Self-Directed Learning: Pedagogical Influences on Graduate Student Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Self-directed learning (SDL), while essential to graduate student success and continued professional development beyond the degree, is rarely addressed intentionally in the college curriculum. In this mixed-method study with 91 participants from two counseling-related degree programs, researchers examined the impact of integrating a unit focused on SDL. Students in both online and face-to-face courses reported their learning and experiences with the topic. Findings suggest that intentionally exposing students to SDL allows them to understand the concept and grow in awareness of its importance. Similar gains were reported regardless of course delivery format. Student perspectives discussed include student appreciation of the process of collaboration for professional growth, student understanding of the centrality of SDL for ongoing development, and student motivation to utilize SDL with those they work with in order to and expand personal agency.

KEYWORDS

Agency, Curriculum, Graduate Education, Pedagogy, Self-Directed Learning

OVERVIEW

For decades, it has been recognized that today’s workforce requires self-directed learners (American Association of School Librarians, 2007; Fein, 2014; Guglielmino & Murdick, 1997), and many government policies, university mission statements, and accrediting organizations clearly state and recognize this need (Candy, 1991). “Accreditation standards for many professions now also examine preparation programs for evidence that they prepare their learners for continued, self-directed lifelong learning” (Guglielmino, 2008, p. 5). Among those touting self-directed learning’s essential role in our future are prominent medical schools including Boston University and Johns Hopkins (Boston University School of Medicine, n.d.; Johns Hopkins Medical School, n.d.).

The 1975 insights of Knowles continue to reverberate within the context of this fast-paced, ever changing, global society. Knowles (1975) stated,

We are entering into a strange new world in which rapid change will be the only stable characteristic... It is no longer realistic to define the purpose of education as transmitting what is known... The main purpose of education must now be to develop the skills of inquiry (p. 15).
Knowles’ words only ring truer with time. In order to be well-prepared for the current technological, global environments that students are entering, students must be self-directed simply to keep up with the rapid pace of information expansion (Fein, 2014). DuBravac (2015) highlights that “…digital data will transform the human experience” (p. 49). What do these increasing challenges and demands mean for those in teaching in higher education? Pedagogically, what can be done to assist our students in understanding the imperative nature of being a self-directed learner?

PROBLEM

The researchers and authors of this study teach in different counseling fields where the concept of self-directed learning (SDL) is recognized as being important (American College Personnel Association, 2010; O’Halloran & Delaney, 2011), but where it typically does not find its way into the curriculum in an intentional manner. This absence of intentional SDL from the curriculum is not unusual, and research focusing on techniques that can be utilized in order to increase and develop student growth in this area has not been frequently investigated (Silen & Uhlen, 2008). Without more knowledge about specific ways educators can facilitate and develop students in their understanding of SDL, it is unlikely that the skills desired of the future workforce will be appropriately developed.

PURPOSE

With this in mind, the purpose of this mixed method study was to examine the impact of integrating a unit on self-directed learning (SDL) research into graduate counseling coursework. There were two questions the researchers sought to answer in this study.

1. To what extent does a unit on SDL impact graduate students in two different counseling-related helping fields?
2. Can similar pedagogical intervention strategies related to SDL be used in both face-to-face and online course structures?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Role of SDL in Graduate Education

In 1975, Knowles’ book on self-directed learning popularized the concept in adult education circles which are particularly relevant for graduate education. Since that time, various definitions for SDL have been presented in the literature (Kerka, 1999), but commonalities appear to focus on the need for learner ownership, autonomy, critical reflection, learner directed experiences, shift in power from teacher to learner, and student engagement (Brookfield, 1986; Candy, 1991; Carr, 1999; Hiemstra, 1980; Hyland & Kranzow, 2011). Self-directed learning is action-oriented, growing out of student critical reflection (Brookfield, 1981; Theil, 1984). It is not self-teaching, as some erroneously interpret the term; indeed, the faculty member/facilitator plays a key role in supporting learner self-direction (Fein, 2014; Silen & Uhlin, 2008). “The students need challenge, support and feedback in their struggle to become self-directed learners and thus require ongoing attention from faculty” (Silen & Uhlin, 2008, p. 462).

If graduate students can understand and be educated about self-directed learning, they will be better prepared to continue with their professional development beyond the walls of the institution.
Knowledge Building Online: The Promise and the Process

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