

Autodidacticism as a Foundational Pillar of Lifelong Learning: A Conceptual Inquiry

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Abstract

This article presents a conceptual inquiry into the role of autodidacticism as a foundational pillar of lifelong learning. In contemporary educational discourse, lifelong learning is widely promoted as essential for personal development, social inclusion, and adaptability in a rapidly changing world. However, much of the literature tends to focus on institutional mechanisms and formal frameworks, often overlooking the intrinsic qualities that sustain continuous learning beyond structured environments. This study argues that autodidacticism (defined as self-initiated, self-regulated, and intrinsically motivated learning) is not only compatible with lifelong learning but constitutes its conceptual core. Through an analytical review of relevant philosophical, psychological, and educational literature, the article identifies key elements of autodidacticism, such as learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and reflective practice. These are then compared with the central features of lifelong learning, including continuity, flexibility, learner-centeredness, and adaptability. The analysis reveals significant conceptual overlaps, indicating that autodidacticism serves as the internal engine that enables lifelong learning to function meaningfully across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of cultivating autodidactic dispositions in educational practice and policy, ensuring that learners are equipped not only to receive knowledge but also to pursue it independently throughout their lifespan. In doing so, this inquiry affirms the philosophical and pedagogical necessity of recognizing autodidacticism as a foundational element in any serious vision of lifelong learning.

Keywords: Autodidacticism, Lifelong Learning, Learner Autonomy, Self-Directed Learning; Philosophy of Education

Introduction

Over the past several decades, lifelong learning has evolved from a loosely defined educational ideal into a central pillar of global policy discourse, human development

strategies, and contemporary theories of learning. International organizations, most notably the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Union, consistently highlight lifelong learning as essential for democratic participation, economic resilience, and social cohesion in an era marked by rapid technological, cultural, and labor-market transformations (McIntosh, 2005). As UNESCO asserts, lifelong learning is not merely an educational aspiration but a normative vision of society in which individuals are empowered to learn continuously, adapt constructively, and participate meaningfully in a knowledge-intensive world.

Within this paradigm, learning is conceptualized as a continuous, holistic, and life-spanning process that unfolds across formal institutions, non-formal community or workplace programs, and the informal learning embedded in everyday life (Mawas & Muntean, 2018). This reconceptualization departs from traditional models of education that confine learning to childhood or early adulthood and treat schools and universities as the primary sites of knowledge acquisition. Instead, lifelong learning positions learning as a dynamic, iterative, and adaptive activity that persists throughout one's lifespan. This shift reflects the growing need for individuals to refresh, update, and deepen their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to navigate technological innovation, shifting economic structures, demographic changes, and evolving social demands (Council of the European Union, 2002). Governments and institutions have therefore invested in infrastructures such as continuing education programs, flexible learning pathways, community learning centers, and digital platforms to support adult learners.

Despite widespread adoption of the lifelong learning paradigm, much of the policy and academic literature remains focused on its structural, institutional, and systemic dimensions. Emphasis on widening participation, credentialing mechanisms, upskilling initiatives, digital access, and governance—while important—often overshadows the dispositional, psychological, and self-initiated aspects of learning. As a result, lifelong learning is frequently framed as an institutional provision rather than a personal process grounded in individual agency, motivation, and self-directed engagement. This conceptual imbalance raises critical questions about the internal capacities that enable individuals to persist in learning beyond formal settings, particularly where institutional support is limited or unevenly distributed.

Autodidacticism—defined as self-initiated, self-managed, and intrinsically motivated learning—offers an important lens through which to address this gap (Dominic, 2017). Historically associated with independent scholars, artisans, inventors, and literary archetypes such as Robinson Crusoe, autodidacticism describes a form of learning driven by personal agency rather than institutional directives. While often stereotyped as solitary, contemporary scholarship challenges this view. Research demonstrates that autodidacts routinely engage with social networks, digital communities, peer groups, and informal knowledge-sharing structures (Cyrot, 2007). The concept also has rich sociohistorical roots, with Fisher and Fisher (2007) linking autodidacticism to middle-class Marxist activist traditions in which self-education functioned as a tool of political empowerment and collective action.

In today's digital knowledge environment, autodidacticism has gained renewed relevance. According to Kiwelu and Ogbonna (2020), the democratization of information, the growth of open educational resources, and the increasing availability of online learning

platforms create unprecedented opportunities and pressures for individuals to manage their own learning. The modern learner must navigate fluid, unpredictable environments where knowledge rapidly becomes outdated. Within such contexts, the dispositions associated with autodidacticism align closely with established constructs in educational psychology. Learner autonomy (Kiwelu & Ogbonna, 2020), intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and metacognitive self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002) are widely recognized as central to sustained engagement and effective self-directed learning. These traits correspond directly to the competencies required for successful lifelong learning, suggesting deeper conceptual interdependence than often acknowledged.

Yet the two constructs are commonly treated as separate or contrasting domains: lifelong learning is located within institutional and policy structures, while autodidacticism is situated within individual initiative and personal disposition (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). This separation risks oversimplifying the dynamics of adult learning by ignoring the possibility that autodidactic dispositions constitute the internal psychological foundation that makes lifelong learning viable and meaningful. Without intrinsic motivation, individuals may not persist; without autonomy, they may struggle to navigate flexible learning spaces; without self-regulation, they may be unable to sustain learning; and without resourcefulness, they may be unable to locate and evaluate available information.

Recognizing the relationship between autodidacticism and lifelong learning thus encourages an integrated understanding of how learning is sustained across the lifespan. It shifts attention from viewing lifelong learning solely as an external or institutional provision to seeing it as an interplay between internal dispositions and external structures. This conceptual gap forms the central problem addressed in this study: the lack of theoretical integration between lifelong learning and the autodidactic dispositions that may underpin it. This study contributes to current scholarship by articulating a conceptual bridge between autodidacticism and lifelong learning. It advances the argument that autodidactic dispositions—autonomy, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and resourcefulness—constitute the internal engine that enables lifelong learning to function meaningfully across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts.

Methodology

To examine this relationship, the present article adopts a conceptual inquiry methodology. Because both constructs draw from diverse intellectual traditions and have evolved through philosophical, psychological, and educational discourse, a conceptual approach allows for the clarification of meanings, interrogation of assumptions, and synthesis of insights across bodies of knowledge. The methodological structure follows the principles outlined by Jabareen (2009), who describes conceptual frameworks as systems of interlinked concepts that collectively provide a coherent understanding of a phenomenon. Aligned with this approach, the inquiry begins with an extensive analytic review of literature from the philosophy of education, adult learning theory, cognitive psychology, and self-directed learning research.

Within this review, the concepts of autodidacticism and lifelong learning are deconstructed to identify their essential characteristics and the assumptions embedded within their definitions. For autodidacticism, attention is given to intrinsic motivation, learner

autonomy, intellectual curiosity, and metacognitive self-regulation—features widely recognized as central to self-initiated learning. For lifelong learning, the analysis considers continuity across adulthood, the integration of formal, non-formal, and informal contexts, and the institutional or social conditions that support or constrain ongoing learning (Soh & Ali, 2021). This deconstructive phase clarifies terminological ambiguities and enables more precise conceptual boundaries.

Building on this clarification, the article then undertakes a comparative conceptual analysis to examine areas of convergence and divergence between the two constructs. This includes assessing whether autodidactic dispositions function as underlying mechanisms that enable sustained engagement in learning across the lifespan and determining the extent to which lifelong learning frameworks account for the internal motivations and self-regulatory processes characteristic of autodidactic behavior. Through this comparative lens, the study identifies points of alignment—such as learner agency and adaptability—as well as tensions, particularly concerning the role of institutional structures in lifelong learning versus the predominantly individual-driven nature of autodidacticism.

The final stage synthesizes these insights into a unified conceptual framework that positions autodidacticism as a potential internal driver of lifelong learning. This synthesis illustrates how self-directed, intrinsically motivated learning behaviors interface with broader educational ecosystems and how they may contribute to sustained learner engagement. The resulting framework aims not only to advance theoretical clarity but also to inform policy and practice by emphasizing the importance of cultivating self-sustaining learning dispositions from early schooling through adulthood.

Elements of Autodidacticism

Taken together, the five elements of autonomy, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, reflective practice, and resourcefulness form a comprehensive and deeply interrelated framework for understanding the internal dispositions that support autodidactic learning. Although each element has been studied separately in the literature on self-directed learning, adult education, and educational psychology, scholars increasingly emphasize that the true explanatory power of autodidacticism emerges only when these capacities are examined collectively. This constellation of traits enables individuals not merely to learn outside formal settings but to sustain knowledge development across varying circumstances, challenges, and knowledge domains.

Autonomy

Autonomy consistently appears as the foundational principle that differentiates autodidactic learning from externally directed forms of education. Within literature, autonomy is conceptualized as more than physical or structural independence from teachers; it represents a psychological orientation marked by an internal locus of control and a sense of personal responsibility for one's learning decisions. Kiwelu and Ogbonna (2020) emphasize that autonomous learners recognize themselves as agents capable of determining their learning goals, selecting resources, and structuring their learning environments. This autonomy does not imply isolation; rather, it empowers the learner to choose when and how to engage with experts, mentors, or communities of practice. Autonomy thus enables intentional engagement: learners decide what matters to them intellectually and pursue knowledge that

aligns with their curiosities, aspirations, or personal identities. It sets the foundation upon which all other autodidactic traits are built.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation reinforces autonomy by providing the emotional and cognitive energy necessary to sustain independent learning efforts. Drawing on Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is defined as engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction or meaning it provides, rather than for external validation or reward. In autodidactic contexts where examinations, institutional expectations, or teacher feedback are absent, intrinsic motivation functions as the principal driving force. Literature highlights that autodidactic learners are often propelled by deep curiosity, enjoyment of intellectual exploration, or strong personal relevance of the subject matter. Intrinsic motivation is particularly critical in maintaining persistence through complex or challenging tasks, enabling learners to invest time, effort, and cognitive labor even when progress is slow or difficult. Without intrinsic motivation, autodidactic learning risks becoming sporadic or easily abandoned, underscoring its centrality in sustaining long-term independent study.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation provides the structural and metacognitive scaffolding required for learners to manage their learning processes effectively. Zimmerman (2002) identifies self-regulation as involving three cyclical phases: forethought (planning and goal setting), performance (monitoring strategies and effort), and self-reflection (evaluating outcomes and adjusting approaches). For autodidacts, these processes are indispensable because there is no external authority to impose structure, track progress, or provide corrective feedback. Self-regulated learners actively plan their studies, break down complex goals into manageable tasks, and monitor their comprehension as they progress. When difficulties arise, they troubleshoot problems, seek alternative resources, or revise their study strategies. Research shows that self-regulation correlates with increased persistence, deeper learning, and higher achievement, even in the absence of institutional support. Thus, self-regulation is the operational mechanism that transforms autonomous intentions into sustained learning behavior.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has historically been associated with professional development, yet it is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of self-directed learning and autodidacticism more broadly. Reflection involves examining one's experiences, questioning assumptions, and critically analyzing the processes and outcomes of learning. Farrell's metaphor, as interpreted by Machost and Stains (2023), conceptualizes reflection as a "compass" that guides learners through uncertainty, providing direction and helping them articulate goals for future improvement. In autodidactic contexts, reflection allows learners to make sense of their learning journeys, identify gaps in understanding, and recognize patterns in their successes and failures. Reflection thus serves as an essential feedback loop that fosters metacognitive growth, deepens conceptual understanding, and enhances the efficiency of future learning endeavors.

Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness encompasses the practical skills necessary for navigating an increasingly vast and complex information ecosystem. According to Ponton, Derrick, and Carr (2005), autodidacts must not only seek out material resources such as books, journals, or online tools but also cultivate the ability to evaluate the credibility, relevance, and usefulness of these resources. Resourcefulness also includes leveraging social networks: experts, peers, communities of practice, when self-study alone is insufficient. In the contemporary era, marked by digital abundance and information overload, resourcefulness becomes even more critical: learners must discern credible information from misinformation and synthesize multiple sources to form coherent understanding. Thus, resourcefulness connects the internal dispositions of autodidacticism with the external world of knowledge, enabling learners to convert opportunities into meaningful learning.

Integration of the Five Elements of Autodidacticism

Across literature, these five elements are frequently associated with broader constructs such as learner autonomy, self-directed learning, metacognition, and motivational psychology. However, their significance lies not merely in their individual contributions but in their synergistic interaction. Autonomy initiates learning, intrinsic motivation sustains it, self-regulation structures it, reflection deepens it, and resourcefulness expands it. Together, these capacities enable individuals to become lifelong, self-directed learners capable of navigating complex and uncertain knowledge landscapes. As such, autodidacticism provides a powerful lens for understanding the internal dimensions of lifelong learning that remain under-theorized in policy-driven discourse.

Elements of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is widely recognized as a multidimensional and evolving concept that extends beyond participation in formal educational programs. UNESCO (2016) frames lifelong learning as a process that encompasses the continuous development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values across all stages of life. This conceptualization situates lifelong learning as both a personal orientation toward growth and a societal mandate for human development. The literature identifies several core elements—continuity, flexibility, learner-centeredness, adaptability, and integration across contexts—that together define the structural and philosophical foundations of lifelong learning systems.

Continuity

Continuity is the cornerstone of lifelong learning. Longworth and Davies (1996) describe learning as a lifelong endeavor characterized by constant engagement with new knowledge and experiences. This conceptual shift challenges the traditional notion that education is confined to early life stages or formal schooling. Instead, learning is viewed as an iterative process in which individuals continually build upon prior knowledge, revisit earlier understandings, and acquire new skills in response to life transitions. The literature suggests that continuity is essential for personal, professional, and civic development, particularly as knowledge rapidly evolves in contemporary society. Learning becomes a habit rather than an event—a sustained process rather than a terminal achievement. This temporal orientation forms the philosophical foundation of lifelong learning systems.

Flexibility

Flexibility refers to the responsiveness of educational structures to the realities of adult learners. Mohamed (2014) argues that flexible learning environments, characterized by adaptable schedules, modularity, blended delivery modes, and recognition of prior learning, are necessary to accommodate diverse life circumstances. Flexibility is especially vital for adults balancing employment, family responsibilities, and community roles, as rigid educational structures often exclude those who cannot conform to conventional schedules. The literature also highlights flexibility as a mechanism for promoting equity: by lowering barriers related to time, location, format, and pace, flexible systems make learning more accessible to underrepresented or marginalized groups. Flexibility thus functions both as a structural condition within lifelong learning systems and as a facilitator of agency and continued participation.

Learner-Centeredness

Learner-centeredness positions learners' experiences, motivations, and goals at the heart of the learning process. Payunda and Khairunnisa (2024) note that learner-centered approaches place emphasis on personalized learning pathways, active engagement, and the recognition of learners' prior knowledge. This orientation aligns closely with adult learning theories such as andragogy, which stress autonomy, self-direction, and relevance. Learner-centeredness shifts the role of educators from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators or co-constructors of learning experiences. In lifelong learning contexts, this principle is particularly important: adult learners enter learning environments with diverse needs, interests, and expectations, making uniform pedagogical approaches insufficient. Learner-centeredness therefore enhances the relevance, engagement, and sustainability of learning across the lifespan.

Adaptability

Adaptability has gained increasing prominence in literature due to rapid technological, economic, and social changes. According to Othman (2022), lifelong learners must cultivate the capacity to respond effectively to emerging challenges, shifting professional landscapes, and evolving societal expectations. Adaptability encompasses openness to new ideas, cognitive flexibility, and the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn. It is essential for employability in industries undergoing digital transformation, as well as for active citizenship in a world characterized by complexity and uncertainty. Adaptability thus reflects not only cognitive skill but also an attitudinal disposition that encourages continual growth and responsiveness to change.

Integration Across Contexts

Integration across contexts emphasizes the interconnectedness of learning experiences in formal, non-formal, and informal settings. The Commission of the European Communities (2001) argues that lifelong learning becomes most effective when learning is recognized, valued, and utilized across multiple domains of life. Integration enables knowledge transfer: skills learned in the workplace can enhance community engagement; competencies gained through hobbies or volunteer activities can inform professional development; formal education can be enriched by experiential learning. This holistic view aligns with the contemporary concept of learning ecosystems, which conceptualize learning as embedded within multiple, overlapping environments. Integration thus positions lifelong learning as a comprehensive and fluid process that spans social, cultural, economic, and personal domains.

Integration of the Five Elements of Lifelong Learning

Together, these five elements create a robust conceptual framework that captures the breadth and depth of lifelong learning. Continuity establishes learning as a lifelong journey; flexibility ensures access and responsiveness; learner-centeredness promotes engagement and relevance; adaptability equips individuals for evolving contexts; and integration supports meaningful application of knowledge across domains. The literature suggests that lifelong learning is neither purely individual nor purely institutional but emerges through an interaction between personal dispositions and enabling structures. Importantly, these elements directly align with the cognitive and motivational capacities emphasized in autodidacticism, indicating a strong conceptual relationship between the two frameworks. While lifelong learning is often approached from a policy or institutional perspective, its sustained practice depends heavily on the internal dispositions of learners themselves.

Synthesizing the Core Elements of Autodidacticism and Lifelong Learning

A close conceptual analysis reveals that autodidacticism and lifelong learning share substantial philosophical, psychological, and practical commonalities, despite originating from different scholarly traditions and policy discourses. Both perspectives position learning as an active, dynamic, and self-propelling endeavor in which individuals navigate complex and evolving knowledge landscapes. Each concept foregrounds the learner's agency, adaptability, and capacity for self-direction, while simultaneously acknowledging that learning is embedded within broader socio-cultural, technological, and institutional contexts. This underlying commonality forms the basis for a rich conceptual convergence.

Autodidacticism is fundamentally oriented toward internal psychological dispositions, the cognitive, motivational, and metacognitive resources that enable individuals to self-initiate and sustain learning activities. These include intrinsic motivation, autonomy, self-regulation, resourcefulness, and reflective capacity. At its core, autodidacticism depicts learning as an internally driven process in which individuals voluntarily select learning goals, independently seek out knowledge resources, and regulate their learning trajectory without dependence on external structures or authority figures. This inward orientation aligns it with theories of self-determination, agency, and metacognition, which emphasize the role of personal volition and self-awareness in learning.

Lifelong learning, in contrast, adopts a systems-oriented perspective that incorporates both individual dispositions and the structural, social, and policy-level enablers that facilitate learning throughout the lifespan. The literature frames lifelong learning as a societal commitment to supporting continuous education, characterized by flexible learning pathways, recognition of diverse learning contexts (formal, non-formal, and informal), equitable access to opportunities, and the cultivation of environments that encourage ongoing personal and professional development (Kaplan, 2016). This outward-facing orientation aligns lifelong learning with educational policy, community development, and workforce transformation frameworks that emphasize how institutions and governments can create ecosystems that empower individuals to participate in learning at all stages of life.

Despite these conceptual distinctions, the relationship between autodidacticism and lifelong learning is not oppositional but complementary and interdependent. Autodidactic elements function as the micro-level psychological engines that drive engagement, while

lifelong learning elements provide the macro-level structures that sustain and legitimize learning within broader socio-educational systems. For example, intrinsic motivation and autonomy empower individuals to seize learning opportunities, but flexible learning environments and recognition of informal learning ensure that these opportunities are accessible and meaningful. Similarly, reflective and self-regulated learners are better positioned to adapt to changing societal and technological demands—an adaptability that lies at the heart of lifelong learning in contemporary knowledge economies.

Table 1 articulates this interrelationship by mapping specific elements of autodidacticism into corresponding elements of lifelong learning. The conceptual pairing demonstrates that each autodidactic disposition finds a parallel structural or pedagogical support within the lifelong learning framework, reinforcing the notion that both constructs articulate different but synergistic dimensions of human learning across the lifespan.

Table 1

Conceptual relationship between autodidacticism and lifelong learning

Element of Autodidacticism	Element of Lifelong Learning	Conceptual Connection
Self-motivation/Intrinsic drive	Learner-centeredness	Lifelong learning depends on the learner's internal drive; autodidacticism provides the motivational foundation necessary for sustained engagement.
Self-regulation	Continuity across life stages	Lifelong learning requires learners to plan and manage their learning independently over time; self-regulation provides the capabilities needed for ongoing progression.
Autonomy	Flexibility in learning pathways	Both emphasize freedom from rigid structures, enabling personalized learning journeys shaped by individual goals, needs, and contexts.
Resourcefulness	Recognition of informal/non-formal learning	Autodidacts frequently rely on informal resources (e.g., books, the internet, peer networks) and diverse learning environments; lifelong learning frameworks legitimize and value these modes of knowledge acquisition.
Reflection/Metacognition	Adaptability to changing contexts	Reflective learners are better equipped to adapt to new challenges and environments; adaptability is essential for lifelong learning in rapidly evolving societies.
Resilience/Perseverance	Lifelong commitment to learning	Lifelong learning is only sustainable when learners persist despite obstacles; resilience, a hallmark of autodidacts, supports long-term engagement without external enforcement.

The conceptual mapping presented in Table 1 highlights a critical insight: the effectiveness of lifelong learning infrastructures is significantly influenced by the presence of internal dispositions traditionally associated with autodidacticism. Intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and reflective practice serve as the psychological prerequisites for meaningful engagement in learning opportunities, whether formal or informal. Without these internal drivers, lifelong learning risks devolving into a policy slogan rather than a lived practice marked by genuine engagement and growth.

Conversely, autodidacticism alone has inherent limitations when situated within unequal or restrictive learning environments. The ability to self-direct learning presumes access to resources, supportive communities, digital tools, and social recognition of learning efforts. Lifelong learning policies and institutional supports address these gaps by providing the external scaffolding necessary to democratize access to knowledge and ensure that autodidactic dispositions can be nurtured across diverse populations. These supports range from workplace training schemes and community learning centers to micro-credentials and open educational resources that make learning broadly accessible.

When considered together, autodidacticism and lifelong learning offer a holistic learning paradigm in which personal dispositions and structural conditions converge to promote sustainable learning across the lifespan. Autodidacticism represents the capacity to learn independently (an internal engine) while lifelong learning represents the opportunity to do so within inclusive, flexible, and supportive environments.

This synthesis underscores a crucial theoretical implication: sustainable lifelong learning cannot be fully realized through policy interventions alone nor solely through individual agency. Instead, it emerges from the dynamic interplay between learner-centered dispositions and learning-enabling ecosystems. The confluence of these internal and external elements creates fertile conditions in which individuals are empowered not only to learn throughout their lives but to do so with autonomy, purpose, and resilience.

Conclusion

This article argued that autodidacticism is not simply compatible with lifelong learning but is, in fact, integral to its conceptual architecture. Through a synthesis of existing literature, five core elements of autodidacticism: autonomy, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, reflective practice, and resourcefulness, were identified as the internal capacities that empower individuals to initiate, sustain, and navigate their own learning journeys. When examined alongside the foundational elements of lifelong learning: continuity, flexibility, learner-centeredness, adaptability, and integration across contexts, a strong conceptual convergence becomes evident. Both frameworks emphasize active learner engagement, the pursuit of meaningful and contextually relevant knowledge, and the capacity to respond effectively to evolving personal, professional, and societal demands.

The analysis presented here reframes lifelong learning as a dynamic interplay between internal dispositions and external structures. While lifelong learning has often been conceptualized in policy discourse as a system-level endeavor that relies on educational institutions, labor markets, and community infrastructures, this perspective remains incomplete without acknowledging the psychological and metacognitive capacities that make

sustained learning possible. Autodidacticism provides this essential missing dimension: it constitutes the internal engine that drives learners to take advantage of the opportunities provided by lifelong learning systems. Without autonomy, individuals may remain dependent on external guidance rather than directing their own learning; without intrinsic motivation, engagement diminishes once external incentives disappear; without self-regulation and reflection, learners may struggle to set goals, evaluate progress, or adapt strategies; and without resourcefulness, they may be unable to navigate the expanding universe of information, tools, and learning environments available in contemporary society.

Thus, lifelong learning emerges not merely as a policy objective or institutional framework but as an inherently personal and self-sustained process grounded in autodidactic capacity. The external structures of lifelong learning—flexible programs, recognition of informal learning, digital platforms, and community-based opportunities—can only be effective when learners possess the internal traits necessary to utilize them. In other words, while institutions can open doors, it is the learner’s agency that determines whether those doors lead to meaningful and enduring learning experiences. Recognizing this interdependence shifts the focus of educational development from solely providing access to also nurturing self-directedness, resilience, curiosity, and metacognitive awareness.

Furthermore, understanding autodidacticism as the conceptual core of lifelong learning has important implications for educational practice and policy. It suggests that fostering lifelong learners requires more than curriculum reform or the provision of technological resources; it demands intentional cultivation of self-driven learning habits from early childhood through adulthood. Educational systems should therefore move beyond transmissive models of instruction and prioritize approaches that encourage exploration, autonomy, critical thinking, and reflective engagement. Likewise, policies aimed at expanding lifelong learning opportunities should incorporate strategies that help individuals develop the psychological competencies necessary for self-directed engagement with these opportunities.

Future research is essential to deepen this conceptual integration and explore its practical implications. One promising direction involves investigating how autodidactic traits develop across different cultural, socioeconomic, and educational contexts. Cultural norms surrounding independence, authority, and learning may influence how autonomy or self-regulation manifests; socioeconomic conditions may affect access to resources that facilitate resourcefulness; and formal education systems may either nurture or suppress intrinsic motivation and reflective practice. Comparative research could illuminate the diverse pathways through which autodidacticism emerges and the ways in which these pathways interact with the structures of lifelong learning systems.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how autodidactic capacities evolve over time and how they contribute to sustained patterns of lifelong learning. Such work could help identify the developmental stages at which certain autodidactic traits are most malleable and highlight interventions that are particularly effective in strengthening them. There is also a need to examine the role of digital technologies—which increasingly mediate learning experiences—and their capacity to both support and challenge the development of autodidactic traits. Questions regarding digital literacy, information

discernment, online learning autonomy, and algorithmic influences on curiosity warrant further exploration.

Finally, policymakers and educators would benefit from research that links specific pedagogical or systemic interventions to measurable improvements in autodidactic dispositions and lifelong learning outcomes. This could include examining the impact of reflective learning practices, self-regulated learning strategies, or resource-based learning approaches across diverse educational settings. In conclusion, this article stresses the centrality of autodidacticism within the lifelong learning paradigm. By demonstrating that lifelong learning is sustained not merely by external structures but by the internal dispositions of learners themselves, it calls for a balanced and integrated approach to educational development—one that cultivates agency, nurtures curiosity, and equips individuals with the metacognitive tools required to engage meaningfully with learning throughout the entirety of their lives.

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