Preparing Our Graduates for a Lifetime of Learning

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In a recent Viewpoint, Lucinda Maine described how our graduates would be practicing in 2015. As we educate our graduates to become effective practitioners 10, 20, and 30 years from now, one of the most powerful tools we can help them develop is the skills to continue and direct their own learning. The recent developments concerning continuing professional development emphasize that our graduates will need a firm foundation for managing their own learning over the course of their professional careers.

The 2004 CAPE Educational Outcomes also demonstrates the significance of producing self-directed learners. The document details many outcomes concerning the ability to “retrieve, analyze, and interpret the professional, lay, and scientific literature” and being able to “maintain professional competence by identifying and analyzing emerging issues.”

The more I read about self-directed learners, the more I see that it is both a set of skills to be developed and an attitude. While individuals may utilize these skills, depending on the particular requirements of a given situation, the skills must be developed to be effective. If a student’s formal schooling (primary through undergraduate) consisted of his passively receiving information from his teachers, then that student’s skills at monitoring and managing his own learning may be poorly developed, and his commitment to actively managing his own learning will be lacking.

In my experience with pharmacy educators, I have been quite impressed by the commitment to developing quality graduates who understand and appreciate the significance of continuing their professional development, and I have observed 2 critical ways that faculty members work to help students develop skills and the right attitude for self-directed learning.

First, many teachers structure their courses to challenge students both to think about what they need to know and to actively seek out the information they need. Virtually every issue of the Journal publishes articles detailing how faculty members incorporate a variety of instructional methods, such as problem-based learning, the Socratic method, self-directed learning, case studies, and simulations, which engage students in various activities that spur critical thinking: analysis, discovery, problem solving, evaluation, debate, and role playing.

Another, equally important component in developing self-directed learners is for instructors to exemplify the behaviors for their students. I have observed some fine teachers who make a point of modeling for students how they monitor their need for information and how they find, evaluate, and use the information. This means allowing students to see that they do not have all the answers at hand. Librarians are also very passionate about educating people to become what we consider lifelong, self-directed learners. During the past 15 years, a movement has taken hold in the profession to help all people develop these skills. The popular name for this movement is information literacy. According to the Association of College & Research Libraries, the information literate individual should be able to perform a variety of tasks in the course of finding and using information, which include:

- determining the nature and extent of the information needed,
- accessing needed information effectively and efficiently,
- evaluating information and its sources critically and incorporating selected information,
- using information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and
- accessing and using information ethically and legally.

As the pharmacy librarian at my school, I work with faculty members to ensure that students (and faculty members) have access to needed information resources, but I also educate students on searching and using primary, secondary, and tertiary sources, which includes activities such as:

- instructing students on how to develop search strategies,
• educating students about selecting and evaluating sources,
• conducting computer labs to train students on accessing and searching electronic databases,
• producing Web-based guides that can be plugged into courseware to direct students in searching for and retrieving information, and
• presenting information on the implications of copyright and licensing law for their uses of information, both as students and professionals.

Librarians can and should partner with pharmacy faculty members to ensure that our graduates have the skills for retrieving, analyzing, and evaluating information, which will enable them to evolve with the profession.

REFERENCES