

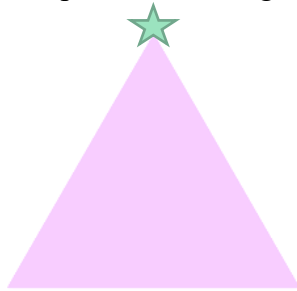
Self-Directed Learning

A Guide to Self-Directed Learning in Medical Education

May 2022

What is Self-Directed Learning?

Self-directed learning is one of the primary ways students can develop their skills of lifelong learning. By selecting their topic of interest within a field, crafting objectives, creating their own questions, and sharing what they've learned in a manner they see fit, students break the standard process of aiming to meet prescribed educational goals. This process is different from independent learning.

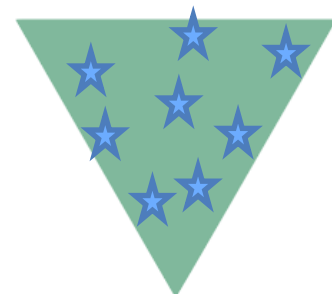


Independent learning: An instructor or facilitator crafts the learning experience for students in some similar ways to didactics. Objectives and questions, for example, are still provided by the educator. After that, time is given for students to learn these same materials in a method of their choosing. The outcome, then, is still a *convergent process*, where everyone leaves the session or unit with the same knowledge.

Self-directed learning: As laid out in [LCME standard 6.3](#), students are responsible for much more than just the time and method allotted to study materials like independent learning offers. Students should assess their own learning needs first. They should be able to find and synthesize reliable information and share that information with peers and the instructor. In the last step, they should be able to receive feedback. This development is more of a *divergent process* because students come away with different knowledge on different topics.

Clues that Self-Directed Learning is Happening

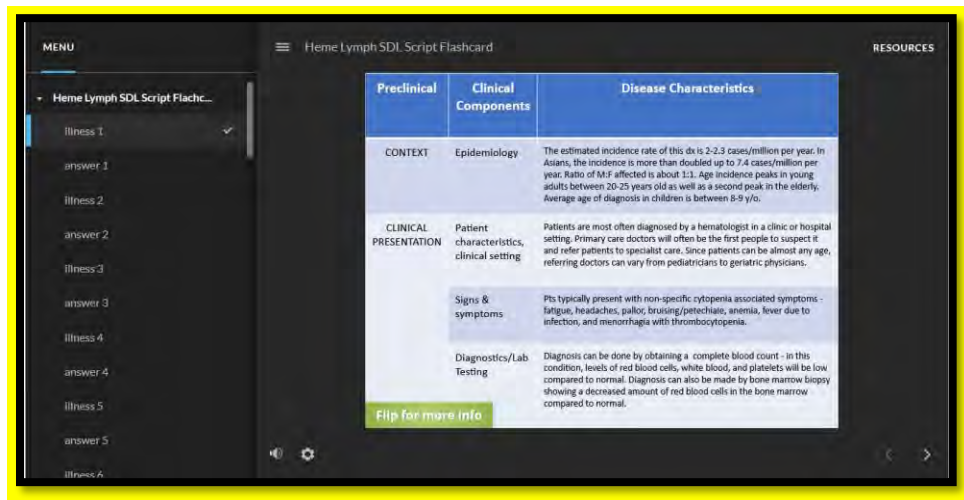
Students will express curiosity in the first step of any self-directed learning activity. Innovative ideas and questions that may not have made it onto an instructor-crafted syllabus may arise. Any question that can be answered with a simple web search or minimal reading



does not reach this threshold, of course. Faculty may learn current information from the student sharing of data. Students may depend upon a wide variety of sources, databases, and apps when finding their information. It is important that faculty are either able to verify the reliability of these sources or have another expert to vouch for the credibility, such as a librarian or another information professional.

Examples at MCW

In the M1 year of medical school, there are many activities that encourage student self-directed learning. In Medical Neuroscience, students select topics from the course that interest them and they give 5-minute virtual presentations to their peers in groups of 5-8. In Infectious Agents and Health Immunity, these same groups of students not only learn from each other but create a group project that encapsulates each others' research. In Foundations of Human Behavior, students select two cases out of 40+ available and simulate patient encounters via the discussion forum, exploring their future possible specialties and developing patient communication skills. Throughout the M2 year, students select different diseases that interest them and, after extensive research, develop and share illness scripts that can help their peers study for exams. In some units, students create flash cards or quiz questions to help their peers better understand the topics that may have not interested them much at first.



Collaboration with OEI resulted in an interactive flash card activity to help students learn from each other.

If you are interested in exploring how self-directed learning activities can be incorporated into your course, contact us at educational_improvement@mcw.edu.