

Leisure Reflections No 55: Self-Directed Learning and Leisure in Social Isolation

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Malcolm Knowles (1975, p. 18) describes self-directed learning (SDL) as “a process in which individuals take the initiative without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes.” The process of SDL, alternatively known as autodidacticism, is especially evident in leisure, where credentials and formal certification are only rarely required, providing therefore circumstances where personal agency can function. That is, this intentional self-planned activity consists of the acquisition of knowledge and experience, which is driven and guided by the learner’s own free-time interests. Moreover, it can occur in all adults and late adolescents whether alone or in the company of others.

The concept of self-directed learning as a corner stone for complex leisure (ie, serious leisure and, to a lesser extent, the project-based form) was examined earlier (Stebbins, 2017). Today, the contemporary world-wide health crisis calls for an SDL-based analysis of the learning of complex leisure under the conditions of extensive social isolation, exemplified in the distancing requirements associated with not only diseases like covid-19 but also with long-term convalescence from an infectious (often viral) disease and the more stringent types of judicial house arrest (home confinement), among possibly others.

In SDL the individual is clearly in control of this process. Such learning may be formal (here it would be synonymous with adult education), but most often, it is informal. SDL is a leisure experience of its own, and one that leads to positive, fulfilling development of the learner. Gerhard Fischer and Eric Scharff (1998) hold that SDL is “a continuous engagement in acquiring, applying and creating knowledge and skills in the context of an individual learner’s unique problems.” In fact, in some serious leisure activities, SDL comes mainly by way of observation, possibly accompanied by oral instruction and perhaps a training video. Instruments like guitar, recorder, and mouth organ are sometimes learned from a pamphlet and, less often, through informal tutelage by a friend or relative.

Social Isolation

The inspiration for this article was the covid-19 pandemic of 2020, for among the ways of avoiding the disease is remaining free from close contact with people who might be carriers – to engage in social isolation. In the case of diseases, this process does of necessity allow for some social contact, including members of the household, external people in crucial businesses (eg, grocery stores, pharmacies, physicians' offices), and home repair services. With respect to leisure activities at home, others present can sometimes fill a vital role, often by enabling them (eg, buying a jigsaw puzzle, encouraging pursuit of a hobby, playing board and card games).

In fact, disease-related social isolation for those doing so at home is only partial. Instead, the pure instance of this process is seen in the highly restrictive rules guiding some house arrests. Furthermore, such isolation occurs in effect away from home, as in seeking leisure away from other people (but possibly with home-based intimates) in nature where few if any participants are encountered. Examples include: fishing, hunting, bird watching, nature photography, ice skating on a pond, cross-country skiing, and hiking infrequently used trails (for a discussion of the “nature challenge activities,” see Davidson & Stebbins, 2011).

Activities in Home-Bound Social Isolation

Let us first examine a sample of serious leisure activities commonly found in the modern socially-isolated household (serious, casual, and project-based leisure are defined in www.seriousleisure.net/concepts and more thoroughly discussed in Stebbins, 2020a). They might consist of, for instance, working on a craft (eg, knitting, woodworking, homebrewing, baking a variety of pastries and breads) or committed reading of a genre of literature (cf, Stebbins, 2013). This pattern of leisure might be made up of video editing, practicing a skilled art or sport, or preparing some gourmet meals each week. Or, depending on the amount of free time one has, the pattern could be composed of two or even three of these, such as knitting and preparing evening gourmet dinners. During the remaining hours the quarantined participant might well crave some less intense, simpler leisure of the casual sort, like watching television, reading popular literature, listening to music, snoozing, and day dreaming or, more seriously, contemplation. A long list of hobbies and amateur activities is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_hobbies.

Social isolation away from home can be effected in a rural setting outside the participant's community of residence within approximately a day's drive from it. “Rural” refers to such parts of the countryside as farms, ranches, non-urban parks, wilderness areas, game preserves, and so on. That true outback hobbyists *try* to spend some time each week in such an environment refers to the fact they may occasionally be stymied in attempting to do so (on outbacker lifestyles see Stebbins, 2020b). They may be (usually) temporarily denied this kind of leisure by such constraints as weather, natural disasters (eg, flooding, forest fires), and environmental protection directives (eg, closures to protect animals, control erosion, prevent over-fishing). The outbacker's leisure lifestyle typically consists of several rural outdoor activities pursued only during certain seasons of the year. In principle, the activities may be either serious or casual leisure, though most probably the typical ensemble is comprised of some of both. Furthermore, the

outbacker may want to become involved in a few leisure projects, for example, cleaning up a trout stream, reconstructing a hiking or cycling trail, or eradicating an invasive species.

Nearly all the serious outdoor activities done in the outback are hobbies, with the amateur sciences of astronomy, ornithology, mineralogy, entomology, and botany being the main exceptions. All these pursuits have been studied under the rubric of “nature challenge activities,” a reasonably complete list of which is discussed in Davidson and Stebbins (2011). Nature presents physical challenges in all its elements: air, water, land, flora and fauna as well as snow and ice. Some of these challenges are also available in towns and cities (eg, birding, entomological research, skating, rowing), but the outbacker prefers much more thinly frequented areas, if not those where no one visits. Since most outbackers live in towns and cities, getting to and from their areas of interest in the outback is frequently time-consuming. Thus part of their leisure lifestyle is routine travel to these places, which, for committed full-time retirees, may occur as often as two or three times a week. Furthermore, since many outdoor activities are seasonal, so are the patterns of travel. For instance, participants usually have to travel farther to find downhill skiing in winter than to watch birds in any season, to find trail hiking (spring, summer, fall) than to photograph flowers (primarily summer).

Adding children and other close relatives to these types seems most pertinent for the first two and the last one in this list. With children the home-based lifestyle might include regular sessions of family chamber music, singing, and table tennis. The presence of children in the out-of-home lifestyle might be birdwatching and fishing in local rivers and lakes or regular outdoor tennis matches (involving older children). Farther afield, we find the family pursuits of skiing, fishing, hunting, and golfing (with older children or adults). All of these activities and a variety of others are enacted regularly in some families, and thereby also help constitute the leisure lifestyle of its members striving to meet the exigencies of social isolation.

Forced social isolation engenders some imaginative adaptation in conditioning for participants who need to stay in good shape, so as to be able to enact to the best of their ability football “skills,” gymnastic “events,” or figure-skating “elements.” Such conditioning is also *de rigueur* in the musical and dance arts. And all of it must be done frequently and regularly, which implies maintaining, even in isolation, a hobbyist or amateur lifestyle that respects this requirement. In other words, finding the self-fulfillment made possible through such leisure hinges especially on two distinctive qualities of serious leisure; namely, it consists of persevering and making an effort.

Finding Something to do

So far we have concentrated on activities already in a participant’s repertoire, part of that person’s pre-isolation lifestyle. Still, being isolated socially may bring with it a surfeit of free time accompanied by little or no knowledge of how to use it in either a casual leisure (satisfying) or a serious leisure (fulfilling) way. This is where SDL enters the picture, as it serves the needs and interests of the learner. How does this work?

One fruitful avenue for SDL for leisure is to study carefully the above-mentioned Wikipedia List of Hobbies to identify one or more that are appealing. Each activity there is linked to a Wikipedia page that more fully describes it and, typically, its history, organization, and varieties. Since the cost of the activity and local accessibility to it are seldom discussed on these pages, the leisure learner must explore the Internet for relevant clubs or associations, outlets selling relevant equipment, gatherings of active enthusiasts (often to be avoided under social isolation), exhibitions of the craft or science of interest, and the like. (The effectiveness of browsing the Internet in general is only now beginning to be studied. See Zhang & Capra, 2019.)

Hard-copy magazines and books are available for some of the hobbies, which if not mentioned on an activity's Wikipedia page, may turn up in an Internet search using the hobby or amateur pursuit as the key word. Be sure to include in the key word "amateur" or "hobbyist." (eg, amateur astronomy, hobbyist ceramics). For books also explore Amazon.com/books. Making telephone or e-mail contact with friends or acquaintances known to be enamored of the pursuit could reveal some additional avenues for getting started in it.

Conclusion

These are the workings of SDL as applied to finding leisure in the free time enforced by social isolation. As always, some learners will face constraints beyond than those associated with the required isolation. Money, space, and compatibility (of the new activity with others in the household) are the three that loom largest. Procrastination against perseverance and effort in new serious activities can destroy intentions to fill time while in isolation (Hughes, 2020) Furthermore, time is of the essence, for failure to fill free time with interesting activities, begets boredom. The latter, not being leisure at all (Stebbins, 2012), is dispiriting, which makes isolation that much more disagreeable.

This essay has promoted serious and project-based leisure as antidotes to the malaise caused by social isolation. Casual leisure, in its enormous variety, also has a role to play here. If nothing else it offers respite from the effort one must make in pursuing its serious cousin. It also allows for lighthearted involvements (eg, conversation, low-skilled games, walks in nature) with others in the household, some of whom may be having their own troubles with being isolated.

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