

Viewpoint: Self directed learning is NOT an easy way out for the teacher

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The practice of medicine changes so rapidly that it is essential for health care professionals to continue to learn throughout their career. Self directed learning helps the learner to remain up-to-date on developments that occur in their profession. Therefore, the new learning technologies have placed an increasing emphasis on self directed learning [1].

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 outcome. It is a key issue in adult learning [2]. Knowles (1975) said “we are not talking here about something that would be nice or desirable....., we are talking about a basic human competence that has suddenly become a prerequisite for living in this world” [3].

The diagram in Figure 1 represents the process of continuing learning in medicine based on self direction [4].

However, a number of misconceptions regarding self direction in learning have emerged over the last two decades. Here are some examples:

- Self direction implies learning in isolation.
- Self directed learning is an all or nothing concept.
- Self directed learning is an easy way-out for teacher.

Self-directed learning does not mean that students' learning is independent of teachers and of organized teaching. The ‘hands off’ approach adopted by some teachers - based on the assumption that support would interfere with self direction - is therefore, inappropriate and may be counterproductive [5].

Here is a quotation by one student:

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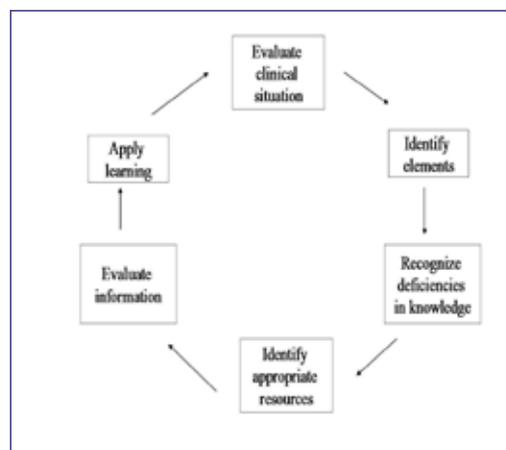


Figure 1. The process of continuing learning in medicine (Source: Medical Education Vol 34, 299-36. 2000. Reproduced with permission from John Wiley and Sons)

“... I mean, for them to tell you ‘go read up’, that for me is just throwing us further away . . . you will still not understand if you—okay, yes go read up, you will read up, maybe get a bit of background of what is going on, but I mean, if they give you the course—what to focus on”[6].

It is important to provide the necessary support and guidance for students to foster their development of self-directed learning skills, and therefore to become lifelong learners. The support depends on the students' stage in the training program. Those that are encountered early in the program need more

support than the latter ones [7]. Four major requirements for the support of self-directed learning [8]:

1. The environment must be socially and professionally safe before any learning will start.
2. It must be structured in such a way that students can find their way around the learning issues.
3. Teaching needs to be paced appropriately for students' level of experience.
4. Learning experiences need to be dependable and followed by prompt, supportive and adequately detailed feedback.

On the other hand, self-directed learning is not always the best way to learn for certain people, nor is it the best method for certain situations. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to think of self-directed learning as an ideal mode of learning for certain individuals and for certain situation [5].

In summary:

The field of medical education has witnessed a change in a student's role from passive to active learner; this moved the centre of gravity away from the teacher and closer to the student [9]. Even so it is strongly argued that the teacher should play an important role in helping students to become self directed, lifelong learners.

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