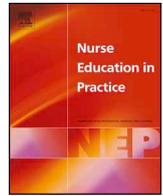




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## Doctorate Studies

## Students' perceptions of self-direction in pre-registration nurse education

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored to understand the lived experiences of a group of pre-registration nursing students' in a United Kingdom Higher Education setting, in the context of increasing responsibility for self-direction throughout the learning process. Care is underpinned by evidence, knowledge and problem solving skills, predicated on enhanced student capability to ensure self-direction in learning. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach framed within an interpretative paradigm enabled exploration to seek out individual and collective perceptions of the learning process. Four over-arching themes were identified: Divergent perceptions of self-directed learning, Adult learning needs and transition, Motivation and Understanding responsibility. Students appeared very dependent and, paradoxically, demanded both variety and consistency from educators in assisting them to develop as they progressed through the course. Within these themes, anxiety and vulnerability were shared motifs in students' experiences. Clear expectations of responsibilities and roles in learning is key to supporting students from the beginning of the undergraduate programme. Teacher and student interaction is important in developing and enabling critical engagement in learning with clear directions and guidelines.

## 1. Introduction/background

Supporting pre-registration nursing students in academic and practice settings, and facilitation of their learning overall have been subjects of recurring debate and reorganisation both in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally (Royal College of Nursing, 2012). Consideration should be given to the ways in which theory and practice are combined and exploration of the most effective method of teaching and learning and what characterises a positive and supportive learning environment are issues that should be addressed (Health Education England, 2013). In the UK, Health Education England (HEE) (2013) advocated that, for nursing students to be effective in their future roles, a greater degree of self-direction should be incorporated within teaching and learning. Consequently, self-directed learning (SDL) is perceived as a fundamental aspect of learning development of students at all levels to be embedded within pre-registration nurse education curricula. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2018) has defined specific standards of proficiency that have to be achieved by pre-registration nurses to meet new criteria for registration. Greater emphasis has been placed on the use of information and digital technology to support learning and care delivery. Among these is the ability to demonstrate responsibility for one's own learning. Pre-registration nursing students have time built in for self-directed study; consideration

needs to be given to the extent of how personalised learning fits within the undergraduate nursing curriculum. Assumptions are made that, as adult learners, pre-registration nursing students are able to engage and become effective self-directed learners (McCauley and McClelland, 2004). Some may be able to develop the skills of self-directed learning by themselves but there are others who may not. Pre-registration nursing students therefore need to have a better understanding on the concepts and purpose of SDL.

The definitions of self-directed learning means different things to different people and are ambiguous (D'A Slevin and Lavery, 1991). Knowles, (1975, p54) defined SDL as "a process in which individuals take the initiative in their learning, with or without the help of others". He considered that adults may reach their full potential when they take responsibility for their own lives, developing and becoming autonomous as well as self-directing. Candy (1991) provided a multi-level definition of SDL, and distinguished it as an outcome rather than a method of education. There is a combination of personal autonomy and self-management skills, referring to learner willingness and capability. As a method, self-directed learning is broken down further into learner control and self-teaching and refers to instructional methods in formal and informal settings (Guglielmino, 2010). As a consequence, the notion of SDL is a strategy that can assist pre-registration nursing students to be proactive in identifying and addressing their personal learning

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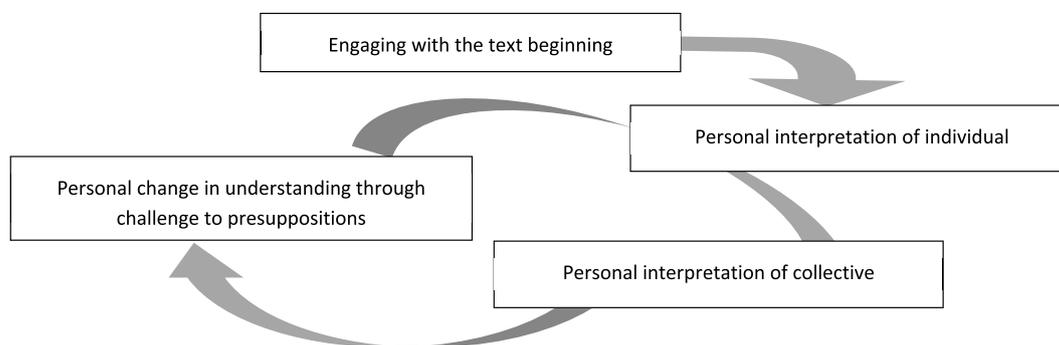


Fig. 1. The hermeneutic circle.

needs (Castledine, 2008). The pivotal position of nurse educators in meeting the demands and guaranteeing successful learning outcomes is a key factor. Degree preparation of nursing students cannot succeed without an expert, motivated academic workforce, alert and responsive to fluctuating contextual dynamics of both higher education and clinical practice (Andrew and Robb, 2011).

The Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018 suggested that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) should offer a flexible blended approach to learning, drawing on the full range of learning methods and modes of delivery, including self-direction. Students enter nurse education with different qualifications and levels of learning needs; those with both traditional and non-traditional qualifications require adequate preparation and support to engage with SDL. This research explored the lived experiences of pre-registration nursing students in a higher education setting, in the context of increasing student responsibility for, and self-direction throughout the learning process. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do pre-registration nursing students experience self-direction in learning?
2. How do they make meaning of their experiences?

## 2. Methodology

The research employed a phenomenological approach to seeking out individual and collective perceptions of the learning process. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit participants' accounts. The study was approached from an interpretivist perspective that ontologically is comfortable in the belief that realities are multiple, and epistemologically that knowledge making is grounded in experience and shared subjectivities. How these may or may not be represented as a collective perspective led to the adoption of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, informed by the work of Hans Georg Gadamer (1976). This has the potential to generate new understandings from collective experience. Understanding can be deepened by engagement with the research, through careful observation and making connections, and through active involvement in adopting or weaving fresh ideas and approaches (Rorty, 1991).

### 2.1. Recruitment and sampling participants

Purposive sampling was utilised to recruit six pre-registration students from one higher education faculty. Although no male students came forward, the student participants represented a range of individual perspectives based on their knowledge and experience of nurse education. Two students from each of the three years of study and from different programmes were interviewed to capture any marked differences in context and experience. Students had entered Higher Education (HE) with a range of qualifications. The sample size of six ensured a range of perceptions was uncovered in line with the aims of the study and qualitative research.

### 2.2. Data collection

Understanding can be deepened by engagement with the research, through careful observation and making connections, and through active involvement in adopting or weaving fresh ideas and approaches (Rorty, 1991). This was the basis for using semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection for this study as the purpose was to engage in a conversation within the interviews to build a more nuanced picture of self-direction as life-world experience for learners. Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted over a nine month period in 2015. An interview guide was used, allowing flexibility for participants to steer the discussion without foreclosing on potentially insightful narrative. Individual interviews were recorded digitally to capture in the participants' own words their notions of self-direction as these emerged through their experiential accounts and the ways in which they tried to make sense of these experiences (Bryman, 2008; Bowling, 2009). Interviews lasted between and one to one and a half hours and were transcribed verbatim.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Braun and Clarke, 2006 framework for thematic analysis was used as a basis for interpretation of participants' accounts of engaging in their learning experiences. This approach was selected as it shares the main features of hermeneutic analysis and is explicit in the procedures to follow in moving from text to interpretation and the formation of themes. The circle is outlined in Fig. 1 below.

Transcripts were read several times to gain an idiographic sense of the overall experience and manually coded by marking and highlighting particular words and phrases that stood out and which appeared to have particular meaning for the individual. An idiopathic approach provides a more complete understanding of the individual, albeit subjective (Nichols, 2018). Codes were clustered into categories, and constantly rechecked and refined. Analysis was inductive, identifying patterns that seem to cluster together identifying similarities, differences and general patterns, which ultimately formed more defined themes. Following this idiographic analysis, the process was then repeated across each group, and finally across the whole data set. Emergent themes were ultimately clustered further into overarching themes.

### 2.4. Ethical consideration

Ethical approval was gained from the university Research Ethics Committee. The purpose of the study was outlined with an explanation that participation was voluntary and participants were reassured that identifiable information would remain confidential. All gave informed consent.

## 2.5. Rigour

Data collection was guided by the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability based on Lincoln and Guba's constructions (1985) Clarification of statements, narratives and context were sought from participants during the interviews to ensure understanding. The transcribed interviews were also returned to participants to check for accuracy. To maintain credibility, interviews, transcripts and subsequent themes were discussed and refined by both authors.

In terms of transferability, the study is to be understood primarily within the context of an emergent culture of self-direction in learning in nurse education, anticipating that findings might resonate with other similar contexts and projects and adding cumulatively to development of an overall picture. The first author's position in the research as an experienced nurse educator was reflected on by way of a journal.

## 2.6. Findings

The following themes were identified from the study Divergent perceptions of self-directed learning, Adult learning needs and transition, Motivation to learn and Understanding responsibility. Whilst presented as separate themes, there is a fluidity and overlap reflective of the complex inter-relational nature of learning and teaching. Each theme is supported by quotations from the transcripts presented verbatim.

### 2.6.1. Theme 1: Divergent perceptions of SDL

Although self-directed learning is embedded within the curriculum, what did students understand SDL to be and what it meant to them in terms of their learning and teaching experiences? Two students' accounts were markedly diverse. The other four students were somewhere in between the two examples illustrated below. For example, Student Nurse 3 came into nurse education straight from school and was at the end of her second year and offered her perspective:

*"It's going away and researching but I think I learn better in the class when the lecturer is there. Sometimes you get self-directed learning, and you just think oh I'll do it another day. SDL it just does not work for me"* (SN3).

The findings suggest that she was very much dependent in her learning and this was interesting as she only had a year left to qualify. A possible consequence of those feelings could be adoption of a more submissive role compounding students' dependency on educators and thus hindering their learning. In comparison, SN 2 was a mature student at the end of her first year. Although she did not provide a definition of SDL, she acknowledged the reciprocity involved between students, educators, and her role in the learning process:

*"I enjoy self-directed learning, because I'm nosey! I just always have done, I like finding out things and researching stuff for myself for my notes. I think I learn more because I'm doing research myself"* (SN2).

There were variations in the above students' accounts and this could be due to a number of factors, including age differences and life experiences. For example, Student Nurse 2 had returned to further education after thirty years, after completing an access course before starting the nursing degree. She acknowledged her role in learning and teaching and her motivation to learn as well as enjoying SDL.

### 2.6.2. Theme 2: Adult learning needs and transition

This theme relates to the theorised needs and transition of adult learners in a higher education setting. In particular, it focuses on the process of knowledge as a skill. These factors influenced the expectations students placed on educators. They related their individual differences and preferences for different approaches to content delivery within the academic setting. For example, Student Nurse 6 was at the

beginning of the first year on the degree course and related her expectations to her perceived learning needs. She had completed a foundation degree the previous year:

*"When we started all we kept hearing from lecturers is that you are now studying at level 4, 5, and 6. I had no idea what that meant and perhaps that need to be explained in more detail. I have had to find that out by myself. There is so much to learn but I think when we start we need to be put straight as to what we need to learn and how we go about learning"* (SN6).

The comments suggested that she was uncertain about what she needed to learn and the level of learning that was required now she was studying at degree level. SN2 offered a different perspective and related the differences between learning at school, college and in higher education:

*"My idea of school is the teacher is there telling you what to do, so when you are in college and it's down to you to go and find out. Mind you if you've come straight from school, you are still in the way of thinking the teacher will come every five minutes and tell you what to do but when you get into uni you've got to fend for yourself"* (SN2).

Here are two conflicting views of adult learners attempting to make the transition into higher education. There were marked differences in their expectations of educators. Consideration had to be given to the length of time they were on the course and what guidance had been provided by nurse educators, among other factors.

### 2.6.3. Theme 3: Motivation to learn

From their accounts, participants' did not provide a clear indication of their motivation to engage in the process of learning and teaching. In addition, how were students facilitated by educators in meeting their individual learning needs? Participants were asked about teaching and learning in general to understand from their perspective how this impacted on SDL. For example, Student Nurse 4 revealed her expectations and motivation for becoming a nurse:

*"I watched Holby City so thought it would be like that, so when I started university I did not realise how much work it was going to be. Doing long days, studying for exams, doing assignments, what if I was like some of the students with children? I don't know how they do it as I was going to leave, but my mom encouraged me to stay as she is also a nurse"* (SN4).

*"I am a more 'hands on' person, so I cannot really learn when someone is talking at me. I need to be doing something, or something engaging. If someone is asking questions or we are having a debate, that gets me going and I remember things that way. Yes, active thinking rather than just staring at information"* (SN2).

SN2 indicated that there is a need for educators to provide vision and be more creative in their approaches in 'engaging' and motivating students and developing them to become proactive in their learning. SN5 came straight from school into nurse education and placed the onus on educators to be flexible in instructional strategies in meeting individual needs:

*"I think it's good for all of us really instead of sitting in front of a power point every week; we need to experience the different styles like the skills lab. We had two lecturers in, I can't remember their names but it was like a song & a dance thing, which was more entertaining and a bit of a laugh"* (SN5).

### 2.6.4. Theme 4: Understanding responsibility

This theme focused on understanding responsibilities in learning and teaching. How were students supported in realising and enhancing their potential in becoming competent and knowledgeable? SN2 offered her perspective on learning responsibilities in higher education:

*"I think it is more intense, as the access course was only for 10 months"*

*but then again I hadn't been in education for so long as I am 46 now so when I went to college it was like how do I write an essay but that then helped me when I got to university. If I hadn't done the access course, I would have really struggled in University. As it happens I've passed all my assignments this year but I think the access course has helped me do that" (SN2).*

This student saw 'passing her assignments' as a success. What is not demonstrated in her response is learning as an evolving process and how the educator was not perceived as a part of her learning journey. Students viewed educators as being responsible for assisting students in accepting some responsibility in their learning:

*"I think a little more guidance would be helpful, as we were doing one assignment and we had to pick a topic, and they told us in our lesson we would be picking a topic and that isn't what happened in the lesson but there wasn't a push in the right direction" (SN1).*

*"Sometimes if you email someone they won't get back to you in time so that's a bit annoying but if you're in a lesson you can ask them straight away. When you are doing self-directed learning, if you have questions you can't get the support or answers you may need straight away as you would in a lesson. I think a little more guidance would be helpful" (SN6).*

SN5 concurred and identified the interaction and support between students and educators in the teaching and learning process.

*"In school you feel more supported by your teachers. Literally getting molly coddled there, where in university, they do support you a little but I think more should be done. If they took the time to give some input and recommendations that can be made that would help to build our confidence" (SN5).*

Overall, the findings of the study revealed that students wanted more support and guidance and that this should be consistent from all educators. Students expected educators to act as facilitators by guiding them through course content and processes, supporting them to actively participate in their learning. Students recounted a wide range of individual experiences leading to different concepts and notions of self-directed learning. The findings in this study make evident the profound impact educators can have on student learning. Students appeared to be very dependent and, paradoxically, demanded both variety and consistency from educators in assisting them to develop. In addition, the relational needs of students were important and they attached these to effective learning, identifying the need to be nurtured to begin to understand their role in higher education and within teaching and learning. Additionally, the need for students to be nurtured by educators in order to develop as self-directed learners, rather than expecting them to be that way were identified by participants' and this is significant.

### 3. Discussion

The findings revealed that individual students construct meaning with reference to their past and present experiences of learning, based on their perceptions and lived experiences. Knowles (1975) proposed that educators must first understand what they are aiming for in teaching and learning, and assist students to structure self-directed learning activities in such a way as to achieve this. However, given the mixed messages that transpired from this study, it was difficult to ascertain if this was taking place in undergraduate nurse education. SDL is perceived by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018 as a fundamental and integral aspect of undergraduate nurse education, therefore understanding its concepts is crucial in developing and incorporating it within the curriculum successfully. In the journey of HE, there is a starting point when students are new and the end product when they qualify. What is missing is the central aspect of the journey, how do they get from the beginning to the end? What is in place to assist them to take control of their learning?

In 2018, the NMC standards for nursing anticipated that developments in nurse education has to equip pre-registration nursing students to embark on a career underpinned by a SDL approach to learning. This will support students in developing a broader and deeper knowledge base. The findings of this study resonate with the literature that suggests SDL as a concept and approach is often misunderstood and may result in mistaken perceptions about the possibilities for its use in HE (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Fisher and King, 2010). Misunderstandings may result in an underestimation of its value in terms of equipping students for a complex and evolving professional life in nursing. Darbyshire (1993) acknowledged that not all adults are naturally self-directed and will require structure to assist them, as demonstrated within this study.

Teaching and learning is a dynamic process in which interactions and relationships are highly important. McSharry et al. (2010) reflect that mutual respect can have a positive impact on relationships between educators, students and other colleagues. This raises the question as to whose responsibility it is to develop students from novice to expert (self-directing) practitioners, deciding for themselves what they need to learn, given learning outcomes and deciding how to go about it. Haggis (2003) identified an assumption that students are prepared by secondary schooling and are ready for HE at a level where they can engage with deeper, self-directed learning and are willing to get better results. The interplay between the learning situation and the learner is the starting point for students to develop and strive towards responsibility for their learning.

The literature suggests stages of professional role transition for students reflect a non-linear process that moves through developmental, professional, intellectual, skills and role-relationship change and contains within it experiences, meanings and expectations (Biggs, 2003). Duchsher, 2008 concluded that expectations can play out positively or negatively depending on teaching and learning and can lead to disillusionment. Literature that analysed students' expectations, aspirations and decision making (Smith and Hopkins, 2005; Longden, 2006; JISC, 2007), indicates that before entering HE, students have difficulties predicting their student experience and envisaging university life. There may be a mismatch between aspirations and the reality of students' first and subsequent years of university.

So what purpose does self-directed learning serve in enhancing the learning endeavour and what are the implications for curriculum development? A facilitative approach, learning from experience are all emphasised in appropriate models of adult education as well as an adult-to-adult relationship between learner and trainer (Rogers, 1983; Newman, 2002). The benefits relate to not only these types of learning, but also for what that will teach oneself and learning to contribute to collective learning. Vygotsky (1978) discusses scaffolding and strongly believe that learning and development differ and that learning not only leads development, but also that learning creates zones of proximal development (ZPD). In other words, the starting point for instruction is the learners' current knowledge and skills; similarly, this is also where SDL begins. In both there is an assumption that each learner brings experience to the learning situation and existing knowledge can be applied to solve problems resulting in the formation of new knowledge (Harland, 2003). The findings suggest that whatever strategy an educator uses, each student will construct their own meaning based on an interaction between prior knowledge and their motivation to learn.

Current expectations demand that nurse education evolves to prepare nurses who are fit for purpose and ready to meet the challenges within an evolving healthcare environment. Willis, 2015 report highlighted this need by outlining expectations of nurse educators in developing strategies to help students to progress as learners, in order to prepare them for a role that will continue post-qualification. It is essential for educators to create a learning environment, which increases the ability of students to interact to develop knowledge and experience. In other words, it is reliant on educators having the capability and vision to support agendas to produce safe, competent and knowledgeable practitioners of the future. Successful education depends on the

effective integration of a large number of relatively separate but mutually dependent factors and events. Walsh (2004) suggested that the socio-political climate is an influence, which is socially constructed and that education is not delivered in a vacuum.

### 3.1. Limitations

The study was conducted in a single UK university and had the modest goal of adding to the emerging discussion. Three participants were from the adult branch of nursing as the other branches were significantly smaller in numbers. The study would have been further enhanced if the views of practice educators on the students experiences highlighted were also sought.

## 4. Conclusion

Understanding the obstacles that can impede SDL is complex and different for each individual. The concept of SDL is based on the principles of adult education and can take many forms. Acquiring the necessary skills is dependent on educators and students having an understanding of the nature and purpose of SDL as well as the motivation and commitment to engage with the process. Learning theories and educational frameworks are the philosophical foundations that guide the selection of instructional strategies and learning activities. Knowledge translation needs to explore the curriculum content to allow for authentic engagement between educators and students, leading to active construction of knowledge. Engagement and partnership requires effort, perseverance and commitment, and adopting a partnership approach to teaching and learning may go some way in enabling full participation.

The curriculum needs to articulate clearly defined structures and frameworks for educators and students in order to facilitate meaningful partnerships in teaching and learning. A SDL development model for nurse education can be crucial in bringing together educators and students to engage in a more meaningful way. Clear expectations need to be defined on both sides so that individuals feel empowered and supported to have a better understanding of SDL and their responsibilities in the entire process. Further research is required to explore a broader range of issues related to students' learning experiences and investigate their effects on the development of SDL. Further exploration of the mutual perceptions of nurse educators in the academic and those in clinical settings, on their respective roles in facilitating self-direction is also indicated. Future research should seek to establish if the identified factors within this study are transferable across age, gender and different ethnicities using a larger sample size.

The capacity of the findings to contribute to curriculum development and practice improvement is examined in terms of enhancing the specificity and relevance of a SDL model for pre-registration nurse education.

### Conflicts of interest

None.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2019.102626>.

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