Preparing for College by Becoming a Self-Directed Learner

Instructor: Dr. Elizabeth Beese
Tuesdays/Thursdays: 10-11am ET, HCHC Leadership Academy, Columbia Campus
January 27th–May 28th 2026

Course Description

This course is designed for students who want to become self-directed learners, engaged in independent intellectual or creative projects. Students will develop the metacognitive skills and practical systems needed to pursue learning outside traditional classroom structures.

This experience will develop the kinds of curiosity and independent productivity that colleges and employers deeply value. Students will learn a comprehensive approach to self-directed learning that is dynamic and flexible: an approach that embraces the open-ended, nonlinear nature of truly self-directed projects.

What Students Will Take Away from Course

Students will leave this course with:

- A clarified sense of their own creative and intellectual interests
- An understanding of what pursuing these interests can look like concretely (in terms of both routines and products)
- A personalized system for managing long-term creative and intellectual pursuits
- Possibly: a motivating project or study that continues after the class ends

Course Progression

Weeks 1-8 (Winter term): Introduction to Self-Directed Learning

Students will learn about the history and philosophy of self-directed learning; will explore motivating educational commitments, achievements, capabilities, and engagement goals; will be introduced to relevant learning theory and instructional design methods; will learn and practice self-directed learning routines from notetaking to research; will begin building their personal self-directed learning system from self-chosen tools.

Spring Break (Weeks of March 22nd and March 29th)

Weeks 9-15 (Spring term): Self-Directed Learning Time + Special Topics

From this point, the majority of class time will be dedicated to independent work, with brief mini-lectures on special topics (e.g., motivation, attention regulation, metacognition, project management). During this time, students will regularly submit low-stakes artifacts from their study process for instructor feedback.

Week 16: Presentations

Students share their takeaways from the course and their plans for continued self-directed learning.

Assessment

This course emphasizes process over product. Students are expected to:

- Actively participate in class activities
- Complete weekly system-building tasks (creating lists, task narrations, reflections)
- Develop and maintain a personalized learning system
- Submit deliverables during the self-directed learning phase (Weeks 10-15)
- Present final reflections on personal growth and next steps

Course Tools

This is a course with significant digital tool use required. Students will need:

- A laptop or equally powerful device equipped with dedicated keyboard and mouse/trackpad

Students will also be highly recommended to have:

- A Google log-in, in order to use all features of Google Work Suite

Apps and tools all students will use throughout this course:

- Google Work Suite (Drive, Docs, Sheets, Slides, etc.)
- Slack (for community discussions)

Important: A major expectation of this course is that students are expected to build a personal learning system for themselves, using a variety of tools they find they like to work with – from notekeeping tools (e.g., Obsidian, AnyType, Notion, Logseq) to planning tools (e.g., Google Calendar, Ellie, Sunsama, etc.) to distraction-beating tools (e.g., Cold Turkey Blocker, Freedom, Opal).

Although this class will stress free versions of all tools, and it is perfectly possible to do this course without paying for any tools or resources: it is likely that students will benefit from experimenting with some paid digital tools or physical resources. If possible, parents and students are encouraged to set aside a small budget – $50-150 – for this purpose.

Course Policies

Attendance and Participation

Attendance

The expectation is student attendance at every class session. If you have planned absences, notify the instructor as far ahead as possible. If you have an unplanned absence due to illness or emergency, make sure to email the instructor before no-showing. In both cases, work with the teacher to develop a plan for make-up work. Note: This course is designed for twice-weekly meetings. Enrollment in this course at the once-weekly level is strongly discouraged; speak to instructor if you would like to talk about this, or have feedback or questions!

Participation

The goal of this course is full and lively participation for all students. If a course activity is inaccessible to you in some way, please let the teacher know as quickly as possible.

Respectful Engagement

The chief expectation in this course is that students will be respectful and treat others with dignity and consideration.

Students are expected to follow standard interpersonal boundaries, avoiding topics inappropriate for a professional context, both in the classroom and in communications with classmates.

Overt disrespect is easy to notice, but note that subtle forms of disrespect and harassment include always positioning yourself as the one who knows better, in group activities or in discussions with others.

Finally: note that in addition to showing respect to the instructor and fellow students, students are also required to speak respectfully about themselves in their course reflections, etc. If it's disrespectful to say about someone else (e.g., calling someone stupid or hopeless), it's disrespectful to say about yourself as well.

Use of Slack

Self-directed learning, despite the name, is best done in community! To that end, this course will make use of the chat platform Slack for sharing questions, reflections, and managing asynchronous classroom discussions.

Students are expected to conduct themselves on Slack with the same standards of respectful engagement expected in the classroom.

The Slack group is private, with outside direct messaging disabled.

Direct messages should be used only to discuss course matters or coordinate group work; personal communications should be handled off platform. Instructor lacks access to direct messages; any inappropriate direct messages should be screenshotted, and discussed ASAP with parents and the instructor. Harassment of fellow students via direct message will not be tolerated.

AI and Technology Use

You are encouraged to use AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, etc.) as learning aids throughout this course, especially as a tutor and research assistant. However, the core work of this course is your own thinking and reflection. AI should support your learning process, not substitute for it.

Appropriate uses: Using AI to identify resources and keywords, explain concepts, make recommendations, test your understanding.

Inappropriate uses: Having AI write your reflections or task narrations for you, or submitting AI-generated content as evidence of your own learning process.

Course Schedule*

*Important note: Weekly topics, activities, and assignments are subject to change and/or rescheduling, as emergent needs of class require. As we will emphasize in this very class: plans are important for orienting work, but not for dictating it without further flexibility and reflection. ☺

Week 1: Introduction & Philosophy

(Week of January 25th)

Session 1
Course introduction and exploring the history of education

Topics:
Syllabus review; what students will take away from course; history of instruction, study, and schooling; introduction to the self-directed learning tradition

In-Class Activities:
Names and introductions; solo writing on self-directed learning experience (choose from 3 prompts)

Likely After-Class Work:
Complete written reflection if not finished in class

Session 2
Philosophy of education and motivating abstract commitments

Topics:
Five key questions of education (aims, content, methods, authority, responsibilities); introduction to motivating abstract commitments (MACs)

In-Class Activities:
Think-pair-share on educational aims and motivating abstract commitments valued by authority figures in your life; discussion educational aims and commitments that attract or bother you

Likely After-Class Work:
Create list of 3-5 motivating abstract commitments you endorse for your education

Week 2: The Blooming Buzzing Confusion

(Week of February 1st)

Session 3
Introduction to task narration, and the challenge of self-directed inquiry

Topics:

Self-directed learning tools and techniques in a nutshell; William James and the 'blooming buzzing confusion'; action-oriented objects (goals, commitments, products); the explore vs. exploit tradeoff

In-Class Activities:

Unscaffolded exploration exercise; share takeaways from exploration

Likely After-Class Work:

Complete task narration with timestamps (minimum 45 minutes); bring printed transcript to next class

Session 4
Introduction to qualitative excerpting, labeling, and metacognitive objects

Topics:

Excerpting and labeling practice; importance of notetaking for self-directed learning; concept of metacognitive objects

In-Class Activities:

Excerpting and labeling exercise on sample text; group analysis of labeling choices; individual brainstorm of metacognitive objects to track

Likely After-Class Work:

Excerpt and label your task narration; document list of metacognitive objects to track

Week 3: Focus & System Building

(Week of February 8th)

Session 5
Attention management and capture routines

Topics:

'Capture' and 'stop-and-log-it' routines; attention and focus during exploratory learning; resource whitelisting strategies

In-Class Activities:

Think-pair-share on designing stop-and-log-it routines; explore tools and strategies for corralling focus at desk

Likely After-Class Work:

Design and practice stop-and-log-it routine with written reflection; create focus plan including resource whitelist

Session 6
Self-directed learning tools and system setup

Topics:
Overview of necessary affordances for self-directed learning: notetaking, tagging, excerpting, sorting, dashboard-building; tool combinations that achieve these affordances

In-Class Activities:
Individual tool exploration (25 min); share-out on progress

Likely After-Class Work:
Document tool exploration as task narration; instantiate all artifacts so far in your draft system (provide snapshot)

Week 4: Motivating Abstract Commitments & Achievements

(Week of February 15th)

Session 7
Exploring motivating abstract commitments in depth

Topics:
How to identify figures and resources related to your MACs; preliminarily identifying achievements, capabilities, and engagement goals associated with MACs; Whitehead's stages of education (romance, precision, generalization)

In-Class Activities:
Make predictions about achievements/capabilities associated with your MACs; system building for tracking emergent objects

Likely After-Class Work:
Document predictions; research and identify 3-5 historical or contemporary figures who embody your MACs

Session 8
Dashboard setup and book reading routines

Topics:
Deep dive into achievements (socially valued products/performances); opportunities for achievements; dashboard concepts and 'motivating situation' for study preparation; documenting learning side-quests

In-Class Activities:
Writing achievement goals for fictional student personas; in-class study time with learning side-quest documentation

Likely After-Class Work:
Source and order 1-3 MACs books; create list of achievements of interest; submit task narration of sidequest

Week 5: Capabilities

(Week of February 22nd)

Session 9
Instructional design foundations for capability identification

Topics:
Gagne's domains of learning (verbal information, motor skills, procedural intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, attitudes); Bloom's taxonomy and common misuses; Mager-style performance objectives

In-Class Activities:
Writing/improving performance objectives activity; work time to draft capability goals

Likely After-Class Work:
Draft 5-7 capability goals using Mager-style format; submit for feedback; begin reading MACs books

Session 10
Beginning MACs books and capability practice

Topics:
Reminder about reading MACs books; setting up book reading routines; beginning independent work

In-Class Activities:
Brief check-in; remainder of session for reading MACs books or pursuing capability goals

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue reading MACs books (ongoing through Week 7); pursue capability goals with documentation

Week 6: Memory & Learning

(Week of March 1st)

Session 11
Learning theory and memory systems

Topics:
Memory, attention, perception; short vs. long term memory; episodic vs. semantic memory; recall vs. recognition; encoding, consolidation, storage, retrieval; storage strength vs. retrieval strength; testing/retrieval practice

In-Class Activities:
Lucas & Lorayne memory exercise; recall vs. recognition activity

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue reading MACs books; identify capability goals suited for recall vs. recognition

Session 12
Continuing MACs book reading and capability work

Topics:
Check-in on reading progress and capability pursuits

In-Class Activities:
Independent work time: reading MACs books or pursuing capability goals with documentation

Likely After-Class Work:
Create task narration of pursuing one specific capability goal; continue reading

Week 7: Engagement & Practice

(Week of March 8th)

Session 13
Practice design and engagement goals

Topics:
What does 'practice' look like? Task decomposition (van Merrienboer); classic engagement goals in various domains; finding exercises and routines in different fields; Ericsson's deliberate practice

In-Class Activities:
Task decomposition activity on pre-written whole tasks; research classic engagement goals with partner and share out

Likely After-Class Work:
Design 3-5 personalized engagement goals (practice routines/exercises); submit for feedback

Session 14
Scheduling practice and deep encoding strategies

Topics:
Scheduling/sequencing practice sessions; spaced repetition; interleaving; implementation intentions; strategies for deep encoding (self-explanation, elaborative questioning, concrete examples)

In-Class Activities:
Critique fictional student's implementation intentions; interleave vs. spaced repetition disambiguation; in-class task narration of deep encoding attempt

Likely After-Class Work:

Create schedule/sequence with implementation intentions for one engagement goal; finish MACs books by end of week

Week 8: System Refinement

(Week of March 15th)

Session 15
Improvisational energy and reflection on progress

Topics:
Engagement goals and improvisational energy; Gallwey's self 1 vs. self 2; Nachmanovich's paradox (constraints enable free play); reviewing systems and tools

In-Class Activities:
Improv activity; brief share-out

Likely After-Class Work:
System refinement and tool exploration; finish first round of MACs books if needed

Session 16
Sorting for metacognition and SDL preparation

Topics:
Sorting for metacognition; setting expectations for next 6 weeks of self-directed learning time; looking ahead to end of class

In-Class Activities:
Think-pair-share on system progress and next steps; silly sort activity; in-class sorting activity and review

Likely After-Class Work:
Complete sorting reflection; update system with all refinements and reorganizations; document updated system

Spring Break

(Weeks of March 22nd and 29th)

No classes

Week 9: SDL Time + Special Topics

(Week of April 5th)

Session 17 **SDL phase begins; discuss motivation and interest regulation**
Special Topic: Brief lecture on motivation and interest regulation I
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable showing evidence of learning progress
Session 18 **Continued SDL time and reflection**
Special Topics: N/A
In-Class Activities: Share-out from previous session Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue SDL work and system development as needed

Week 10: SDL Time + Special Topics

(Week of April 12th)

Session 19 **Motivation and interest regulation + SDL time**
Topics: Brief lecture on motivation and interest regulation II
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable

Session 20 Attention and emotion in learning + SDL time
Topics: Attention and emotion in learning
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue SDL work

Week 11: SDL Time + Special Topics

(Week of April 19th)

Session 21 Metacognition + SDL time
Topics: Brief lecture on metacognition
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable
Session 22 **Metacognition and Sorting**
Topics: Metacognition and sorting
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue SDL work

Week 12: SDL Time + Special Topics

(Week of April 26th)

Session 23

Project Management
Topics: Brief lecture on project management
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable
Session 24 **Quick takeaways and sorting revisited**
Topics: Looking ahead to presentations
In-Class Activities: Quick takeaways reflection activity Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue SDL work

Week 13: SDL Time + Special Topics

(Week of May 3rd)

Session 25 Project management for learning
Topics: Brief lecture on project management II
In-Class Activities: Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)
Likely After-Class Work: Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable
Session 26 **Continued project management**
Topics: Brief lecture on project management III

In-Class Activities:
Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue SDL work

Week 14: SDL Time + Synthesis

(Week of May 10th)

Session 27
Self-directed learning time

Topics:
No lecture

In-Class Activities:
Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable

Session 28
Presentation prep

Topics:
Presentation expectations and Q&A

In-Class Activities:
Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable

Week 15: SDL Time + Synthesis

(Week of May 17th)

Session 29
Presentation prep

Topics:
Presentation expectations and Q&A

In-Class Activities:

Self-directed learning time (50-60 mins)

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue self-directed learning; create weekly deliverable

Session 30
Independent work and presentation preparation

Topics:
N/A

In-Class Activities:
Independent work time: refining system and preparing presentations (75 min)

Likely After-Class Work:
Continue presentation preparation; finalize system documentation

Week 16: Final Presentations

(Week of May 25th)

Session 31
Student presentations of takeaways and next steps

Topics:
None (presentations)

In-Class Activities:
Student presentations

Likely After-Class Work:
N/A

Session 32
Student presentations and course closure

Topics:
None (presentations and wrap-up)

In-Class Activities:
Student presentations; closing reflections

Likely After-Class Work:
Course complete!