Pursuing a definition of self-directed learning in literature from 2000-2012

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Abstract

With the advances of technology providing large amount of information available for learners in the field of medicine, and the fact that it is exceedingly demanding to work on this body of information in the classrooms, a mounting need for training autonomous and self-directed learners who are responsible for their own learning and management of their learning process is felt. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the concept of self-directed learning from different aspects and on the basis of an independent definition leading to an explicit conceptual framework. Although there are many research studies on self-directed learning, there is no consistency in the definitions provided and a few of these studies provided an explicit definition and description of the concept. A systematic review is required to bind the former definitions with more recent descriptions of the concept to bring about a thorough definition matching the demands of the new era.

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1. Introduction

With the expansion of information and an increasing emphasis on autonomous learners in post-graduate syllabi, a mounting need to revise the present syllabi and include items supporting self-directed learning (SDL) is felt (Corrigan, 2012). However, the literature lacks an explicit and independent definition of the concept which matches the demands of a brave new world. This makes the exploration of different aspects of the topic difficult unless an independent clear definition matching the burden of the modern electronic world is proposed.

2. Sources of evidence

This study was conducted by searching four data bases of PubMed, Google, Scopus, and Medline. The search was carried out through two sets of keywords: self-directed learning and medical education. Overall, 36 articles were downloaded, among which letters and review articles were excluded. Then, only the articles related to the field of medical education, conducted between 2000 and 2012, were included in the study. Finally, 14 were included for pursuing an explicit and independent definition.

2.1. Purpose of the study and argument

This paper which is a review study was an attempt to pursue a new, independent and explicit definition of self-directed learning in the literature from 2000-2012. Without elaborating on the concept, Shokar, et al. (2002) viewed SDL as a lifelong learning necessary for medical students, especially with integrated curriculum, who need to search and make themselves updated with the new information. Patterson, et. al, (2002) provided a relatively detailed description of SDL and the competencies associated with it without an explicit definition of the term. Regan (2003) used SDL as a concept which was synonymous with pedagogical terms like autonomous learning, self-managed learning, lifelong learning and independent learning but did not provide an independent definition for the term. Given the explosion of information and skills for health professions, Nshaho(2005) believed that learners needed to acquire skills and knowledge at their own pace, constantly and forever. Focusing on problem-based and student-centered learning as a part of the SPICES Model in education, he discussed the advantages of applying this model leading to self-directed learning which he believed would be necessary for learners in the field of biomedical sciences, however, he did not give any clear explicit definition of what self-directed learning was, except that he mentioned it as a life-long self-learning. Discussing the implications and limitations of SDL with regard to adult graduate and undergraduate learners, Levett-Jones(2005) was amongst the few authors providing an informative description of the concept by bringing a historical background of SDL and focusing on Knowles’(1984) theory of ‘androgogy’ bound with SDL. Comparing the definition and characteristics of SDL from that of Knowles (1975) to those proposed in 1995, Teo&Gey(2006) refered to Abdullah (2001) and defined SDL as learning activities taken place at learner’s initiative. They further emphasized on self-management and self-monitoring indicating that learners were responsible and managers of their own learning. In this paper, the concept is thoroughly described and explained by giving a section to SDL and referring to different researchers. Williamson (2007) defined SDL as a learning process in which the learner took the responsibility and worked independently on his own in the process of learning by referring to Knowles (1975). In a qualitative study, Brouse (2007) explored students’ perception on how self-directed learning was facilitated in an online course; however, he just mentioned that there were many variations in the definition, descriptions and goals of SDL. Shannon (2008) in an action research project tried to empower the student to become self-directed learners by applying appropriate metacognitive strategies. In his study, Shannon defined self-directed learning by emphasizing the presumption that learners were responsible and managers of their own learning processes by citing Abdullah’s definition (2001). Hendry and Ginns (2009) perceived self-directed learning as a process of decision making for the depth and breadth of their own studies. Comparing the students in a PBL and traditional program, Hofgaard, et al. (2006) measured students’ learning outcome and strategies. It is mentioned, in the introduction of the paper, that the term self-regulated would be used instead of self-directed to cover different processes of knowledge construction such as self-directed learning suggesting that SDL is
a process of knowledge construction. Although the results of the study are addressed to both self-directed and self-regulated learning, none of these terms are explicitly defined throughout the paper. Hendry & Ginns (2009) determined the validity of a new instrument used for measuring readiness for self-directed learning of medical students. Unlike the former studies, this study does not constrain to classic definitions nor merely focus on Knowles ‘definition. Elaborating on different aspects of the term and covering more recent literature, Hendry & Ginns (2009) examined different definitions and descriptions of the term including decision making, metacognitive thinking, studying individually or jointly, making decisions about the depth and breadth of their studies, developing autonomy and self-actualization in learners from 1991 to 2005. Re-examining the validity of self-directed learning readiness scales, Fisher and King (2010) briefly defined the term as a method of instruction -and not learning addressing the amount of responsibility the learners accept for their own learning. Lee, et.al, (2010) examined the influence of PBL on students’ SDL in a hybrid curriculum, emphasized on lifelong learning aspect of SDL and defined the concept by referring to Knowles (1975) in a few words. Devi, et.al. (2012) compared self-directed learning readiness among students experiencing hybrid and traditional curriculum and found that students in traditional curriculum enjoyed more readiness for SDL than those with that of hybrid curriculum.

3. Conclusion

Although there are many research articles attempting to examine different aspects of SDL, only a few of them provide an independent definition and a thorough description of the concept. 6 out of 36 articles had a thorough description and an explicit definition of SDL to avoid ambiguity and to provide an apparent context for further exploration of the concept. This finding is in line with the findings of Ainoda, et.al, (2005) finding 5 articles out of 63 with an explicit definition of SDL. The results also showed that 2 researchers used Abdullah’s definition (2001) while four of them merely constrained to Knowles’ definition and only one study referred to different sources for defining and describing the concept. The inspection in the definitions given in these articles, shows that there is no consistency in defining SDL. Some researchers apply classic definition of Knowles (1975) while others use simple short definition of Abdullah (2001) and others use different descriptions suggesting that the literature lacks a conceptual framework.

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