

Assigning and creating self-study materials

This chapter deals with the features and the application of self-study materials in in-person and online educational settings. After reading the chapter, you should be able to:

- ✓ Explain the main features of self-study materials,
- ✓ Describe the process of assigning and creating self-study materials,
- ✓ Compare the use of self-study materials in face-to-face, online synchronous, and online asynchronous learning.

The chapter includes the following sections:

1. *Self-studying, self-motivating, self-learning: what are the main differences?*
2. *The role of the educator in assigning and creating self-study materials*
3. *A step-by-step guide for creating self-study materials*
4. *Self-study materials in face-to-face, online synchronous, and online asynchronous education*
5. *Challenges: your learners do not use the materials you've created*
6. *Questions for reflection*
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1. Self-studying, self-motivating, self-learning: what are the main differences?

At some point in our lives, we have all been self-studying. And you most probably remember the feeling of preparing for the test: highlighting, sketching, trying to memorise as much as you can. All of that from the comfort of your own space, wearing comfortable clothes and fuzzy socks with your favourite drink by your side, books and articles spread around the kitchen table - or wearing headphones in the library. **Now, as a digital educator, you are aware that the success and effectiveness of distance learning largely depend on the quality of the study materials you and your learners use.** You might wonder how to assign, create, or encourage your learners to design and follow self-study materials and get the most of them.

We define **self-studying** as a learning method where one is **learning about a subject at their own pace without direct supervision or attendance in a class**. In other words, self-studying allows learners to understand what they want when they want, and how they want it—following or creating any material that our learners use while self-studying is called **self-study material**. While textbooks and articles present information in a compact knowledge form and are often closer to reference material, **self-study materials are the instrument of learning**. What does it mean?

Research (Jayaram and Dorababu, 2015) suggests that self-study materials support the learning process because they are:

- 1.) **Self-motivating:** They foster curiosity, raise problems, and relate knowledge to familiar situations and previous knowledge and experiences making the learning meaningful.
- 2.) **Self-learning:** They provide learners with directions, hints, references, and bites of information to facilitate independent learning. Also, to make the content understandable, self-study material is supported by simple explanations, examples, illustrations, activities, etc.
- 3.) **Self-explanatory:** the learner can go through the material without external support. The content should be analysed logically and presented in a self-explanatory and conceptually straightforward.
- 4.) **Self-contained:** regardless of distance learning amid pandemics, self-study material should be self-sufficient for the learners who are not able to receive support due to their geographical, physical, and psychological isolation.
- 5.) **Self-directed:** the study material should provide learners with necessary guidance at each stage of learning in a role of a distant educator who can guide, instruct, moderate, and regulate the learning process, even online.

6.) Self-evaluating: To ensure optimum learning, the learners should know whether they are on the right track. Self-evaluation in the form of self-check questions, activities, exercises, etc., provides the learners with much-needed feedback about their progress, reinforces learning, and motivates them for further learning.

Learners guided by self-study materials should experience learning that they may have in a typical formal classroom setting. But still, there are several differences – let's explore them by analysing their advantages and disadvantages.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of creating self-study materials?

Creating self-study materials has its advantages and disadvantages. As self-study materials are self-motivating, self-learning, self-explanatory, self-contained, self-directed, and self-evaluating, the **major benefit is the active role of learners and significant responsibility for the process of learning**. On the other hand, as learning is happening independently of an educator, **some learners can feel isolated or lose motivation to follow the materials**. According to the literature (Minnick, 1989), you can explore some further differences.

Advantages of self-study materials:

- learners are active rather than passive in the learning process,
- learners control the pace of learning,
- learners can explore materials on their own because they are self-learning and independent of the educator,
- learners control the time and interval of learning – the content is available when learners want it,
- content is tightly organised,
- learners are responsible for their learning,
- repetition of content material is possible,
- learners can skip familiar information and concepts,
- the frame format of documenting material content and sequence facilitates peer review,
- module documentation can be treated as creative works and scholarly publications by the academe, much as chapters in a book,
- materials are exportable for use at home or sharing with other institutions.

On the other hand, the **disadvantages of self-study materials** are:

- some learners can feel isolated,
- self-study materials can make it more difficult to emotionally motivate learners,
- it is harder to show attitudes about the content,
- immediate feedback or question periods may not be available.

2. The role of the educator in assigning and creating self-study materials

Fostering the method of self-study materials, the role of the educator changes from traditional (as a broadcaster of information, performer, entertainer) to a more modern and innovative one that aligns with digital education. That does not mean that the learners do not need the educator. They do, but the **responsibilities for the learning process puts the focus on learners themselves**. To use the advantages of self-study materials and to achieve an active role for learners, the educator should be a **manager and a facilitator, equipped with different skills**. By creating self-study materials, educators **teach learners how to teach themselves**, and re-allocate the responsibility of learning to the learners – from dependent to independent.



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3. A step-by-step guide for creating self-study materials

We have seen the description of self-study materials, their advantages, and disadvantages, and defined the role of an educator in assigning and creating self-study materials. Now, let's explore the process of designing self-study materials, step by step. Available expert resources suggest the following steps (Chaudhary, 2005; Jayaram and Dorababu, 2015):

1) Define the access devices

Even though self-studying happens without the presence of an educator, access devices are helping you, the course creator, to come as close to your learner as you possibly can, and the learner to come as close to the content as they can. This makes the content more intimate and provides a substitute for a live educator. The main access devices are:

- **Cover page** – identify a suitable and attractive cover design for the course as the cover page also communicates a broader view of the course to the learner.
- **Title of the unit** – the appropriate title of the unit gives a clear idea about the content of the unit. Try to be as specific about the title so that your learners understand it clearly.
- **Structure of the unit** – the structure provides the road map of the unit as it contains main sections, sub-sections, and sub-sub-sections of the content. The structure shows what the learners are expected to learn to meet the objectives and shifts their attention towards the subject matter.
- **Objectives** – list observable and measurable objectives of the unit.
- **Division of the content** – indicate each section distinctly by **BOLD CAPITALS** and each sub-section in **smaller bold letters**.
- **Illustrations** – support the content with different illustrations, diagrams, charts, graphs, and photographs to make the course visually engaging and appealing.
- **Glossary** – create a glossary of keywords, new concepts, and technical expressions relevant to the content, preferably after the summary of the course.
- **Instructions** – precise instructions as to how to go through the unit, guide your learners.

2) Develop the unit – beginning, the main body of the unit, ending of the unit

Self-studying materials should be effective without the direct support of an educator. Developing the unit is important because we have to integrate the role of the educator into its content.

- **Beginning of the unit** (be clear and decisive on how your learners should approach the unit and guide them through what to expect from the unit):
 - a) **Structure of the unit** – online self-studying materials do not have just one table of contents. The list of the content applies to every unit itself. The list of learning

items is called the structure. With the help of clearly defined and arranged sections, sub-sections, and sub-sub-sections, the material is more learner-friendly and easy to follow.

b) Introduction to the unit – you need to welcome and motivate your learners in the introduction. Giving the learners the impression that what they are going to study is easy and manageable, encourages them to interact with the content.

c) Defining the objectives – objectives help us describe what a learner should be able to do after going through the unit. Defining the objectives is important because we need to identify the outcomes of instruction in terms of observable performance of learners – in pedagogy, we call them learning outcomes.

- **The main body of the unit** (main body is a place where your most important content is at home. It consists of a sequence of materials explaining a topic, self-assessment questions, exercises, and different activities):

a) Small steps – divide the content into small manageable learning steps making it easier for the learner to move from one step to another.

b) Logical arrangement – arrange the content logically so that the learners can proceed from one learning point to another like they are climbing the stairs. State the learning points in the unit clearly and link them with others that follow them. This way, the content has continuity and consistency.

c) Order the content for optimal learning – from known to unknown (link the unit with the entry behaviour or previous learner's experiences to make the learning meaningfully connected with things they already know), from concrete to abstract (start with concrete information and gradually introduce the abstractions using illustrations, demonstrations), from particular to general (discuss a few particular cases before generalising it into wider concepts), from actual to representative (describe the actual objects or events, use charts, graphs or diagrams if needed).

d) Use a personalised style – write in simple, plain, and clear language. Address the learners by 'you', and by their names, to create a feeling of being paid individual attention. Self-study material should give learners a feeling that he/she/they are being taught by an educator even though the educator is not physically present in the room. Make writing personal and interactive to influence the attention and interest, use personal pronouns, adequate humour, and illustrations.

e) Assess – include in-text questions that include self-check questions, progress checks, exercises, activities, and assignment questions to reinforce learning and provide feedback.

- **Ending of the unit** (ending of the unit should contain a summary, a glossary, and suggested literature for further reading).

4. Self-study materials in face-to-face, online synchronous, and online asynchronous education

Face-to-face education	Synchronous education	Asynchronous education
<p>In face-to-face education, self-learning materials are mostly used for homework, extra reading, or for those learners who want to know/do more.</p> <p>When introducing the materials, it is important to explain their use, the way the assessment will be done (if any!), and to demonstrate them to the learners. You can also monitor your learners by asking about their progress in each session and going over their progress together.</p>	<p>Synchronous education is similar to face-to-face education but does ask for a more structured approach. It is important to store self-study materials in an accessible format like Open Office or Adobe Acrobat .pdf. Not everyone has Windows!</p> <p>When introducing the materials to learners, take your time to make sure everyone downloaded them or accessed them successfully.</p> <p>Explain the use to everyone and demonstrate by sharing your screen. You can also put learners in groups by breakout room option and give them time to go over materials together and come back with any questions they have about them.</p>	<p>In asynchronous education, every material is self-study material.</p> <p>Pay special attention to the materials for asynchronous courses where the focus is on building a community. They have to encourage the learners to interact and engage with the group.</p> <p>Keep in mind the importance of testing your lesson or course so you make sure everything works as it should.</p>

5. Challenges: your learners do not use the materials you've created

Creating self-study materials is a time-consuming process. It is not easy to summarize the content, make it readable and coherent for an online environment. The frustration can become bigger if you notice that your learners are not using it at all. There is a couple of solutions to consider.

- 1.) **Go visual!** Plain bunch of text can sometimes be boring. Foster your creativity with free online platforms like [Canva](#). You can easily (and for free!) create engaging materials, use different styles and figures.
- 2.) **Use storytelling and be authentic.** Address the learners by 'you' to create a feeling of being paid individual attention. Make writing personal and interactive to influence the attention and interest, use personal pronouns, adequate humour, and illustrations.
- 3.) **Share responsibility.** Encourage your learners to create their own self-study materials. Especially if you are using self-study materials in a face-to-face education, your learners can individually create different parts of a unit, share their work with their peers and stimulate peer-to-peer learning.

6. Questions for reflection

1. *Try to come up with one advantage and one disadvantage of self-study materials according to your personal experience of self-studying!*
2. *List and reflect on the most important skills the educators need to assign and create self-study materials for their learners.*



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7. References and resources

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