Self-directed learning and advanced practice development in pharmacy

By Elizabeth Mills, postgraduate academic course manager, and Patricia Black, director of postgraduate studies, both at Keele University

In his Agenda (PJ, 11 July 2009, p47), Barry Jubraj discusses the need for pharmacy to develop a definition of self-directed learning (SDL) that "allows students to learn what they need to learn, with support for their development through provision of the necessary experience, guidance and assessment". He writes with experience of supporting newly registered pharmacists and suggests that, for these learners, the "what to learn" should be defined and fixed for them in the form of learning objectives.

We have considerable experience supporting pharmacists further on in their careers and argue that the "what to learn" for experienced pharmacists relates to an individual's needs and should be negotiable, flexible and relate directly to the individual's practice and aspirations for further development. We agree that, on the whole, it is appropriate to define the "what to learn" for newly registered pharmacists embarking on a postgraduate diploma. In this context, SDL is about providing the student with the skills and support to become a self-directed and confident adult learner. This transition, from the arguably more didactic and tutor-led approach to learning and teaching that they may have experienced as undergraduate students, may be difficult for many, but it can be successfully achieved through the medium of a written reflective portfolio that engenders a systematic approach to reflective learning.

The definition of SDL in Mr Jubraj's article, developed in the context of the Joint Programmes Board diploma, that "SDL is about pharmacy practitioners being personally responsible for achieving the required competencies in the workplace to achieve fitness to practise, supported by the infrastructure of an accredited training centre" is, we agree, appropriate for this group of pharmacists. The required competencies are usually specified by the Higher Education Institute in the form of learning outcomes.

At Keele University, we use a similar approach through the integration of structured portfolios throughout our postgraduate diploma courses. These provide students with a model of learning that they can subsequently use in their professional practice to develop knowledge and understanding through reflection on learning and to improve and advance professional practice through reflection on practice.

There are, however, other groups of pharmacists who embark on formal postgraduate education courses for whom this definition of SDL may not be appropriate because they require more individual flexibility in the learning outcomes and, therefore, the concept of a "traditional" course with a common syllabus for all may not be appropriate. These pharmacists then become responsible for achieving the learning outcomes that they have had a role in defining. They include, for example, experienced pharmacists who have achieved a postgraduate diploma that has engaged them with a model of learning that developed them to be effective self-directed learners, and who are now seeking to advance their practice further to focus on an area in which they wish to specialise. Also, there are perhaps some experienced pharmacists who have had little formal education since qualifying but who have, over time and through experiential learning in the workplace where there has been little or no support for their learning, developed the skills to be effective self-directing learners. In this regard, we go on to discuss further the concept of SDL and how it might apply to pharmacists such as these.

These pharmacists are likely to display the characteristics of adult learners as described by Knowles (see Panel below), more so than those who enrol on a diploma course straight from qualifying, including taking control of and responsibility for, their learning. Learning is most likely to be entirely intrinsically driven. They are pharmacists who are likely to identify their learning needs, not through...
The assumptions of andragogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>The need to know</td>
<td>Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it</td>
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<tr>
<td>The learner’s self concept</td>
<td>Adults have the self concept of being responsible for their own decisions (ie, learning is self-directed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The role of the learner’s experience</td>
<td>Adults have accumulated a great deal of experience, which is a rich resource for learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readiness to learn</td>
<td>Adults become ready to learn when they need to know or be able to do something in order to cope with a real-life situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation to learning</td>
<td>Adults are life-centred in their learning. They are more interested in immediate, problem-centred approaches than subjected-centred ones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>The most potent motivators in adults are internal (eg, increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life)</td>
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The APD course, which can be studied as a stand-alone 15-credit module or as part of a MSc academic award, including the advanced professional practice award route, was developed with this notion of SDL and the principles of adult learning as central considerations.

The APD course is assessed using a structured reflective portfolio in which learners must provide evidence that they have achieved their learning outcomes and reflect on their learning experiences, so developing further their skills of critical reflection. Thus the APD module is an SDL course designed for the self-directing learner and based on the principles of adult learning.

In their recent review of the literature, Kostrewski et al concluded that evidence is limited in relation to the contribution that portfolios can make to practice development. However, the supporting structure of the portfolio design created by Keele has been shown to develop practitioners’ skills in using reflection on learning and professional practice that can make a powerful contribution to professional learning and development. Our evidence comes from research that provides theory that is grounded in reality as perceived by pharmacists who have used our unique portfolio design to develop their skills in reflection on learning and professional practice.

In conclusion, we agree with Mr Jubraj that pharmacy needs to define and appropriately apply SDL to post-registration education, and argue that there is more than one way of defining self-direction that is dependent on the pharmacist’s previous experience of levels of attainment. The required competencies in our definition relate to individual need, not an academic one-size-fits-all model.

It may be appropriate for newly registered pharmacists embarking on postgraduate education that the “what to learn” is, on the whole, defined for them. But experienced pharmacists can reasonably decide, with support from an academic tutor to ensure academic rigour, what is to be learnt and how it should be learnt. Courses such as the APD course support pharmacists to develop as advanced and specialist practitioners and, therefore, offer one model to meet future needs in line with the current development work of the new professional body in this area.

References