Self-Directed Learning: Faculty and Student Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a qualitative study that explored faculty and student perceptions of self-directed learning (SDL) and investigated factors that facilitate or impede it. This study was conducted at McMaster University with faculty and students in a 4-year undergraduate nursing program. Data were collected from 47 faculty and 17 students by means of focus groups that were audiotaped and transcribed. Content analysis was conducted to identify common themes in faculty and student transcripts. The themes that emerged provide insight into the educational strategy of self-directed learning and can be summarized by the following major points: (1) commitment to SDL requires students and faculty to understand the value of empowering learners to take increased responsibility for decisions related to learning; (2) students engaged in self-directed learning undergo a transformation that begins with negative feelings (i.e., confusion, frustration, and dissatisfaction) and ends with confidence and skills for lifelong learning; and (3) faculty development is important to ensure high levels of competency in facilitating self-directed learning.

The nursing education literature is replete with demands that curricula change, from traditional Tylerian approaches that emphasize direct instructional techniques and the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student to methods that provide a greater opportunity for individual learning within the broad confines of program objectives (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Glen, 1995; Lindeman, 1989; MacLeod & Farrell, 1994). Self-directed, small group, problem-based learning, an example of such an educational approach (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Boud & Feletti, 1991), has been used for more than two decades by faculty in the School of Nursing at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Self-directed learning is central to the school philosophy concerning learning:

The process of learning (and teaching) is learner-centered and focused on solving clinical problems or addressing potential health care issues through the use of inductive and deductive reasoning. Self-directed learning (SDL) skills such as defining personal objectives, understanding the dynamics of behavior change, information acquisition/assimilation and self-evaluation are acquired within the context of a respectful and facilitative teacher-learner relationship where students take responsibility for their own learning (BScN Programme Handbook, 2000).

Although students and faculty support this philosophy, they express concern about the self-directed component of the process, particularly the skills students require to become self-directed learners, methods for acquiring these skills, and faculty activities that foster self-directed learning. Furthermore, as more and more nursing programs are modifying their curricula to promote interactive and interdependent learning approaches (Creedy, Horsfall, & Hand, 1992; Frost, 1996; Heliker, 1994), there has been increased interest in understanding the strengths and limitations of a self-directed approach within nursing education.

The overall aim of this study was to explore the meanings, variations, and perceptual experiences of the phenomenon of SDL from the perspective of students and faculty. More specifically, the study (1) explored faculty and student perceptions of self-directed learning, and (2) investigated factors that facilitate or impede self-directed learning.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-direction in learning has received much attention and there are numerous articles that: (a) define SDL (Knowles, 1975); (b) describe how various undergraduate programs educating health care professionals have incorporated SDL (Iwasiw, 1987; Layton, 1972; Lingeman & Mazza, 1986; Slevin & Lavery, 1991); (c) demonstrate the usefulness of SDL in programs of continuing education for staff nurses (Brooks, 1985; DeSilets, 1986; Hamilton & Gregor, 1986; Hegge, 1985; Moran, 1977; O'Connor, 1982), and staff orientation programs (Procik, 1990); and (d) report on the extensive research conducted to identify student readiness for SDL (Crook, 1985; Dixon, 1991; Guglielmino, 1977; Oddi, 1986). The literature is typically favorable and there is much support for SDL as a method of learning among adults in undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education programs.

The literature reveals several models that attempt to describe the phases of the SDL process. While some of these models are anecdotal (Boud, 1981; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) and based on inferences made from observation (Knowles, 1975; Rogers, 1969; Smith, 1982), one such model by Taylor (1986) is based on qualitative research conducted with students enrolled in a self-directed graduate course.

The purpose of Taylor's study was to identify, from the learner's perspective, common patterns in the experience of learning in a self-directed course. The study revealed four distinct phases of learning: namely, disorientation, exploration, reorientation, and equilibrium with four phase transition points. Taylor (1986) states that "the learning process begins with the collapse of the learner's frame of reference or 'assumptive world' as an adequate means of understanding his/her experience" (p. 53). This collapse marks the beginning of the learner's reorientation in their assumptions and expectations about teaching and learning. The learner then proceeds through a transformation that helps him or her assume greater personal responsibility and self-direction in learning. The learner moves through this cycle at his or her own pace and achieves equilibrium when he or she can demonstrate application of the new perspective and approach to learning. Taylor's (1986) study concluded that these phases and transition points "occur in a consistent order and eventually display a thematic problem being worked on" (p. 53).

In summary, the literature on SDL has exploded over the last three decades; however, little attempt has been made to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of the teacher and the student. Educators propose ways to facilitate SDL (Knowles, 1975), incorporate computer technology into SDL (Armstrong, 1986), and evaluate the effectiveness of SDL without rigorously analyzing the meanings and perceptual experiences of those who teach and learn in a curriculum that has SDL as its driving philosophy. Therefore, a study that explores the experience of learning and teaching in a self-directed nursing education program should contribute to understanding the process and outcomes of self-directed learning, and assist nurse educators who are contemplating more student-centered and self-directed educational approaches.

METHODS

Study Purpose and Design

An interpretive perspective was used to explore the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of students and faculty about SDL. This method allowed the researchers to develop an accurate description of SDL and the relevant issues from the unique perspective of the participants. Data were collected through the use of focus groups because they offer several advantages: (1) they are a rapid and cost effective means of obtaining participant views; (2) groups can provide support for participants that may allow them greater expression of their thoughts and feelings; (3) ideas expressed by participants can be expanded and built on by others; and (4) investigators hear from more participants than may be possible with individual interviews (Morse & Field, 1996). The recommended size for focus groups depends on the sensitivity and complexity of the topic and the abilities, expectations, and needs of the group members (Carey, 1994). A range of 5 to 12 individuals per session is considered appropriate. We aimed to recruit 5 to 8 students and faculty per focus group.

Participants and Setting

Faculty focus groups were conducted during an annual retreat that was attended by 87% (N = 47) of the total complement of 54 nursing faculty. Rather than selecting a sample from among those present, we chose to hear from everyone, randomly assigning our colleagues to five focus groups, with an average of 9 persons per group. Each focus group was led by one of the study investigators.

Student participants were selected from the total 328 students enrolled in the second, third, and fourth years of the generic BScN program. We chose not to include first year students because of their limited time in the program and, more specifically, their limited experience with SDL. Eight students per level (N = 24) were randomly selected to participate. This number was arbitrary since there are no formulae for sample size selection such as exist for quantitative approaches (Creswell, 1998). Instead, the number of students was chosen with the intent that additional individuals would be recruited if necessary to achieve theoretical saturation, described as the point at which no additional themes or ideas are being presented by the informants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Selected students were contacted by letter and invited to be part of the study. Students who did not respond were called by the research assistant to remind them and to solicit their participation. A total of 17 students attended the focus groups, 4 from second year, 7 from third year, and 6 from fourth year. The focus groups were held in the School of Nursing at a convenient time and place for the
students. Analysis of the student transcripts revealed similarity of comments among participants and across levels, a richness of data, and open and honest responses, confirming that the sample size was sufficient. Furthermore, we invited participants to attend a presentation of emerging themes with the express purpose of comparing and validating our findings and eliciting feedback. As a result, we believe that the methodological rigor in the collection and analysis of the data ensures the trustworthiness of the study, and the results are generalizable to the faculty and generic students in the undergraduate program at McMaster University.

Procedure

Student and faculty focus groups were, on average, a minimum of one hour in duration and all discussions were audiotaped. The decision to suggest one hour sessions was influenced by the fact that students and faculty are comfortable working in groups and that a longer time frame would not necessarily contribute to the richness of the data, although groups that chose to discuss longer were not impeded from doing so.

The following questions were addressed in all focus groups:

- What does SDL mean to you?
- What factors influence SDL?
- What are some of the things that professors do to facilitate SDL?

Faculty were also asked to comment on how they strike a balance with the student between the need to know and the nice to know in a professional educational program; whereas, students were asked to describe particular actions they took that facilitated SDL.

In the faculty focus groups, group facilitators, who were part of the research team as well as faculty members, posed the questions to the participants and helped guide the discussion. The faculty gave verbal consent and all those present at the retreat willingly participated in the focus groups.

Consistent with the learning philosophy of the program, the research team decided to conduct the student focus groups in a self-directed manner. The goal was to encourage frank and honest discussion that might be impeded by the presence of a faculty facilitator. For this reason, the research assistant collected consent forms, prepared the groups with an outline of questions for discussion, and started the tape recording apparatus.

Participants were assured that (1) there were no right or wrong answers; (2) their responses would remain confidential; and (3) published results of the study would not identify individuals by name. Finally, participants were encouraged to respond in an open and honest manner.

Data Analysis

Concurrently with data collection, the five faculty and three student tapes were transcribed by a research assistant. To ensure anonymity of student participants, student transcripts were assigned for analysis to two investigators who did not teach those students. The investigators individually read the transcripts while listening to the tapes to ensure completeness, adding pauses and laughter where they had not been indicated in the transcript. Transcripts were read again individually to get a sense of the "whole" and the tone of the group discussion. Transcripts were reread and words, phrases, and sentences that described specific aspects of SDL and factors affecting SDL were underlined. Words and phrases were assigned a code that best described the aspect or factor of SDL that was underlined. The two investigators then met and compared coding line by line. Codes and dimensions of codes were agreed on by consensus. Themes emerging from discussion of codes were identified by each researcher independently. The themes were named and a statement of their meaning was formulated. Once all the teams had completed their work on the assigned transcripts, the resulting themes and the meanings attributed to them were then presented to the group of investigators as well as to faculty and students for comparison, validation, and discussion. In this way, methodological triangulation was accomplished from the interrater perspective and credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the data were assured. Exemplar quotes for each of the themes in both the faculty and student focus groups were identified. These themes and their meanings are reported here.

RESULTS

Faculty Perceptions

An analysis of the transcripts from the faculty focus groups revealed four major themes common to all of the groups.

**Theme #1: Defining Self-Directed Learning.** All faculty groups used similar words to define SDL including choice, individualization of learning needs, expressions of creativity, and identification of strategies unique to each person’s individual learning style. For example, “self-directed learning means to have some choice about what you wish to pursue in your learning based on your needs.” Faculty related SDL to the requirements of a professional program:

There are certain things that students have to learn and don’t really have a choice about learning. I don't think that negates self-directed learning . . . I have always thought that self-directed learning is how you go about learning. It is what makes the self part of it, not necessarily the what.

Faculty acknowledged the need for course objectives to serve as the “givens” or the minimal requirements that students need to meet to pass the course. However, within the framework of the course objectives, students can demonstrate self-direction by expressing creativity in meeting their learning needs, making choices about resources and strategies to meet these needs, and in developing criteria to evaluate the outcomes of learning.

**Theme #2: Searching for Confirmation.** "Am I doing it right?" This theme indicated that some faculty had doubts
in their own abilities to implement SDL effectively, even though they are able to define it. One faculty member expressed unwillingness to “reveal what [she's] doing” or “ask a question” about the implementation of SDL for fear that “I'm not going to measure up or do something wrong.” One faculty member stated that “I may have four year's experience, but I might be doing all the wrong things.” Another agreed “some of us seem to have a lot of experience and maybe we've been doing the wrong things all these years, but we have survived.” Yet another, admitted that “(there) was always a confusion for me in problem-based learning . . . I was trying to apply this self-directed learning. When did I become an expert? . . . I always felt that I wasn't catching on.” Whether novice or expert, faculty expressed concern about the quality of their teaching in an SDL program.

Theme #3: The Struggle for Consistency. “Should we all do it the same way?” Not only did faculty express some insecurity with their ability to teach in a program that promotes SDL, there were also questions about consistency in how SDL was being implemented and concerns that all faculty might not be implementing SDL in the same way. As an illustration of this, one faculty member made the following statement:

Do we as a faculty think there should be some consistency or do we feel that the value of creativity is so important that it takes precedence over other values? There is also a difference between whether a student is [supported in] saying “I want to do [this]” versus a tutor who says “you must do this in my group.” We can end up with tutor expectations that are so different. I don't think that is particularly fair to students.

Another tutor stated:

This term, SDL is used very loosely by different people, including the faculty. When the students come to me, they see SDL learning as “I have to be totally self-directed,” in a sense that they can't ask the tutor any questions. They can't use human resource experts so they can only go to the literature to retrieve the information. They have to do it themselves, individually.

SDL for some faculty may mean complete student autonomy in learning; whereas, for others autonomy is given in increments and this may account for the following quote:

“I always invariably have some students who will say, “I have never had to do this before.” I say well that's interesting and we keep hearing this but nobody confesses to being [the faculty member who] doesn't require [students to be self-directed].

Perhaps faculty have differing degrees of understanding and commitment to the philosophical underpinnings of the program. Some may have difficulty making the transition to teaching in a curriculum where student-centered and problem-focused learning are the norms. Whatever the reason, there was a perception of inconsistency within the faculty.

Theme #4: The Need for Ongoing Faculty Development. Faculty members, because of their commitment to students and the desire to implement SDL in the most effective way possible, clearly stated the need for continuing education:

I think we need more of an expectation around faculty development. I think we should be helping other people. There isn't any forum for discussing certain problems or issues that arise in regard to teaching. There isn't any formula to go by. Who do you ask and if you ask, will they think you're stupid?

Another confirmed this viewpoint, “so we do need a small group where people can come and discuss exactly that and then get new ideas. Otherwise you stagnate.”

The faculty themes reveal that, whereas faculty could define SDL, many were uncertain of the role they play in a student-centered program. Their uncertainty extended beyond the enactment of their own role. They asked about consistency around expectations and application of criteria to judge student performance. A possible solution to some of these issues presented itself in each of the focus groups where faculty suggested providing a forum for discussing and comparing strategies for facilitating SDL.

Student Perceptions

The five major themes common to all student focus groups were remarkably similar to those identified by faculty.

Theme #1: Defining Self-Directed Learning. As in the faculty transcripts, the student data revealed an ability to define SDL. For example, a second year student stated that “self-directed learning is great . . . we learn for ourselves, but you can't self-direct yourself in everything you do in university.” A third year student presented a more detailed definition of SDL, “it means you're responsible for your own learning and you learn at your own pace and you set your own standard . . . But you're never alone, there's always a [Professor] you can go to.” Finally, a fourth year student stated, “it's acknowledging that people learn differently and it's allowing us to do so.”

Theme #2: The Development of Skills in SDL Can Be A Painful Process. The second theme related to the context in which students experienced SDL. They stated that although SDL has positive outcomes, the process of becoming a self-directed learner can be painful.

A second year student described her struggles with the developmental process of becoming a self-directed learner:

At first you kind of get disappointed and you don't do anything and then you, I guess, you get back into the mode of being self-directed and say, “no I have to accomplish something more,” so, I think it keeps you going because you are the driver of the car. It's not like someone else driving you in different directions where you don't know where you're going, but you kind of, like, meet your ends and then you kind of rethink about where's your next road trip . . . .

One third year student was able to look back on the first two years of the program and describe the struggles and challenges she faced in the following manner:

Coming into first year, they want you to be self-directed.
but this was such a foreign body of knowledge and way of learning that you couldn't be self-directed cause you didn't know where to start, that was the hardest part.

The third and fourth year students were also able to express how learning to be self-directed can be a painful experience; “you feel that you're not getting credit for all those extra hours you put into it” or “I can't say I really hated it from the beginning, but I remember being very frustrated.”

As students progress through the program they improve their skills in SDL, become more confident in taking control of their learning, and become more positive. The following statements illustrate some of the outcomes that students attribute to SDL:

If you really look at it [SDL], it builds character. It gives you a definitive purpose, I guess if you want to call it. I mean you know the direction you want to go into. It gives you a little more confidence, in the sense that, you know, I can come up with my own ideas. (Third Year)

I think it [SDL] has a lot to do with a certain level of confidence on the student's part as well. The student has to be the speaker for their own autonomy and if you have the confidence to say well, no, that's not going to help me learn. I am not going to do it that way. I am going to do it this way. That would be better than trying to fit yourself into something your [faculty] wants you to do. (Fourth Year)

The positive perceptions of students were clearly identified:

It's [SDL] a really good life skill to have. (Third Year)

It's more realistic to what real life is, after you get out there you have to direct your own learning. No one is going to force you to learn anything. (Fourth Year)

Theme #3: Consistency. Should all Students, Faculty, and Courses Do It the Same Way? Concerns about consistency echoed those of the faculty, specifically: Should all students/peers learn the same way? Should courses be structured and faculty teach all students in the same way? Students believed that allowing differences in the way they learn can lead to conflict within a group of learners. For example:

One person may be really self-directed and very outgoing and very organized and another person may not want to be organized at all and that then conflicts with how you operate as a self-directed group. (Second Year)

Individual differences within this student's frame of reference did not add richness and challenge but were seen as threatening and confusing.

Students were also frustrated by the inconsistent implementation of SDL among professors and preceptors. Inconsistency among faculty, within years of the program, and between faculty and clinical preceptors led to frustration in learning within the SDL environment. Students across the years stated that faculty need to get together and communicate with each other and with students. For example, one student from third year made the following suggestion “so maybe they should standardize within, among the [faculty].”

A student from fourth year believed that:

Clinical instructors who aren't necessarily part of [McMaster] . . . don't understand [SDL] and they are harder to deal with and interact with than McMaster [faculty].

Another fourth year student stated:

I think that in order for them to be most effective, the [faculty] should have to take a course, or something. Discuss what it is that they want, like, what's the purpose of learning plans and make sure that everyone is consistent with that.

Students echoed this theme in every level reflecting their need and request for standardization of the educational approach used by faculty across the program.

Students also found it confusing when SDL was not a requirement in all of their courses. Electives that students take in other departments (e.g., psychology or sociology) are teacher driven. Some courses in the baccalaureate program (i.e., pathophysiology) do not allow the same degree of student autonomy in identification and pursuit of learning needs in a self-directed manner. All nursing courses do have a tutorial or small group component where SDL is practical and possible. However, inconsistency among courses resulted in strong feelings among senior students, which one student summed in the following directive to faculty:

If they prepare you in first and second year to be self-directed, don't give us something that's so structured in third year and expect us to be able to go along. Because they've basically retrained the way we've learned from high school. (Third Year)

Theme #4: Confirming. “Am I learning what I need to learn? One second year student made a very insightful comment when she stated “because we don't know what we need to learn sometimes, directing yourself in the right direction is very difficult . . .” Students repeatedly expressed the need to be reassured that they were learning what they needed to know to pass the course requirements. They also believed that there should be more frequent and traditional evaluation, such as graded components (i.e., tests), which, to them represent a more concrete measure of what was learned. One fourth year student, as she reached the end of her program, described her concern:

Even now I find I still get frustrated sometimes when you think, OK, now I have to write the RN exams. What if there is stuff I don't know? No one told me I had to learn that. That wasn't where my interest was. Why would I learn that? That's when you get worried.

This student expressed a need for evaluation within SDL to ensure that she had met all course objectives and requirements. At the same time, she expressed appreciation for being able to pursue individual learning needs and interests. This demonstrates a dichotomy in student thinking, between their role as self-directed learners with responsibility and accountability for learning, and their need for assurance from faculty that they are achieving the necessary learning outcomes.

Theme #5: The Need for Support and Resources to
Succeed. The need for reassurance, not only about learning outcomes but also about the process of SDL, was noted across all levels, along with suggestions for resources that would be helpful in facilitating self-direction. A student from second year stated:

I think the most important thing that I’ve ever experienced with self-directed learning and the learning process is, I need the reassurance from somebody who is a mentor, professor, whatever. I need that reassurance to know that I am [going] in the right direction and it’s OK to not know everything and it’s OK if you’re not looking at this but suggesting that. You are, we are like a bunch of fish in the ocean and we don’t know what the heck is going on sometimes or a lot of times and you need that. (Second Year)

Faculty were seen, by all levels of students, as resources and providers of reassurance by giving frequent feedback. Some students identified other resources that would be helpful to support them in a self-directed program. These included (1) more structure in the early years followed by increasing flexibility; (2) clear course objectives; and (3) more specific pre-entrance information about the style of learning used so students could better self-select the program. An example of the need for clear course objectives was given by the student who stated:

Sometimes you know how, in some courses, if the objectives are clear, then you know what you’re headed towards, but if they are fuzzy, you don’t know where to steer yourself. So I think the objectives that are laid out are an important factor. (Fourth Year)

Altogether these comments suggest some preparation for or information about SDL would have been helpful for students prior to entering the program, as well as the provision of support in the transition to becoming self-directed.

DISCUSSION

The themes that emerge from the transcripts of the focus groups provide us with insight into the educational strategy of SDL that was introduced into our curriculum in the mid 1970s. The discussion that follows will be organized according to three headings that synthesize the phenomenon of SDL as perceived by our faculty and students.

Commitment to Self-Directed Learning

Faculty and students of all levels were able to define SDL using terms consistent with the SDL literature. Historically, most of our learners and many faculty have been conditioned to primarily pedagogic teaching methods. As a result, learners are accustomed to playing a dependent role, while faculty provide varying levels of direction. Commitment to the idea of SDL was evident in the positive outcomes described by students and in the desire that all courses be grounded in the SDL approach. Although faculty described concerns with their change in role and questioned their ability to take on the facilitator role effectively, they also expressed commitment to and endorsed the philosophy of SDL.

Nurses today are required to be critical thinkers, problem-solvers, and self-directed learners to face the changes and challenges in the health care system. Participants in our study confirmed that the self-directed nursing education is useful in achieving these outcomes.

Self-Directed Learning—A Developmental Process

Although self-directed learning empowers learners to take increased responsibility for decisions related to learning, hence increasing their autonomy, student participants acknowledged that the process of becoming a self-directed learner is a painful one. Our second year students described a phase of what Taylor (1986) calls “disorientation.” During this at times lengthy phase, students gained lived experiences in an SDL program. The experience challenged their assumptions about learning in general, and more specifically about their own role as well as the role of professors in the learning process. Previously practiced relationships with “teachers” changed. Students were now on a first-name basis with faculty and “teachers” were no longer to be viewed as authoritative and powerful, but rather as facilitators who empower students and foster self-direction. During this transition phase, our students stated that they experienced negativity, confusion, frustration, and dissatisfaction with their learning experience. At this stage of the developmental process it is the responsibility of faculty to provide direction, reassurance, and support for learners. Students also need the opportunity to express feelings and opinions without the fear of being judged. It is important to remember that students progress at different rates through this transformative process.

Continued experience and the opportunity to engage in SDL activities enhanced students’ confidence and they became increasingly involved in mutual goal setting, negotiation, and collaboration with faculty and peers in their learning groups. This is a productive, proactive stage, termed a time of transformation by Brundage and MacKeracher (1980) and “exploration and reorientation” by Taylor (1986). Faculty need to encourage cooperative and collaborative behavior by role modeling and coaching in a group format. Both formative and summative feedback enable students to visualize their progress more clearly and eventually monitor their own progress objectively and realistically. They can also compare self-evaluations with tutor evaluations to assess concordance. Again, our data confine this need for reassurance that they are indeed becoming self-directed learners, who are learning what they need to learn.

By the time students reached their fourth year they were able to identify the advantages of having become self-directed learners. Our study confirms that students achieve the phase of “equilibrium” described by Taylor (1986) as they are able to demonstrate the application of a new perspective and approach to learning. The students develop internal standards for self and others based on course expectations that reflect behavioral and practice competencies. The students at this stage are best sup-
ported by faculty who openly share their feelings and values, who can take on the role of co-learner, who value individual and group performance, and who model self-evaluation (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980).

The literature supports our research finding that students, when they enter a new learning experience, begin with dependent behaviors and, as they advance through the program, develop interdependent behaviors. The student transcripts speak clearly to their need for structure and direction in the beginning years. However, by the third year students questioned and indeed were resentful of highly structured courses. The developmental process culminates in the fourth year when students demonstrate confidence in their SDL skills and value their ability to be life-long learners.

**Consistency in Facilitating Self-Directed Learning**

While the curriculum is based on the tenets of self-directed learning, our study shows that there is great variation in (1) how SDL is implemented; (2) the clarity of faculty expectations; (3) the experience students have with SDL; and (4) the level of student satisfaction.

To address the student concern about a perceived lack of clarity in course expectations, faculty need to increase the level of student awareness regarding the organizational infrastructure that supports and ensures communication among faculty members. The mandate of the Undergraduate Nursing Education Committee, which includes student representatives as well as year and course coordinators, is to oversee the total curriculum. Faculty within courses meet regularly to discuss ongoing issues, expectations, and revisions that are responsive to student evaluations. However, our data suggest that there is still a lack of assurance among students that learning outcomes are clearly articulated and are being used by faculty to guide student learning activities.

Both students and faculty identified the need for orientation and ongoing education to ease the transition from teacher-directed to student-centered learning. From faculty transcripts it is evident that SDL is implemented differently by faculty, possibly because we all have varying degrees of knowledge, creativity, and experience with SDL. Based on our educational histories and values, faculty have differing degrees of willingness to relinquish the power and authority vested in the teacher-centered approach. Faculty suggested a forum in which they could discuss how they implement SDL and compare strategies with other faculty. In response to these suggestions, we have engaged in faculty development workshops, retreats, brown bag lunches, and course and curriculum reviews. While there is continued support for the individuality and uniqueness of each faculty member, both faculty and students identified the need for clearly articulated competencies that facilitate SDL.

The topic of faculty development is beyond the scope of this article; however, the issues around quality and competence of faculty merit mention. The professors of nursing in our faculty engage in several methods of evaluation: namely, ongoing anonymous student evaluation of faculty at the conclusion of each course, peer review, and reflective practice. They also engage in annual performance reviews with the dean of nursing based on data from an updated curriculum vitae, student evaluations, and numerous other sources. All these evaluation strategies assist faculty in becoming better educators and in providing a more consistent approach to the implementation of self-directed and student-centered learning, which is seen as a priority and emerges as a common theme in most transcripts.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has given us a greater understanding of self-directed learning as not only a goal our students strive for to become life-long learners, but also as a developmental process that needs to be understood, recognized, and nurtured by faculty. We conclude by making the following recommendations around the implementation of SDL in an undergraduate nursing program: (1) ensure and facilitate faculty development around philosophical and practical issues related to the SDL approach; (2) recognize the transition of students from a teacher-centered to student-centered approach to learning as a developmental process; and (3) engineer student success in their progress through the phases of this developmental reorientation to learning and teaching by providing clear guidance and adequate support for the transition. Future research should explore, identify, and test the effectiveness of strategies that foster the development of self-directed learning skills in baccalaureate nursing students.

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