working population.

While relevant at the time, this model is unlikely to be effective in a rapidly changing 21st Century world of work. Even before the pandemic, discourse on the future of work - and therefore the future of learning - pointed to the need for knowledge application, rather than mere knowledge acquisition. Skilled professionals who are compassionate, fair, adaptable, quick to learn, can innovate, mobilise resources in short times, communicate effectively, and make fast but meaningful decisions are the need of the hour in this era; and the COVID-19 pandemic underscores this need.

In this context, Self Learning - the process by which the learner makes informed decisions about their own learning journeys - becomes indispensable. Individuals who believe they can learn, resolve problems, and find solutions during difficult times hold the key to the future.

Building a learning identity for young people requires a critical shift in the systemic approach to learning and education. Practices, beliefs, and mindsets will need to evolve. Educators and educational institutions will need to shift power and authority in the hands of the learners, and create environments which enable them to craft their own learning journeys. Access to resources, availability of resources to marginalised communities, and fair and equitable practices around conducting businesses will play a critical role in enabling self learning.

The global crisis has challenged age-old, entrenched ideas about classrooms, the role of educators, and traditional methods of learning. We are faced with an opportunity to overhaul the system and pivot to provide learning experiences that are relevant, meaningful, and rewarding for our learners - our future leaders.

An Introduction

Did you learn something this past week?



How do you mean?

???

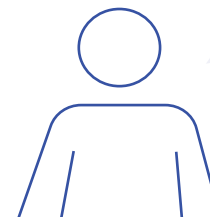


Do you mean as part of a course?

What kind of learning are you talking about?



In a classroom?



Do you mean formal education?

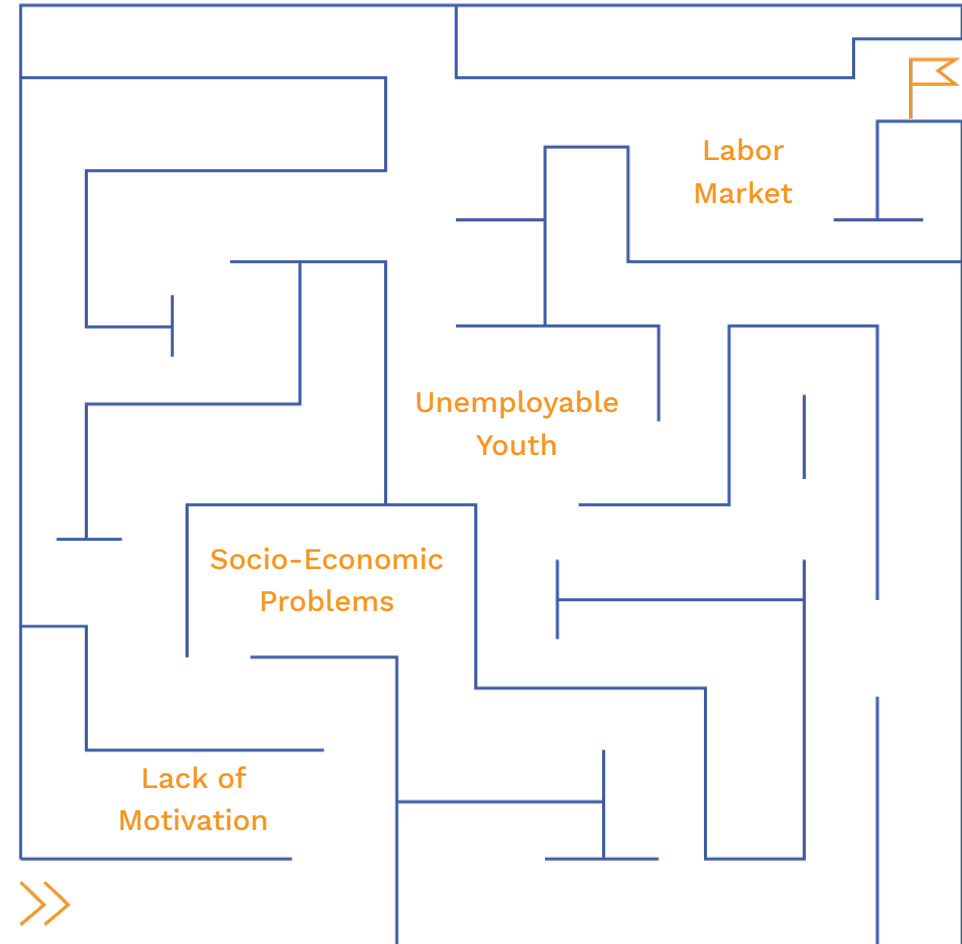
You might have nodded yes, and started thinking about what you learned.

The premise

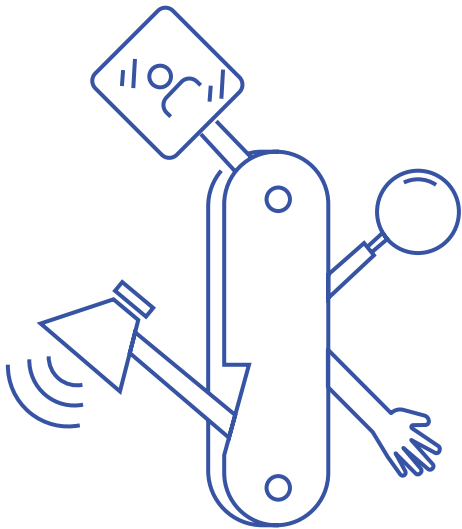
Learning is a part of our daily life. It is driven by an innate curiosity humans have to understand life around them.

Education is imagined to be an equalizer, a transformational formula to help you achieve your dreams, and prepare you for an aspirational future. However, there is a gap between learning as a process and education as a system. It manifests in poor learning levels in children, lack of motivation in educators, the unemployable state of young people in the labor market, growing socio-economic problems, large global crises, and an unjust society. This paper sheds light on the concept of Self-learning, where the impetus lies with the individual in charting their own learning journeys.

Obstacles in Learning Journeys



Where does Self-learning fit into this?



Self-learning as a process, over time, builds skills such as self awareness, critical thinking, communication, collaboration; what are now termed 21st century skills. It helps you deepen your connection to yourself, and find ways to build agency to communicate your needs, aspirations, and ideas. This approach to learning creates a community of learners, defying the socially-conditioned hierarchies in which our society is steeped. While this isn't a cure-all, it is definitely a way forward, as there are inherent flaws in traditional learning setups.

This paper is aimed at educators, leaders, organizations, and government officials, who work tirelessly to change the way we learn and help nurture learners to be truly prepared for an uncertain future. We need to acknowledge the changing dynamics in the world around us, and reimagine the way we think of learning. This paper seeks to curate the existing understanding of Self-learning in the Indian context, explore some of the foundational principles and values that define Self-learning, and identify ways in which individuals and organizations follow their Self-learning pathways.

An underlying thread that connects various manifestations of Self-learning across the country and elsewhere, is to look at every opportunity as a learning opportunity, and to develop a learning identity over time. In practice however, these opportunities are not equal for everyone, and a majority of the barriers lie not with the learners themselves, but the environments in to which they are born.

As people who work with and for youth, if we want to nurture them as self-learners, much has to shift in the systems, structures, and policies that govern education and learning.

These are some fundamental questions we need to ask of ourselves, to be able to relate to why Self-learning is critical and indispensable as an approach to learning.

Collectively, we must re-evaluate what truly matters:

- What beliefs, values, mindsets, and knowledge guide us in creating and nurturing learning spaces?
- What do we want the learners to take away?
- What is our role in the process?
- What does learning mean in the larger scheme of things?
- Why do we want them to learn?

By nurturing self-learners, and creating Self-learning environments, we may empower learning communities that are reflective, resourceful, curious, evolving, and resilient, to cope with a rapidly-changing external world. Our belief that Self-learning can lead to transformation keeps us on the lookout for ways in which Self-learning is manifested, nurtured, sustained, and leveraged, in different contexts and scenarios.

This point-of-view paper presents Quest Alliance's present perspective on Self-learning. We will continue to explore this as a concept and revise our understandings on a regular basis. If you would like to contribute to/expand our views on Self-learning, this paper is also an invitation for collaboration.

We hope our learning
exchange continues.

The Background

As we equip ourselves for the 21st century, the idea of learning societies is gaining momentum, and we cannot but engage with how education is organized and learning takes place.

For centuries now, the aims of education have been articulated at the individual and societal level. Educationists like John Dewey stated that the purpose of education is putting the individual on a path of growth and that it is a process of continual reorganising, reconstructing and transforming.⁵

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) has reinforced the aims of education as enabling a process of self discovery for the individual, opening up their mind to possibilities within and without, equipping them with different ways of knowing, developing the ability to question existing social structures to drive change, and building a more humane society that respects individual differences and cultural diversity.

“ *If we teach today’s students
as we taught yesterday’s,
we rob them of tomorrow.*

- John Dewey, American philosopher and education reformer ⁴

**A learning society⁶
in the 21st century**

Supports systems of continuous innovation and feedback to develop knowledge of what works in which circumstances

Provides the infrastructure needed to succeed; still physical but increasingly virtual

Develops new relationships and new networks between learners, providers (new and old), funders, and innovators

Cultivates and embraces new educational providers, from the public, private, and NGO sectors.

Recognizes that people learn differently, and strives to meet those needs.

Believes that learning is for all, that no one should be excluded

Takes learning to the learner, with the view that learning is an activity, not a place.

Aims to develop motivated, engaged learners prepared to conquer the challenges of tomorrow and those of today.

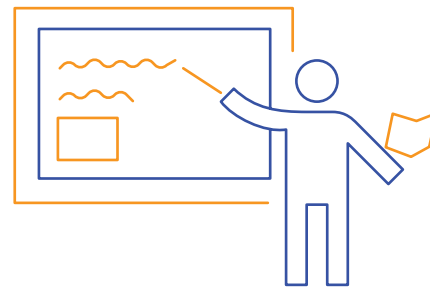
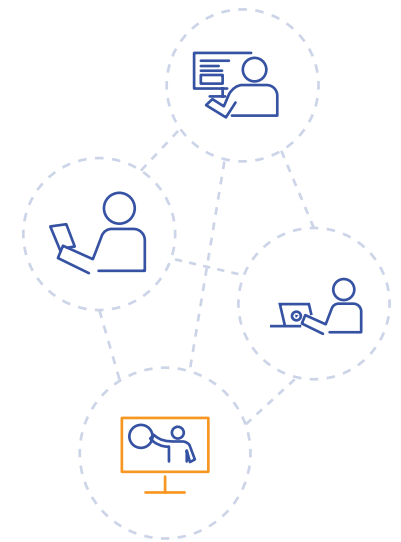
Engenders a culture of learning throughout life.

However, it is critical to note that today's formal education system was designed for mass education in the wake of the Industrial era, driving competition and hierarchy, uniformity, and lack of exercise of individual agency. Textbooks continue to be considered as the primary source of information. This has become even more stark as we move into the 21st century, where the requirements from individuals to be able to thrive in a diverse, creative and a networked world are rapidly changing. It requires individuals to exercise agency, become change agents and be capable of navigating through uncertainties across varied contexts .⁷

We are living in a world that is changing at a pace that has never been seen before. There are advances being made at multiple levels of the economy and society; inevitably, in the process, leaving many groups of people behind. On the one hand, we are moving towards becoming a knowledge and digital economy, which requires new ways of accessing and processing information, connecting with people and engaging with technology platforms; on the other, we are still struggling to access basic needs.

It is estimated that 65% of children starting school today will hold jobs that do not exist yet.⁸

These children are likely to have four or five careers over the course of their working life. However, the focus of our schools is limited to learning outcomes based on age and grade. A large percentage of students do not meet these outcomes but continue moving to higher grades, leaving a huge vacuum in their learning and skills, to be able to participate as productive citizens of society.



The Problem Statement

In this widening gap between the articulation of the aims of education and the way it is practised, right at the cusp of the school-to-work transition, we see many complex issues largely grouped under issues of poor learning outcomes in school children, dropouts, unemployment, and low employability of graduates.

We live in a time where the focus has moved from knowledge acquisition to knowledge application. Unfortunately traditional schooling does not allow individuals to capture application as opposed to acquisition.

Session at WISE '19 Summit presented by Learning Economy.

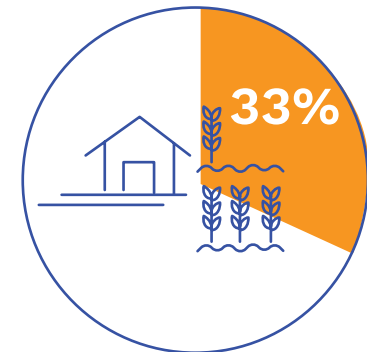
Despite various reforms enacted at the centre and state levels, there has been no significant change in the dropout rate in India.⁹ Children currently enrolled also display poor learning levels. The lack of school infrastructure and poor learning environments play a critical role in increased dropout levels. Marginalized communities, women in particular, are severely affected by the challenges in learning environments and access to learning resources. Lack of education plays a critical role in these marginalized groups having to resort to low paying, menial, and low skilled jobs, which essentially prevents upward mobility in society.

In 2015, more than 30% of India's youth was neither in education, nor in employment or training.¹⁰

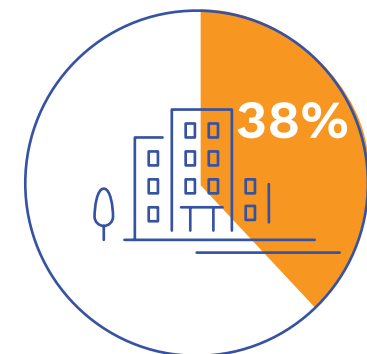
With over five million young people entering the workforce every year, the availability of relevant, adequate, and job-ready skills' training is very less. Technological advancements are causing disruptions in the way we live, and work, causing an extinction of low skilled, routine jobs. Young people from the poorer communities, especially women, already suffer poor wages, due to their participation in low skilled jobs. The changing nature of the world of work might put a lot of these people out of work.¹¹

It is critical to transform learning spaces with new approaches that enable smoother and more effective school-to-work transitions. Learning the art of learning, and staying open and curious, might be the tools we could rely on to cope with the changing world around us. Our innate curiosity and need to learn, that which makes us human, are two critical premises on which Quest Alliance proposes Self-learning as an approach to prepare for the future.

India: Dropout rates, across 5-29 years



Rural



Urban

National Sample Survey, 2014

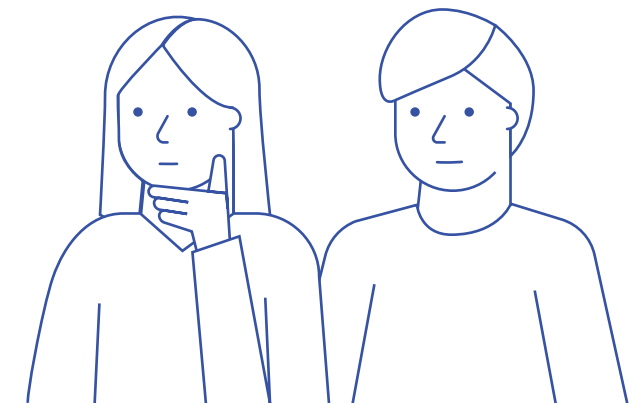
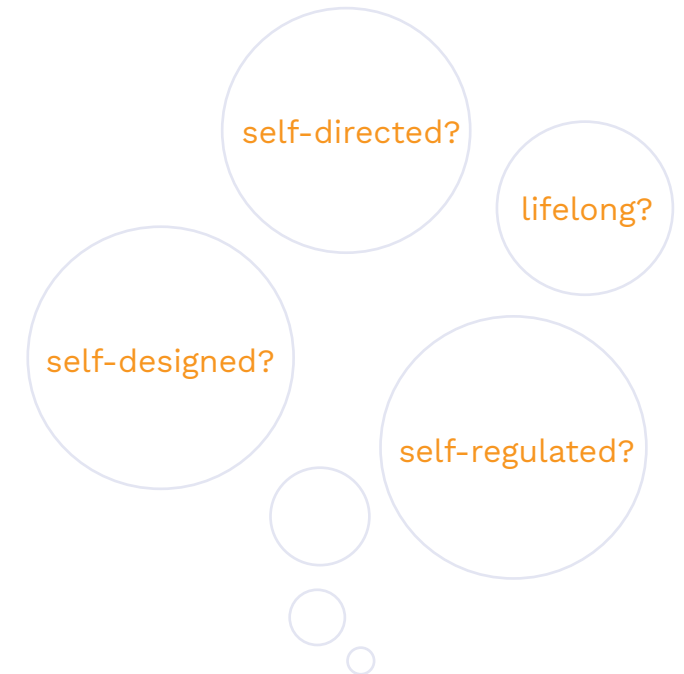
What is Self-learning?

Self-learning as a concept is not new. Terms analogous with Self-learning include, self-directed learning, self-designed learning, self-regulated learning, lifelong learning. Self-directed learning (SDL) has its roots in the concept of adult education, while self-regulated learning (SRL) on the other hand, is mostly studied in the school environment.¹²

In SDL, it is the learner who defines the learning task, in SRL it may also be a teacher.¹³

“ *Self learning to me is “learning the art of learning, the art of accessing tools of learning, and the art of 24-hrs learning”* ”

- Vijoy Prakash, IAS, Association for Promotion of Creative Learning, APCL



SDL has also been treated as a broader concept of the learner's freedom and degree of control in managing their learning activities. This definition makes us focus on values and characteristics that become precursors to Self-learning, such as autonomy, and control.

Over time, scholars like Gibbons have also suggested that self-directed learning is better understood as a spectrum that begins with the lowest level of incidental self-directed learning to the highest level of self-directed learning.¹⁵

This definition helps us understand that Self-learning could happen over a spectrum where one could manifest Self-learning at varying degrees, as directed by the environment of which we are a part.

Rooted deeply in experiential learning theory, Kolb & Kolb (2009) define a concept called the learning way, which is "about approaching life experiences with a learning attitude"¹⁶ which has inspired how we define Self-learning at Quest Alliance.

“

“In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.”¹⁴

- Malcolm Knowles, one of the earliest proponents of self-directed learning.

“

It is important to lay greater emphasis on the self, when we talk about Self-learning.

- Abhijit Sinha, Project Defy

At Quest, we define Self-learning as a **process** in which the learner makes informed decisions about their learning journey.

It requires a **combination of knowledge, skills, and attitude**, which **allows the learner to choose** what, why, where, when, how, and from whom they would like to learn, and access the resources that will allow them to do so.

In its truest sense, it also allows the learner to use their discretion **to determine what marks the completion of the learning process**, which is usually arrived at based on why the learner wanted to learn.

While establishing a definition might seem critical, true understanding can only emerge in knowing the values that guide Self-learning, and understanding the environment in which the learning occurs.

Case 1

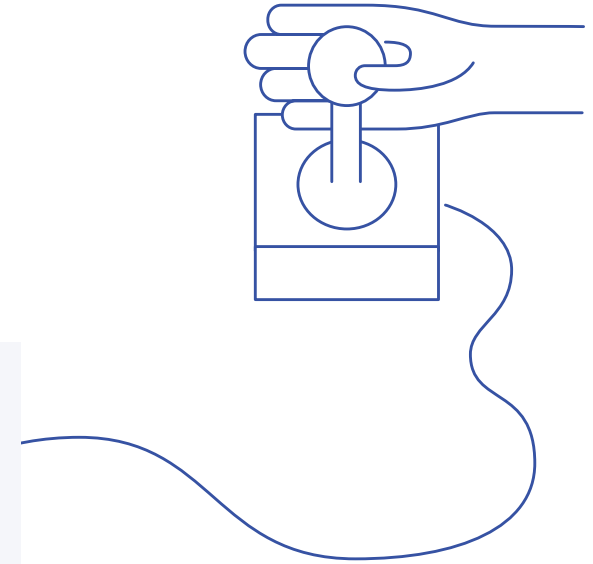
A closer examination makes one even wonder if there is any difference between learning and Self-learning.

Consider this: In one of the engineering colleges in which Quest Alliance works through the interventional Arise ToT: MasterCoach

Development Program, we asked engineering students what Self-learning means to them and if they consider themselves self-learners. Most of the students did not seem surprised about the phrase or the idea of it. They said they have always been self-learners.

If as individuals we do not choose to learn, learning could never happen. We have to put our hearts, and minds, into learning a concept, even if it is merely to score passing grades and receive credentials.

Excerpt from a conversation with Rohan, Capacity Building, Quest Alliance.



“

Self-learning is the ability to seek someone to learn something, how you go about getting the information or the learning needed.

- Kotresh, Quest Alliance

From this exchange, we can distinguish between the act of learning and teaching. While teaching could occur in classrooms, in the act of learning, the locus of control always lies with the learner. The individual constantly tries to make meaning of the learning content, as it applies to their own context. To be able to exercise their locus of control, the learner needs to be self-aware, and constantly be in touch with oneself to listen to learning needs and thereby make informed decisions.

It also draws our attention to understand what learning means; is it being able to answer proficiently in an assessment, or is it one's ability to apply the learning in a newer context? In more than one way, the learning, meaning-making process that happens outside of the four walls of the classroom, in a market, or a playground, or in transit, also results in shaping us as individuals, and helps us apply the learning from one context to the other.

“

Self-learning happens when the onus of learning shifts to a learner. It means learning everyday, taking responsibility for one's own learning and believing that they can learn.

- Michelle, Tamarind Tree

“ *Most of our formal institutions, like schools, hold classrooms where children of the same age, with less than a year’s difference, come together and learn. This structure creates a monoculture in thought, action, and value systems, and makes us compare and compete with each other. It does not leverage the intergenerational wisdom that most Indian communities are built on. In a similar vein it also forces us to believe that knowledge lies only in the head thus ignoring the wide range of talents, needs, experiences and potential each learner comes with and the larger web of learning opportunities learners can access. It is important for all learners to realize that we are here not to compete but complete each other.*

- Manish Jain, Shikshantar



1

Believes they can learn, and has a strong learning identity



2

Is curious, approaches every situation confidently, and seeks a learning opportunity in them



3

Strives to build agency to pursue their learning journeys



4

Uses reflection as a critical tool to enable their Self-learning journeys



5

Is able to negotiate, and access tools, resources, and communities, to craft their own learning journeys



6

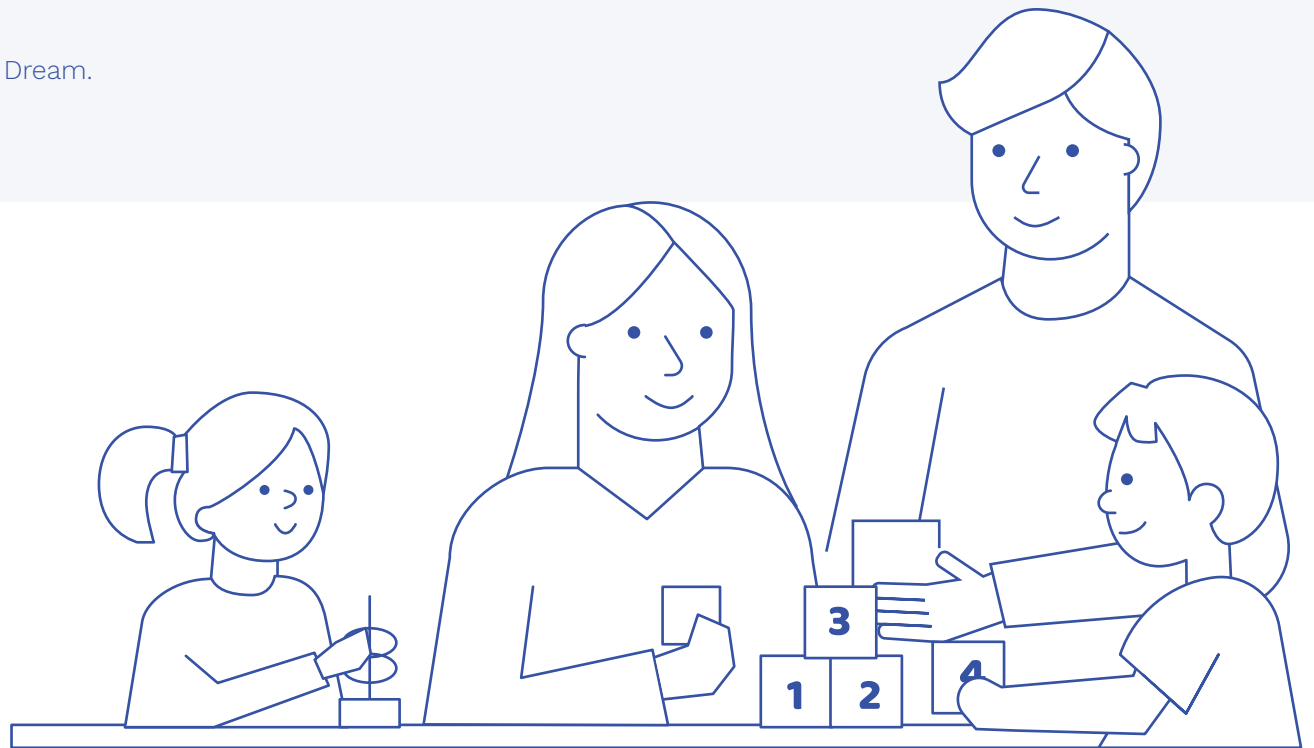
Is able to demonstrate the skills of being self aware, think critically, communicate effectively, and build relationships with other individuals

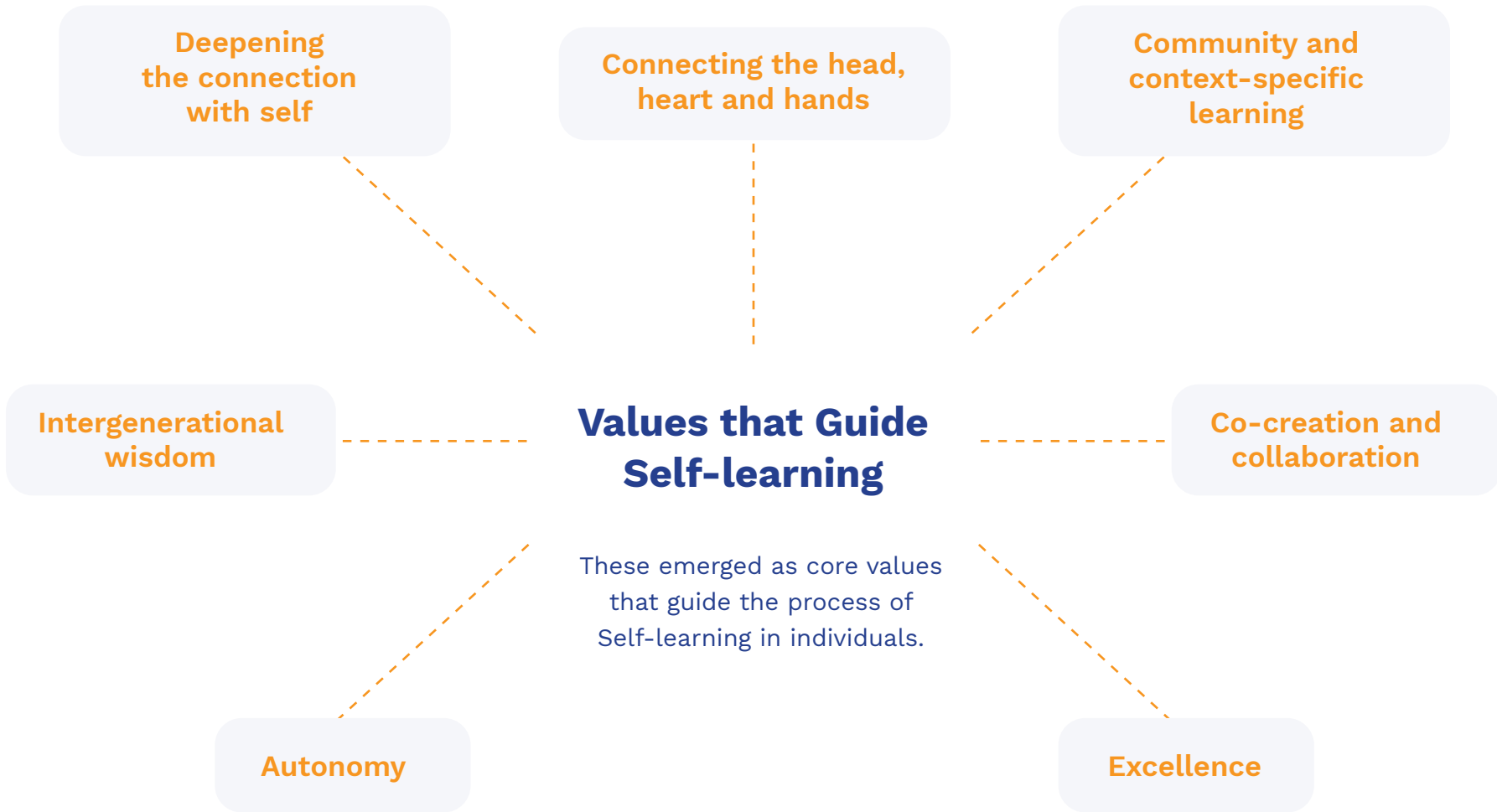
Note: These are also called 21st century skills, and the rationale for the choice of these skills can be found in the section: Acquiring 21st Century Skills.

Characteristics of a Self-learner

Childhood adversities affect people who are disadvantaged and hinder or sometimes even damage the developmental milestones in children. Therefore healing comes first, before one is offered opportunities to learn new skills. The first stage of learning should focus on the foundational skills of choice making, critical thinking, and creativity, before they could be encouraged to practice lifelong learning.

Excerpt from an interview with Vishal Talreja, Dream A Dream.





Deepening the connection with self

A defining factor that promotes Self-learning is self awareness. Since the onus of learning lies with the learner, it is critical that the individual has clarity in identifying their learning needs, the purpose, and what learning settings work well for them. It allows individuals to develop a learning identity¹⁷ that instills them with the confidence that they can learn.

Establishing a connection with oneself includes having feedback loops in which individuals are able to regularly check in with their emotions, thoughts, and feelings, which enables effective interaction with the outside world. This deep connection with the self becomes a useful and critical tool for individuals who face adversity at a young age to heal, and be ready to learn new skills.

Community and context-specific learning

Self-learning is guided by the belief that all learning is rooted in one's own lived reality, which gives context to and enhances an individual's meaning-making process. Applicability and relevance of the learning is critical to engage the learner, to connect them with their environment, thereby allowing them to contribute effectively to society. When learning moves beyond classrooms and gets embedded in the community, the learning process becomes richer and more meaningful. This also highlights that knowledge, and what is considered learning, could have multiple meanings, based on the context and the community.

Autonomy

Self-learning is based on an individual's ability to exercise agency; the ability to make choices, learn from the consequences of those choices, and embrace the attitude of learning from mistakes. The capacity to take responsibility, think critically, and act with reason, comes from one's ability to use agency in everyday actions. Self-learning allows the learner to be, follow their own schedule, make mistakes, and explore their potential. Thus freedom and autonomy take precedence over conformity, where individuals are forced to follow rules determined for everyone, irrespective of their differences. The learners driven from within, and not for rewards placed on the outside to perform, succeed, or acquire a skill.

Co-creation and collaboration

Co-creation and collaboration takes precedence over competition. Learning therefore becomes an act of seeking solutions, encouraging curiosity, as opposed to following only the preset pathways to success. It allows for innovation and relieves the learner of anxiety, stress, and fear of the learning process, which are major inhibitors of learning in young people and adults alike.

Excellence

Striving to do better, to learn from failures, to excel, becomes a guiding post in a Self-learning journey. The drive to learn comes from within, which encourages the individual to pursue sharpening skills and gaining mastery in the task of choice. An absence of fear, or external compulsion, nurtures the innate tendency to learn continuously. This is not to say that everyone has a drive to self-learn. Like any other habit, it takes time, exposure, and experience, to stay the course to draw motivation from within, and that should also be acknowledged. The end goal of the learning process, then, is not to best another individual, or an external benchmark, but to outdo one's own self and shine brighter.

Intergenerational wisdom

Dewey was a proponent of education being a necessity of life. In order for life to continue, it is imperative that the adults in a society pass on their wisdom to the young ones so they are prepared for the future¹⁸. Life outside the classroom includes people from different generations, creating intergenerational spaces that allow for the flow of knowledge between different age groups. Self-learning upholds the value of wisdom, and leverages collective learning to build upon one's knowledge, attitude, and skills. The underlying belief is learning happens at all times, and anyone who imparts wisdom can be a teacher to an open and curious listener.

Connecting the head, heart, and hands

Learning is not only a matter of the head. From Maria Montessori to Mahatma Gandhi, educators and philosophers have demonstrated the use of the head, heart, and the hands, in the learning process. Dewey suggested that we let children do and experience, as opposed to teaching them concepts. Experiences, which involve thoughts, but also emotions, relationships, and community, shape the meaning-making process and thereby play a critical role in learning. Self-learning is built on this value of connecting the head, heart and the hands, and leveraging experiences for learning.

How do you keep the drive in a self-learner? Most of the time it is learning on the go, the process is slow, mistakes happen, but learning also happens.

- Abodh, Project Potential



Authority



Power



Learning Identity



Relationships



Social conditioning

Factors that Influence Self-learning

While the core values appear acceptable and desirable, they do not always get integrated in to our everyday lives. As a part of our sharing, we want to highlight five major factors that influence the practice of Self-learning by individuals as well as organizations.



Power

Learning as it is practised today, is transactional. There is the learner and the learned (also called teacher, facilitator, mentor, coach), and knowledge is transacted between the two. Power gets manifested in the relationship between the learner and the learned. The curriculum provided to the learner is defined by someone else who holds greater power over what is shared with the learner. It is important to critically evaluate the curriculum and uncover what the hidden curriculum is.

Isn't it crucial to ask if the learning imparted allows an individual to develop their own thinking process, or makes them conform to the rules of the game as determined by more powerful players?

Power also manifests in the form of policies and systems that enables/ hinders access to knowledge and resources, to certain groups of populations more than others. Hierarchies exist for accessing learning resources, and tools, which leaves behind some communities. A democratic relationship between the teacher and the learner is critical to enable Self-learning, where the learner has the opportunity to bring their context into the learning environment, and the teacher provides support and guidance in navigating the learner's realities while facilitating the learning of new concepts and skills.



Authority

Self-learning is affected when the locus of control is taken away from the learner. Many times, young people in school have no say over what or how they want to learn, and are often subjected to one way of learning things that are deemed critical by the others. This often disempowers a learner and disconnects them from knowing what their learning needs are. The learner often ends up seeking instructions, directions, and suggestions from others, usually experts, and does not take ownership of their learning journeys.

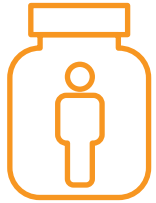
Learning spaces demand obedience and conformity, and do not allow for multiple perspectives to co-exist, to find ways of working together. The learner does not have an opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the curriculum, or the pedagogy, or have a dialog to tailor the learning journeys that suits them and their realities.



Relationships

Researchers and studies constantly highlight the importance of relationships in the learning process. Whether virtual or physical, the process usually involves people, which makes relationships critical. Learning as a process involves not just the head, but also the heart, which means emotions play a major role in helping a young person learn. Some of the factors that affect relationships are empathy and compassion. Being able to walk in the other's shoes, experience their realities, and offer authentic help, become cornerstones for Self-learning.

More often than not, learning spaces are not designed for nurturing relationships between the learner, teacher, their families and communities, since learning outcomes take far greater precedence over social and emotional realities. Certain relationships can cause more stress, anxiety, and distress, which hampers the learning process. Care should be taken to make space to understand how the learner and the teacher feel, what they say, and do, and how their thought processes converge or diverge, to make learning more authentic, meaningful, and relevant.



Social conditioning

For a very long time, we have been conditioned to think that learning happens in a certain way, only certain factors mark the completion of learning, and only certain spaces allow for true learning to occur. These lay theories on what learning is, why we should learn and follow a certain learning journey, often force individuals to follow a fixed, preset path in their lives. For some, access to these pathways are more an aspiration than a necessity.

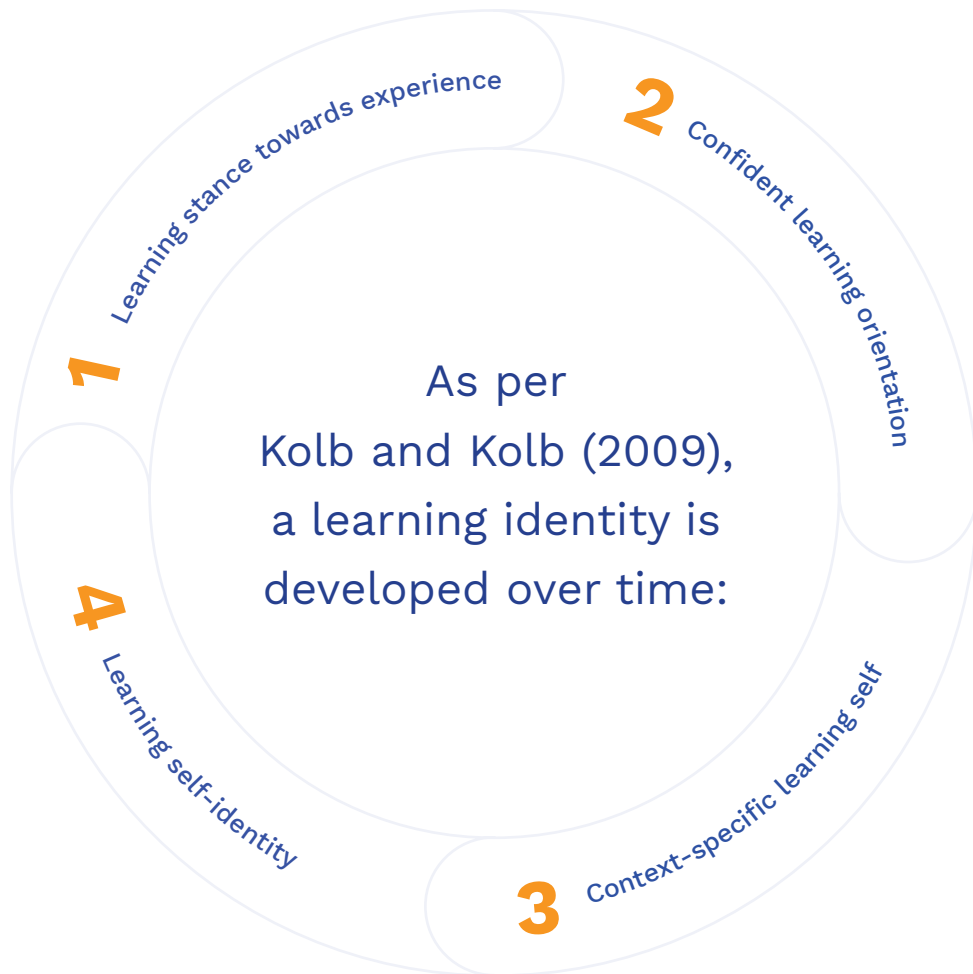
We carry with us myths around what marks a high quality of learning, in the form of certificates and degrees, elite institutions, and from certain geographies. This makes it easy for us to dismiss other pathways of success as lower quality, despite their being the most viable options for certain groups. Social conditioning about what learning is, also creates a divide and vests power and authority in a few. In this situation, bringing the locus of control back to the learner, through Self-learning, is nothing short of an act of rebellion.



Learning identity

Learning identity refers to an individual's ability to regard themselves a learner, who trusts their direct experiences and believes that they can learn from that situation. Learning identity speaks to the innate confidence in oneself that they can learn. Social conditioning and other factors previously discussed have a great impact on an individual's ability to develop confidence in themselves as learners.

The process by which an individual might build their learning identity is proposed by Kolb and Kolb (2009) based on their work in experiential learning theory. Learning identities allow individuals to believe that they can always learn and improve their skills and knowledge, which allows them to be open and curious. At the same time, not every individual holds a positive learning identity for themselves, so a learning identity is a critical factor that affects the Self-learning process.



- 1 The learner takes **a learning stance towards an experience** - where they see an opportunity to draw insight from an experience;
- 2 This allows them to develop **a confident learning orientation** - which means the learner believes they can actually learn;
- 3 More practice helps the learner seek **a context-specific learning self** - where the learner seeks opportunities that are specific to a particular context, as it suits the need of the learner;
- 4 Every opportunity becomes a learning opportunity, and the learner approaches those experiences with the curiosity to learn more, believes they can learn from these experiences, and makes meaning of the learning as it applies to their context.

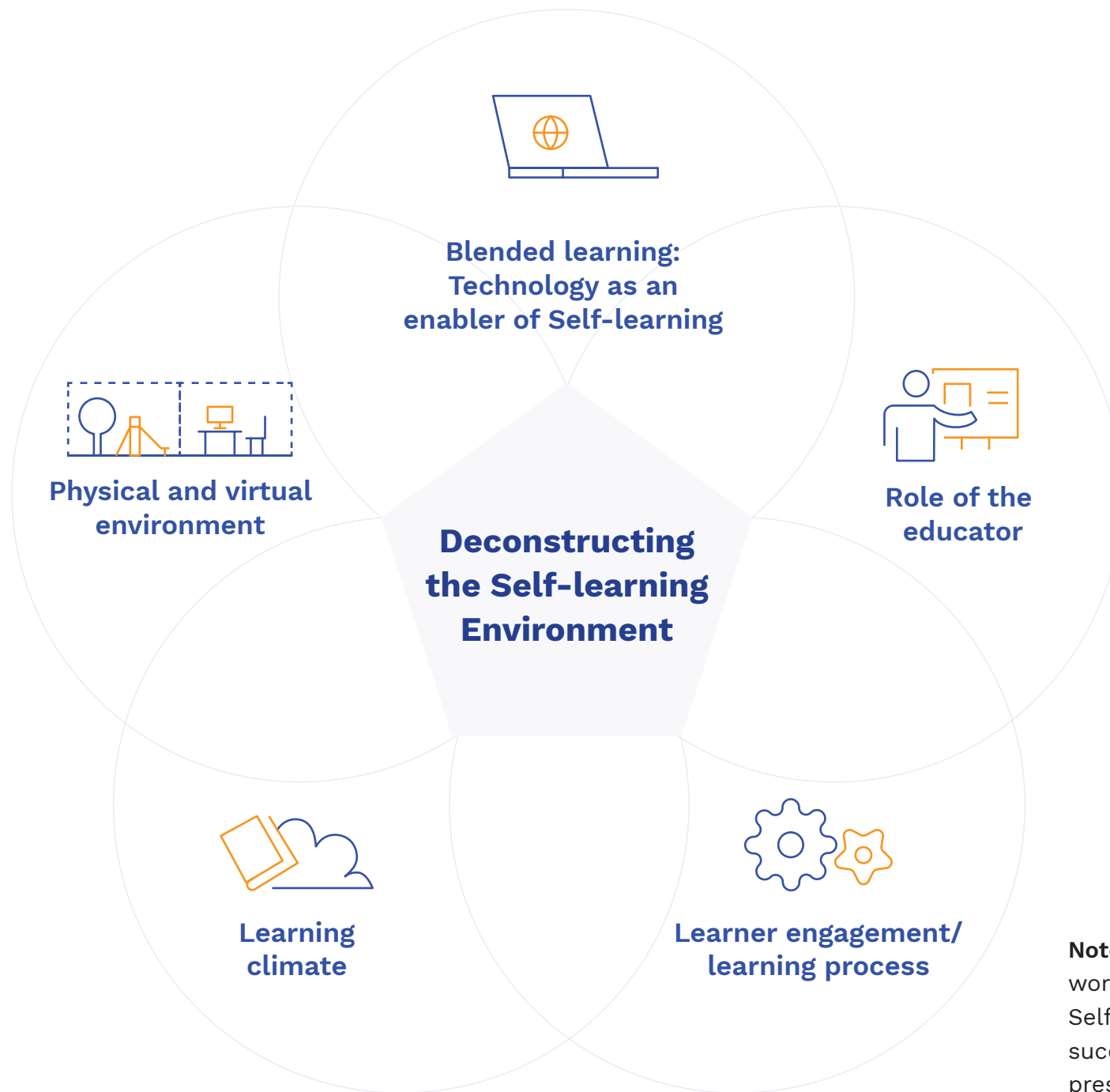
The development of learning identity is an iterative process, similar to building the muscle, one day at a time.¹⁹

Deconstructing the Self-learning Environment

A defining factor that delineates learning from Self-learning is the way the learning environment is constructed. At Quest we believe that a Self-learning environment is not merely a combination of physical tools and materials, but rather an ecosystem that helps a learner access, build, and evaluate their learning. Our framework draws inspiration from SCALE built by Punya Mishra to help the development of creativity in a classroom.

“ *In order to create an environment in which Self-learning could thrive, it is important to believe in the idea, which translates into actions; role modeling of intentions is a critical element to create a learning climate where individuals feel safe to use their agency. Use of one’s agency has consequences, it takes time to own accountability for one’s actions. The end result is liberating; however it is a long process of building muscle on an everyday basis.*

- Vishal Talreja, Dream A Dream

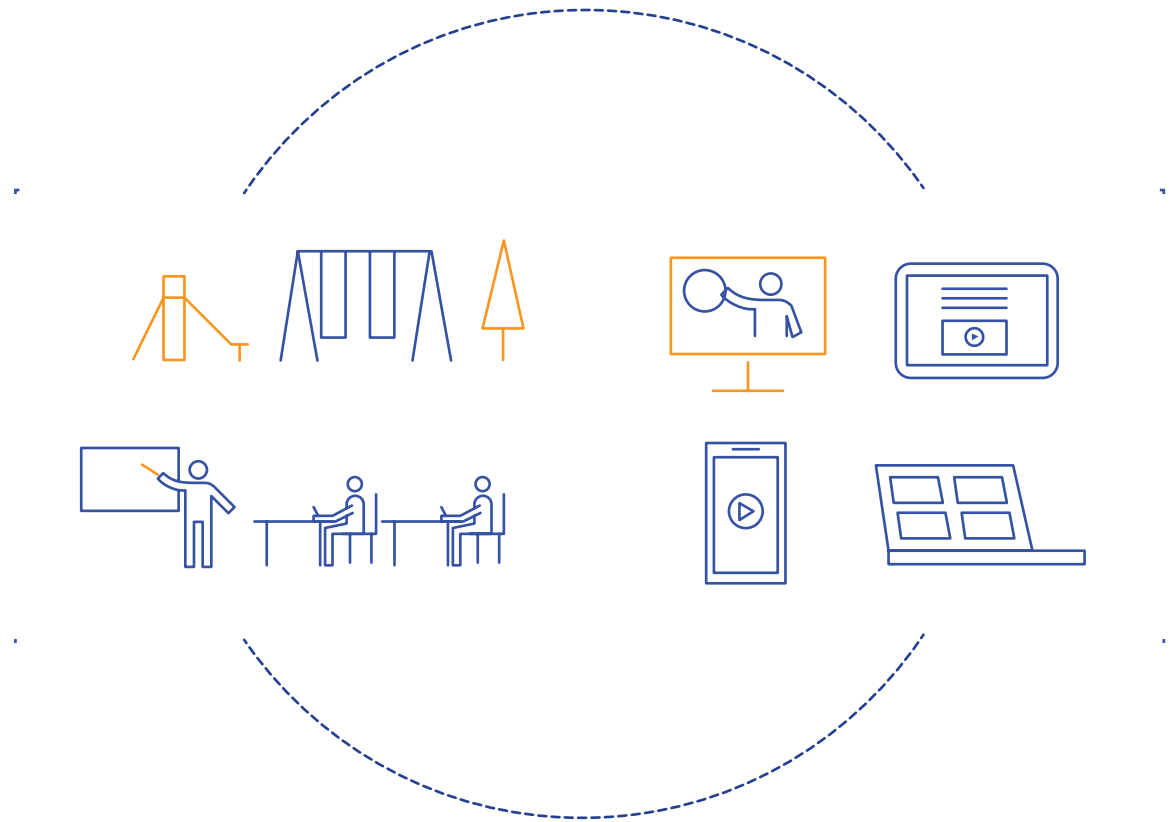


Note: While all these factors work together to create the ideal Self-learning environment, its success isn't dependent on the presence of every factor.

The physical and virtual environment

All the components which can be seen in the process of Self-learning, such as learning tools, resources, stationery, networks, and the physical learning space, constitute the learning environment. The physical environment consists of both digital and non-digital tools, as well as networks of individuals in digital and non-digital spaces.

The characteristics of the environment apply equally to physical and virtual spaces. We are aware that the manifestations might differ. Our intent is to provide an array of examples; by no means are they exhaustive.



Characteristics

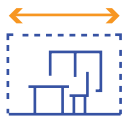
Manifestation



Make learning visible to the learner

Provide a visual tracker of goals met, paths followed, accomplishments, and learnings on the way.

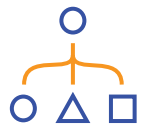
- Learner board
- Self assessment board
- Learner profiles to track learning journeys
- Artefacts produced by the learners
- Opportunities for share-outs, demonstrations, and presentations to a wider audience



Create flexible spaces

Structure the space to accommodate group activities, individual reflections, workspaces.

- Movable furniture
- Free space
- More greenery
- Quiet islands
- Multipurpose furniture



Accommodate multiple learning styles

Provide access to varied resources that make multiple kinds of learners feel comfortable.

- A dedicated section for different kinds of resources
- Multiple Intelligences corners
- Tools or formats for self-reflection
- Stationery such as post-its, posters, markers, colors, etc.
- Digital tools - digital devices (computers, tablets, phones), internet access, digital lessons
- A well-stocked library



Make reflection a part of the space

Create spaces and triggers for reflection, which is foundational to Self-learning.

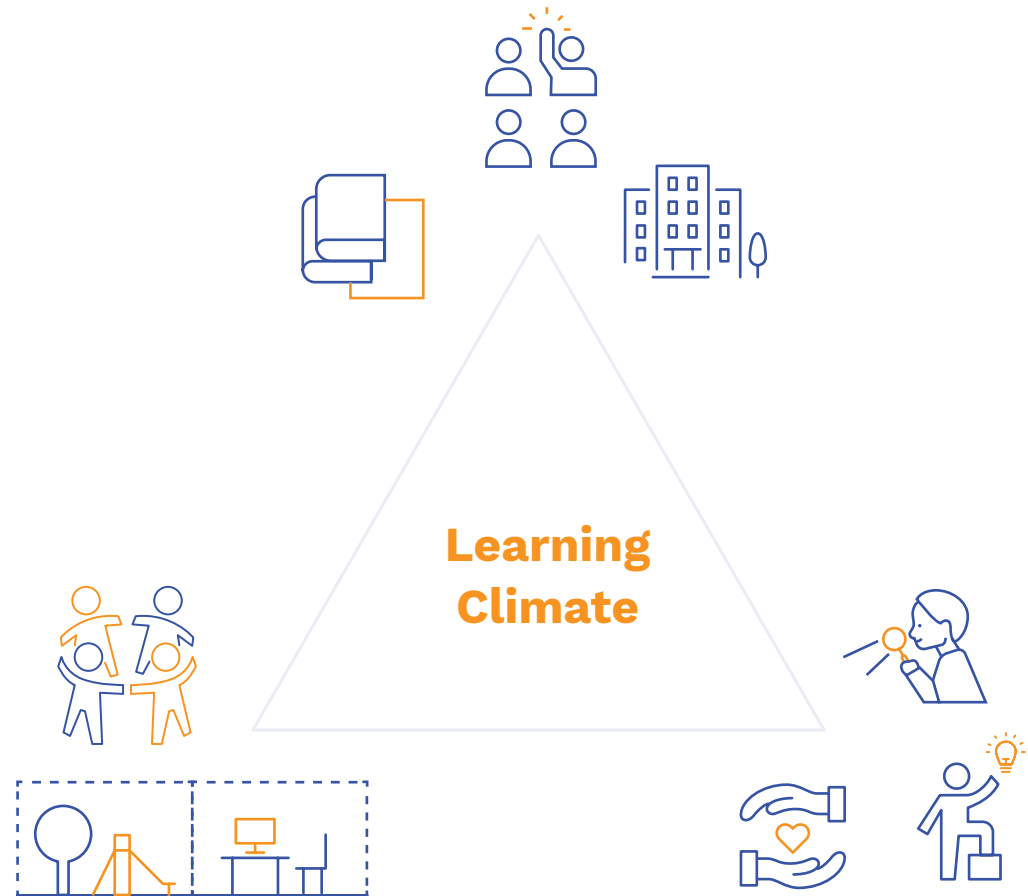
- Reflection prompts
- Zen corners
- Use of mirrors

Learning climate

This concerns how the learner feels; what they believe and value in the process of Self-learning. The learning climate is co-created by learners, educators, the institution, and the curriculum. It combines the physical environment, value systems, and the relationships that are built between its co-creators, which influence how the practices/pathways of Self-learning are crafted and sustained.

The pillars on which the learning climate support Self-learning journeys are trust, dignity, accountability, and safety. These pillars have a direct impact on the influences (of power, authority, social conditioning, relationships, and identity) that shape the Self-learning process.

The way these pillars manifest will vary across contexts and people. However, what is common across contexts is the need to constantly reflect on how people feel in the space that is created for Self-learning.



Case 2

In one of the Self-learning spaces created under Project Defy, we found a heartening story of how to build trust in communities. Nooks are Self-learning spaces created by communities for their own learning needs. These spaces need tools to impart skills, which are managed by community members.

In one such nook, some community members noticed that a tool of their trade went missing. This created a concern about the security of tools in the nook. When they identified who might have taken the tool, they paused to understand why this person might have done that. Severe financial constraints and poverty led to this incident, and since the community members shared this lived reality, could relate to the act perpetrated. They replaced the tool and continued with their learning journeys. During their next community huddle, the person who had taken the tool broke down, unable to fathom that the community could condone this act.

The trust that the community were able to show their fellow learner, is the result of a long, community-building process that is followed during the set up of nooks.

- Excerpt from an interview with Abhijit Sinha, Co-founder, Project Defy.

This case study highlights the essence of what it means to have a learning climate conducive to Self-learning. While trust and other values cannot be manifested in physical forms, the group's behaviors, attitudes, and values, shape the learning space and allow individuals to exercise their agency and freedom.

The Learning Process²⁰

Why theatre? The individuals bring their stories, and build it into a drama and then perform. It builds self-belief and self-worth in individuals, in expressing themselves, in using their creativity. They also develop critical thinking, communication and confidence in themselves.

In conversation with Abodh, Project Potential

The learning process is action-oriented, consisting of tasks and activities that a learner chooses to engage in as part of their Self-learning, ranging from goal-setting to pacing their learning according to their preferred learning style. Every action a learner takes or does as part of their learning falls within the realm of the learning process.

Plan

Setting learning objectives

- Learners set their goals
- The educator shares learning objectives

Share

Sharing the learning

- Documenting the learning journey
- Presenting to an external group

Do

Giving triggers for learning, seeking information

- Learners do research
- The educator provides conceptual inputs
- Self-paced activities
- Real-life problem solving

Reflect

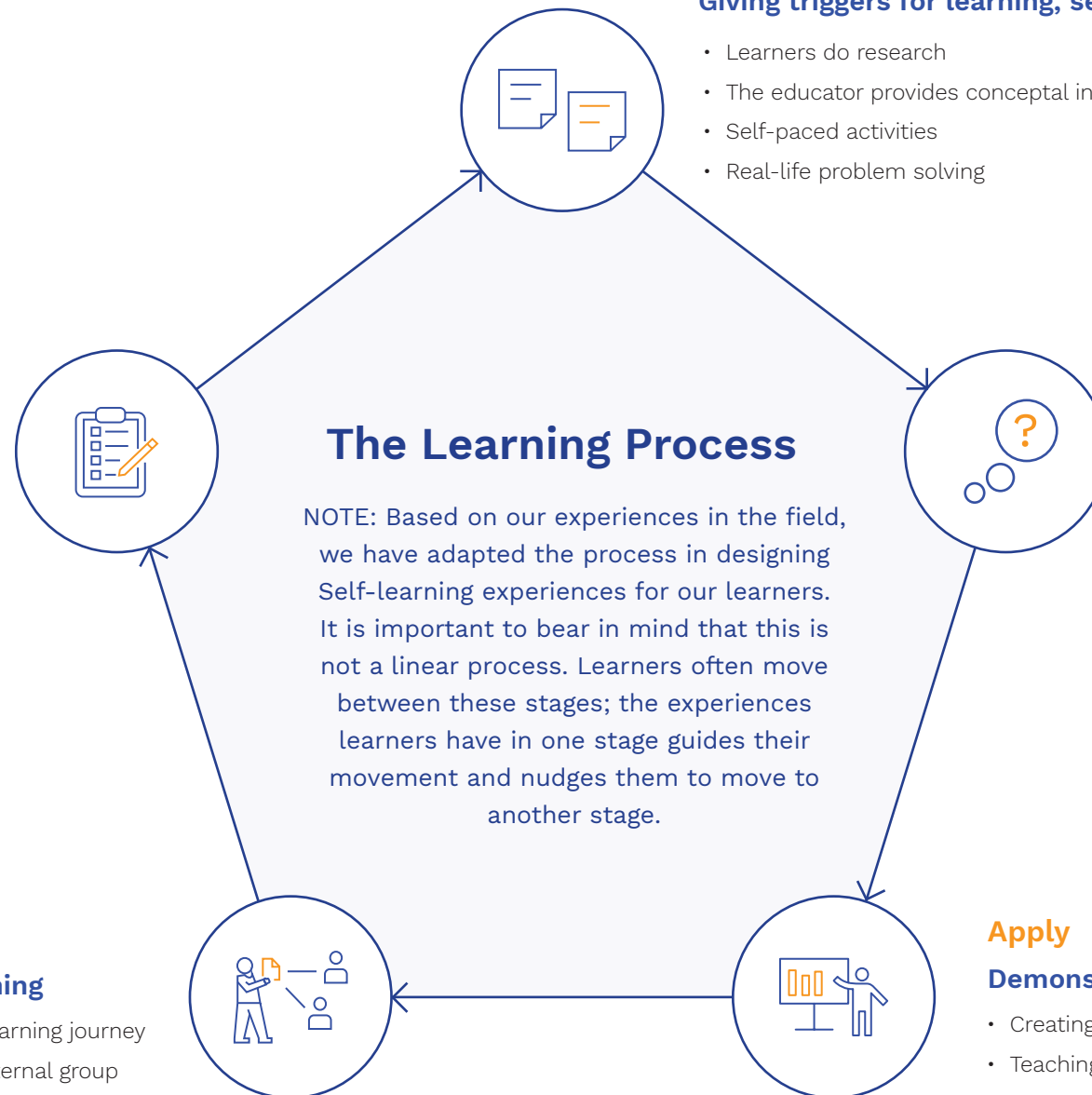
Processing the learning

- Group reflections
- Individual reflection

Apply

Demonstrating the learning

- Creating a project
- Teaching someone else



Case 3

The Self-learning process can either be structured or not. In one of the visits to learn about Self-learning, I met with the anchors of Swaraj University, who explained the process their khojis (learners) follow during their 2-year graduate program. One striking exercise is when the learners go on a cycle yatra (journey).

As they describe it on their website, “One Learning Journey [is] on cycles, without money, technology or first aid, with the aim of going to the heart of India – its villages – and learning from nature and those living in harmony with it”.

It may seem like this process does not have a specific structure, in that the learners are not prescribed a schedule, or expected to follow a certain routine. However, this learning process brings the cohort closer to each other, through intense experiences of hunger, jealousy, fear, anxiety, while reaching within and without for support, compassion, company, resilience. This process brings individuals closer to themselves and generates a certain level of self-awareness that could guide them through their lifetime.

- Excerpt from field notes of the author’s visit to Swaraj University, Udaipur.

The role of the educator

“I started to become more flexible, tried to understand students better and I could immediately see the change. I tried to see things from their [the students’] point of view, made it more student-centric, tried making the classrooms more interesting and a student-friendly space.”

He finds that by focusing on students’ engagement, it has become easier now to form connections with his students, who earlier were hesitant and fearful when it came to speaking out in the classroom and asking questions.

- Excerpt from an interview with one of the facilitators trained by Quest Alliance, working in an ITI.

“

Most of the time educators know how to learn; where they need support is on ‘what’ the students should learn, the need to set direction.

- Rohan, Quest Alliance.

Is a storyteller who

- Documents their own experiences and that of their learners
- Uses stories as triggers for learning and building relationships

Is a designer of learning experiences that nurtures:

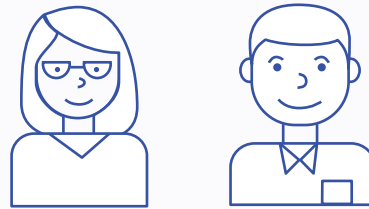
- Learner autonomy
- Collaboration
- Self direction
- Safe and inclusive spaces

Is a reflective practitioner who

- Continuously examines their practice and learning space
- Learns from mistakes and failures
- Assesses gaps in their own understanding and skills
- Asks good questions
- Seeks feedback for self and the learning experience created
- Checks their own mindsets and biases

Uses technology as an enabler for self and their learners to

- Create learning experiences
- Access resources
- Share learning experiences
- Build and access a learning network



A 21st Century Educator

Is a self-learner engaging in

- Continuous learning
- Learning networks
- Role modeling Self-learning for others
- Taking risks for learning

Values learning over 'marks' / 'syllabus'

- Facilitates transformation of information to knowledge
- Enables application of learning to real-world scenarios
- Enables transference of learning from one context to another

Is a scaffolder who:

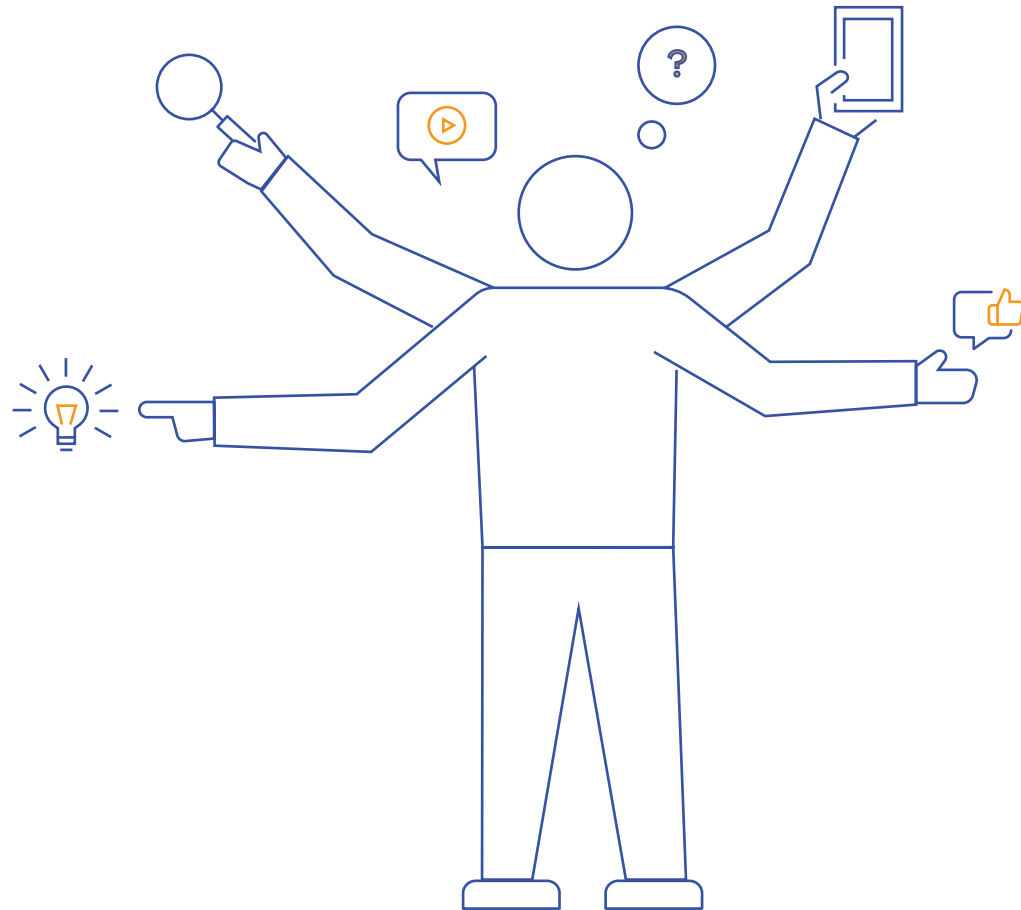
- Recognizes their learners' efforts and not just the outputs
- Gives constructive feedback to further learning
- Is not prescriptive in their approach
- Balances stepping in and out of the learner's way

Understands their learner, their contexts, and the communities

- Caters to learner needs
- Believes in their intrinsic motivation
- Creates multiple choices to suit their learner needs
- Exercises flexibility to meet learner needs
- Listens to what they are saying and not saying

At Quest we believe that for an educator to create Self-learning experiences they need to be self-learners themselves. Educators play a critical role in evaluating the ways in which the influences that affect Self-learning impacts their own learning spaces. In more than one way, the role of an educator in a Self-learning environment shifts between being a teacher (educator, guide, coach, mentor, facilitator), as it applies to being a learner. And in this shift, the learner and the educator set the terms and conditions of their engagement, clarifying their expectations from one another during the learning experience.

The beliefs, values, and attitudes held by educators have a direct impact on the learning climate, and how open and comfortable they are to let the learners take charge of their own learning journeys. The belief systems held by practitioners, act as 'critical filters', differentiating traditional teachers and 21st century educators.²¹



Acquiring 21st Century Skills

There are multiple frameworks around 21st century skills. Almost all the frameworks provide a combination of learning skills, psycho-social skills and life-work skills.²² A shift from life skills to 21st century skills has been the integration of digital literacy and information synthesis and locating oneself in the larger societal and environmental context.²³ The concept of digital citizenship including digital rights and ethics and how one conducts oneself responsibly in a digital space also plays a prominent role in acquiring 21st century skills.

Historically, Quest Alliance focused on building life skills in young people, which enables individuals to navigate their personal and professional lives. The definition of life-skills was articulated in 2006 as part of the Digital Life Skills Toolkit consolidating the literature available.

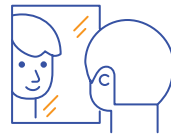
We drew from the World Health Organisation's definition of Life Skills as 'Abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enables individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.'²⁴ The skills we chose as core skills were in the personal and interpersonal domain.²⁵

The element of digital literacy has been integrated across skills in alignment with changing demands and the discourse around 21st century skills. The skills have been articulated in the domains of personal and interpersonal skills.

The key 21st century skills for Quest are:

Personal

relates to the individual



Self awareness

The ability of an individual to reflect upon the self and understand their motivations, beliefs, biases, value systems, emotions, and the multiple dimensions of their identities, with a focus on gender and building a digital identity.



Critical thinking and problem solving

The ability to locate, analyze and synthesize information, identify problems, make informed decisions, ask questions to challenge existing norms especially around gender, and move towards finding a solution and triggering change.

Interpersonal

relates to the other



Communication

The ability to articulate clearly without fear of any kind, using different mediums including digital and nondigital, and comprehend, listen to the other to respond with compassion and sensitivity. In the 21st century, media literacy (which includes communication through social media) has also become an important skill.



Relationship building

The ability to collaborate and build enabling relationships by demonstrating empathy and respect for diversity, being adaptable, negotiating for conflict resolution, taking responsibility for one's actions and setting realistic expectations.

Blended Learning: Enabling Self-learning through Technology²⁶

Adopting blended learning to facilitate Self-learning experiences could enhance the agency of the learner. Blended learning combines traditional face-to-face learning with online, web-based content and delivery that asserts control over the time, place, path and pace of the learning journey.²⁷ Technology can play an important role in enabling Self-learning and its various dimensions.



Control over the learning process

Self-learning implies a democratic commitment to shifting as much control to learners as possible to conceptualize, design, conduct and evaluate their learning, and to decide how resources are to be used to further these processes. Technology can be an enabler to pace one's learning, identify suitable learning methods, resources and access to the learning content whenever, wherever they need, facilitating just-in-time learning. Technology can enable learning through multiple attempts, and help develop clarity on concepts, without falling behind in their learning journeys.

Technology can be an enabler to pace one's learning, identify suitable learning methods, resources and access to the learning content whenever, wherever they need, facilitating just-in-time learning.



Learning as a social activity

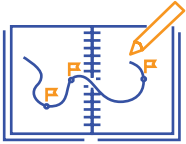
Learning does not happen in a vacuum and is located in the learner's social and cultural contexts. An individual can learn with other individuals in learning groups and networks. Technology can assist the learner with greater access to information, which expands their understanding of the social context at the local and global level, to draw connections between their immediate reality and the larger societal context.

Also, technology can enable access to learning networks one otherwise would not be able to reach. This enables dialog, reflection and access to multiple perspectives, which can widen the scope of meaning-making.



Access to resources

Technology opens the door to a pool of resources that can enable the learner to make informed choices. In one click, learners can have access to multiple resources in varied formats, and also interact with thematic experts from across the world. In this scenario the teacher becomes a facilitator of the learning process, creating conditions to exercise agency and make informed choices.



Documenting the learning

Being an inherently reflective process, Self-learning demands that the learner's reflections are documented. Digital resources, such as learning portfolios and mind-mapping tools, can be leveraged to trace the evolution in one's learning process. Innovators are looking to apply technological evolutions such as the block chain to benefit learners, to securely document their learning journeys, and take control of managing their credentials.

As further innovations evolve, the locus of control in managing learning journeys will truly rest with the learner, allowing for flexible learning journeys, crafted to suit the individual's needs.

Case 4

Learner for life: Quest App's role in confidence-building

I am Nishchay M, a third year Engineering student of Electronics and Communication at the T. John Institute of Technology, Bengaluru. Back in 2018, I was devastated when I was held back a year in the second year of Engineering. I didn't know what to do and was in a very bad place in life.

One of my teachers introduced me to the Model ITI (Industrial Training Institute) at Diary Circle, Bengaluru. ITIs offer computer training, introduction to programming languages and teach basics of networking. While I was interested in acquiring these skills, I was hesitant to join an ITI.

The common perception is that ITIs are only for those who have failed in their 10th and 12th standard exams, and here I was, an Engineering student in an ITI. I felt I didn't belong in an ITI. Still, I opted for the Computer Operator and Programming Assistant course. However, my perception of an ITI changed drastically over the course of that year.

All thanks to the Quest App I bagged the third place in a competition in the Vishvesvaraya Industrial and Technological Museum, where I gave a presentation on – Initiatives for Energy Demand'. The Quest

App helped me make my presentation candid. Previously, I would struggle with sentence construction; The Quest App addressed this issue and helped me communicate in an effective manner.

Also, at the ITI, unlike Engineering, I got hands-on experience. There was more focus on practical implementation than learning from a book. At the end of the year in an ITI, I not only felt more confident about my subjects in Engineering but also felt that I could express my ideas better.

Now back in Engineering, I still refer to the Quest App once or twice a week to improve my sentence construction or prepare for an interview. I credit the Quest App in giving me the confidence to return to my Engineering degree after a setback.

It has made me a learner for life and I hope more students take inspiration from it.

Challenges and Limitations

Through this report we have sought to highlight that while much of being a self-learner depends on an individual's locus of control, the external environment plays an equally important role in helping the individual translate their intent to practice.

Some of those challenges are critical to consider for learning organizations and those who want to create Self-learning spaces.



1 Accessing opportunities, resources, and platforms, are defined by where you are born, despite innate talents and skills.

Most of the time, where you are born determines much of what you can access, including Self-learning pathways. While you might individually choose to acquire skills daily, how those skills translate into a forward momentum for society is limited to where you were born.

3 Being able to choose is a political act and a democratic principle.

The socio-economic and political realities are the external factors that influence an individual's or collective's ability to choose. It is closely tied to the geography/ community that you are born into. Not everyone has equal opportunity, nor is it a reflection of your ability to choose.

2 Building familiarity with Self-learning needs time, and space.

Social conditioning plays an important role in developing the Self-learning muscle. Particularly for individuals to develop a learning identity, to have confidence that they can learn, needs to be supported with continuous, positive learning experiences. In the absence of time and space, to practice autonomy and develop a deep connection to the self, Self-learning could become challenging.

4 Systems need to pivot and transform.

For Self-learning to flourish, the systems governing learning, education, and employment, need to have a buy-in on the values of Self-learning and allow for multiple ways of acknowledging learning milestones. Self-learning is not entirely an individual's responsibility. For more independent thinkers and self-learners to lead organizations, and systems, we need a subset of systems with the ability and the intent to nurture them. The old ways of preparing workers for the industrial age is not going to nurture individuals who can lead the 21st century and beyond.

Women and Self-learning

At the heart of Self-learning lies the values of independence. Women and girls navigate authority and negotiate autonomy in their everyday lives, to even meet basic needs like access to nutritious food, quality education and the freedom to make their own life choices. These everyday challenges create a sense of dependency, and support the notion that freedom is not a choice for everyone.

In the absence of opportunities to experience freedom and exercise autonomy, individuals may find it hard to wield them. Thus, there is a need to create space, time and opportunities for women and girls to learn to exercise freedom and agency. To be able to understand power dynamics and assert oneself requires not just empowerment at an individual level, but a systemic shift addressing the stakeholders of the community as well.

A deeply patriarchal society makes it hard for women to escape rules and norms established by traditions, customs and rituals of society. In such an environment, making informed choices about what they want to learn, why, how, and from whom, is overwhelming, if not out of bounds.

This is not to discount the reality that despite living in a constrained environment, we have seen women and girls demonstrate the values of a self-learner more explicitly in their daily lives. Many women and girls find ways to upskill themselves, squeeze time out of their busy days to learn a new skill, and secure a job to be economically independent. During the COVID-19 pandemic, an internal survey showed us that more girls accessed online education via mobile phones and TV as compared to boys. More girls mobilized their peers to engage in virtual learning activities and took the responsibility to not let the pandemic disrupt their education. It makes us believe that women and girls are more resilient, which allows them to be self-learners and pursue their goals despite all challenges imposed on them.

Being collaborative, drawing from intergenerational wisdom, processing information logically, emotionally and practically comes naturally to women. In an internal study to understand online learning behaviors we found that more girls, than boys, discuss their learnings with their peers and siblings, and reach out to peers to access information and resources.

Unfortunately, social conditioning has led most of society to value only certain kinds of learning. The ability to run their households with limited resources, the ability to provide meals, manage money, raise children, care for the elderly are not considered “skills”. The effort it takes to acquire these skills and navigate domestic expectations and challenges is seldom acknowledged or appreciated.

The existing stereotypes around girls and women -- their roles, their skills, their responsibilities -- needs to be challenged. Investing time and effort to help communities re-examine their beliefs and thought process is the first step towards cultivating Self-learning environments for women and girls. A learning environment which

is inclusive, makes space for diverse learners from marginalised groups, allows for failures and is open to new experiments and standards of learning will also help women and girls exercise their agency as learners.

The ‘self’ in Self-learning emphasises the need for placing the agency of choice-making in the hands of the learner, as opposed to a system or an institution. It believes that the individual determines the best pathway to achieve their goals. But having the ability to make choices or having a vision to craft one’s learning pathway doesn’t always go hand-in-hand with the individual’s ability to make it come true.

Women and girls are more resilient, which allows them to be self-learners and pursue their goals despite all challenges imposed on them.



Making a choice is also a political decision -- and when systems do not allow for that to happen, no amount of agency will be fruitful.

On the other hand, when systems and processes become inclusive and allow for equitable participation, policies and norms also become more just and fair. At the heart of empowering more women and girls to be self-learners lies the work of altering our paradigms on: (i) what learning means (ii) who decides on standards and benchmarks (iii) and towards what goals.

For future research

Since a Self-learning environment allows for individuals to follow their own journeys, in the interviews and field visits, we were unable to find specific differences on what works better for women and girls. There is scope for further investigation to understand how women and girls navigate power, authority in their everyday lives, and the causal effect of those in their learning journeys.

This study could be designed to compare two environments where Self-learning is manifested and demonstrated -- to understand the innate values demonstrated by women and their impact on crafting their own Self-learning journeys. This might help us understand if it is easier for women and girls to be self-learners than men and boys. Additionally, there is merit in examining if Self-learning environments could be the strategy to bring about gradual systemic changes where inclusion and equitable treatment across genders and other such divisive groupings are successful.

— Self learning is a lonely activity.

Self-learning is a collaborative exercise, if the learner designs it to be so.

— Self-learning is possible only when a learner has access to superior technology, the Internet.

Technology acts as an enabler to connect learners to resources and can also manifest through television, radio, even a basic mobile phone.

— Self-learning is overly individualistic and will only work for motivated students.

Self-learning can be driven from collective self-direction and helps a learner to build a muscle to walk the path of the Self-learning journey.

Mythbusters²⁸

— Self-learning means not needing a teacher/ educator/ facilitator.

In the learning journey, we all need guidance, support, and direction. In Self-learning, the learner gets to choose their mentor.

— Self-learning requires the learner to have all the answers around what, why, when, who, how, before they can embark on their learning.

Arriving at the key questions is also part of the Self-learning journey.

— Myths

Conclusion

Self-learning is a potential way forward to close the gap between the aims of education and what is practised. The values guiding the process of Self-learning, and nurturing self-learners, should be viewed in light of the existing socio-cultural-political-environmental realities of the day. Our present systems and policies are not designed to enable all people, and unfortunately leave quite a few behind. Factors such as power, authority, relationships, are deeply-ingrained social practices that have adversely affected individual learning journeys.

Self-learning cannot be nurtured if some of these systemic issues are not addressed. While they seem overwhelming, the people and organizations we interviewed for this study, show us that small changes at the local community level have the potential to bring exponential shifts at the national level.

We are aware that the concept definition and cases presented do not cover the wide gamut of realities that govern our nation. The realities of people in different parts of the country are starkly disparate; what might hold good for one, might be harmful for the other. There is also a wide gap in the realities of a rural setting and an urban one. However, we hope that the values presented in this report, along with the characteristics of a self-learner, will enable individuals to adapt the concept of Self-learning in their communities and learning spaces.

We invite more people to share their stories, their experiences, and their challenges, so we can deepen our understanding of Self-learning as a collective.

For future research, these questions might be explored with greater depth and vigor:

Through self learning, we can build our muscles to lead a life where learning becomes priority and not happenstance, and all our actions are guided by informed decision-making, which eventually uplifts us as individuals and as a community.

1

How do Self-learning pathways benefit marginalized communities, in particular women, who have historically been denied access to resources and opportunities?

2

How does Self-learning as an approach enable individuals to develop agency and exercise their autonomy to create change in the system, and transform how learning happens in our formal education system?

3

How can we nurture the values and characteristics of a self-learner from a young age?

4

What role does basic reading and comprehension play to further an individual's Self-learning journey?

Credits

If you wish to know more about the methodology or the findings, or if you want to share your experience as a self-learner, please reach out to jayashree@questalliance.net

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28 For more on this, please read:

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