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Home
Contents

Fostering Self-Directed Learners Through Competitions

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Abstract

Educational programs are continually seeking ways to encourage students' independence, personal growth, and self-directed learning. Graduates should enter the fashion industry with the ability to engage in lifelong learning in order to ensure competence in professional practice. Competition experiences help students to achieve these goals. The results of the study suggest that students perceived they developed high skill levels as self-directed learners and recognized the benefits from entering design competitions.

Introduction

Rapid changes in the fashion industry create the need for industry professionals to continually learn throughout their careers. One way to ensure continued work force competence is to develop self-directed learners in higher education. Fashion education programs identify self-directed learning as a student outcome; however, few programs identify how the curriculum creates opportunities for students to achieve this goal. Competitions are a vehicle for students to explore their creativity, develop industry contacts for potential career positions, improve their technical skills, achieve personal goals, and evolve as self-directed learners.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is deliberate learning that can and should occur throughout each person's lifetime (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Kidd, 1973; Knapper & Cropley, 2000). Colleges and universities are not only providers of lifelong learning opportunities; they also prepare individuals for lifelong learning in other settings (Hesburgh, Miller, & Wharton, 1974; Knapper & Cropley). A number of authors indicate the need to change teaching and learning strategies to support self-directed learners (Brockett & Hiemstra; Coombs, 1982; Hesburgh et al.). According to Brockett and Hiemstra, an effective approach to lifelong learning is to become a self-directed learner by controlling the methods and content of one's learning. Learners should acquire the skills and techniques to continue learning throughout their lives. The Conference Board of Canada (2002) identified three categories of skills individuals needed to enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work: Fundamental Skillls, Personal Management Skills, and Teamwork Skills. The category, Personal Management Skills,

addresses elements related to self-directed learners that eventually lead to lifelong learning, namely, a willingness to continually learn and grow; assess personal strengths and areas for development; identify and access learning sources and opportunities; and plan for and achieve learning goals.

Self-Directed Learning

Competitions help develop the skills that self-directed learners need, such as the abilities to solve problems, generate numerous ideas, look at data and choose relevant resources, create original ideas, and conduct assessments of their own performances. Self-directed learning can be traced to Dewey (1938), who stated that teachers should guide but not interfere with or control the learning process. Tough (1967) initially described this process as "self-teaching"; learners assume responsibility for planning and directing their course of study. Knowles (1975, p. 18) described self-directed learning as a "process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes." As stated by Brookfield (1986, p. 67), "self-directed learning is an intentional pursuit of clearly specified learning goals with the learner exercising control over the content and method of learning."

Merriam and Caffarella's (1991) definition of self-directed learning builds on previous theorists. Self-directed learning is a form of study in which learners have the primary responsibilities for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences. Researchers in the nursing field claim self-directed learning increases students' confidence in, and their capacity for independent learning (Nolan & Nolan, 1997) and Leonard (1993) suggests that self-directed learning allows learning to progress beyond acquiring knowledge to a memorable and motivating experience. However, Brookfield (1983) cautions that no act of learning is fully self-directed if this means that learners are so self-reliant that they exclude all external sources of stimuli. Ultimately, self-directed learning is a means to facilitate lifelong learning.

Design Competitions

Students in the Ryerson University School of Fashion may enter a variety of national or international design competitions. Competitions provide opportunities and resources for individuals who want creative challenges. Students may enter design competitions to experience creative outlets and develop industry contacts. Some design competitions are incorporated into the course curriculum while other competitions are introduced as extracurricular activities. The Departmental Competitions Committee analyzes each competition to determine whether those competitions merge with the school's vision and project criteria for courses.

Students in our program dedicate large amounts of outside class time to competitions because they may be trying to establish themselves nationally and internationally while gaining monetary rewards. A study by Marra, Avery, and Rao (1993) attempted to explore students' beliefs and attitudes about their learning and motivations within the context of a national advertising competition. They stated:

The survey results suggest that students relished their competition experience generally. The results also suggest that students learned a great deal, and they participated because of assumed job or career prospects and the lure of working within a team. They also participated because they expected to win, additionally believing that winning increased their prospects for jobs, including exceptional jobs. Finally, students believed that their participation meant missed classes, missed work in classes, and lower GPAs overall. (p. 3)

There are a number benefits that students receive as a result of entering and competing in design competitions. Students benefit from their involvement in national and international competitions by receiving evaluation and feedback from industry judges; establishing industry contacts; creating internship and job opportunities; and receiving exposure in professional fields. As a result of entering competitions, students may explore their creativity in industry "real life" situations.

Six competitions offered through the School of Fashion provide a variety of prizes and rewards for the winners. Monetary rewards can be equivalent to the annual university tuition. Additional rewards include national and international expense-paid trips or internships; editorial spreads featured in a fashion magazine; promotional posters displayed nationally for a cosmetic company; or apparel designs produced and sold in retail stores.

Potential benefits for all students lie with the development of students as self-directed learners. Skills linked to self-directed learning may include increasing students' abilities to solve problems, generating numerous ideas, looking at data and choosing relevant resources, and conducting assessments of their performances. The benefits of students entering competitions, according to Riley and Karnes (1998), range from satisfaction in accomplishing individual goals to academic growth and development.

Competitions were incorporated into the curriculum as a result of our department responding to high profile companies that wanted to support our fashion program; seeking a higher number of quality entries; supporting students by providing instructor feedback and guidance; and identifying self-directed learning as a student outcome. Departments and universities benefit from students' involvement in competitions through national and international exposure and building industry contacts.

Methodology and Procedures

A number of questions were formulated and served as a guide for the study. This study attempted to answer the question, "Do fashion students believe they developed the necessary skills to become self-directed learners?" Specifically, the following two questions guided the research:

1. What are students' ratings of their skill level as self-directed learners after completing design competitions?
2. What are students' ratings of design competition benefits?

The participants were a group of second- and third-year undergraduate students enrolled in a fashion design program. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 26 years. The participants had common career goals, and they completed at least one design competition. Ten percent of the participants won a prize or award in at least one competition.

The method of data collection was a quantitative survey. We obtained approval from the ethics board and solicited participation for this study by using a verbal script. The survey questions were generated from faculty members' experiences offering competitions to our students and faculty members' service on the departmental competitions committee. The completed surveys were submitted to a third party so that the participants would remain anonymous. The two components of the survey included self-directed learning and design competitions. Participants were asked to rate their competence as self-directed learners and the benefits of entering competitions. The self-directed learning component of the survey, adapted from Knowles (1975), included nine questions and was constructed using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from high skill to low skill level. In the design competition component, the 19 questions concerning potential benefits of entering competitions were constructed using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from agree to disagree.

One open-ended question was included in the survey for the participants to express ideas or experiences that the researchers had not considered. The open-ended question included: Is there anything about competitions that you wish to add that we haven't asked you? A limited number of participants generated responses to the open-ended question, and responses to this question were categorized by each of the authors to increase reliability.

Quantitative questions on the survey were compiled and analyzed in a computer file.
Percentage values were assigned to the numeric value entries.
Included in the data analysis were 57 participants that responded to the surveys out of a total of 100 students for a 57% response rate (S 1-40).

Research Findings

The results of the research study suggested that participants perceived that they developed high skill levels as self-directed learners as a result of completing projects for competitions and recognized the benefits of entering competitions. The participants were asked a series of questions related to self-directed learning and design competitions.

Self-Directed Learning

The nine questions in the self-directed learning component of the survey were adapted from Knowles (1975). The questions addressed the participants' skill development related to their experiences and activities completing competition projects. The 4-point Likert scale ranging from high skill to low skill level included:

1. Your experiences and activities related to competition projects has significantly developed the listed skill.
2. You have an average ability to use the listed skill, some development is needed.
3. You have a low ability to use the listed skill, development is needed.
4. You do not have or are unable to use the listed skill.

The majority of the participants positively rated their skill development as self-directed learners as a result of completing design competitions. Over 80% of the participants perceived that they had a high or average skill level for all nine skills listed in the self-directed survey component. Percentages ranging from 83.3% to 97.2% were determined by combining high skill level and average skill level responses.

The ability to commit to work on goals received the highest rating (70.3%) for self-directed skills developed by the participants and an average skill level rating of 18.9%. The majority of participants also assigned high skill level ratings to their ability to generate numerous ideas (high 62.1%, average 29.7%), conduct a self-assessment of their performance (high 56.7%, average 35.1%), question and problem solve (high 54.3%, average 42.9%), continually motivate themselves (high 54.1%, average 35.1%), and create original ideas (high 50%, average 33.3%). The participants' experiences and activities related to competition projects significantly helped develop the aforementioned skills. Two questions received an average skill rating by the majority of participants: the ability to look at data and choose relevant resources (55.6%) and the ability to transform learning needs into learning goals, plans, and activities to improve performance (52.8%). Some skill development may be needed for the participants that rated their skill level as average. The ability to conduct a self-assessment of their performance received a high skill level rating of 48.6% and an average skill level rating of 37.8 %.

Design Competitions

A total of 40 participants answered the design competition component of the survey.
Nineteen questions concerning potential benefits of entering competitions and the skills participants developed were constructed using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from agree to disagree. Findings from the competition component of the survey provided insight into several areas including: self-directed learning, competition benefits, and curriculum development.

Self-Directed Learning Questions

One hundred percent of the participants agreed or somewhat agreed that the benefits of entering competitions included taking responsibility for their learning and improving their independent decision-making skills. Ninety percent of the participants either agreed or somewhat agreed that they were intrinsically motivated to complete the competition. The majority of the participants (90.3%) rated that they experienced personal growth as a result of entering design competitions. Eighty-three percent of the participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they discovered how to achieve their personal goals. Students entering design competitions may have personal goals of completing the competition, building industry contacts, receiving monetary rewards, and gaining national or international recognition.

Competition Benefits Questions

The perceptions of participants that won competitions differed from their nonwinning counterparts in questions related to jobs, monetary rewards, and recognition. The participants were asked how many competitions they entered and the number of competitions they won. The number of competitions participants entered ranged from one to eight. Ten percent of the participants won a prize or award in at least one competition.

The majority of participants did not agree that competitions contributed to their job or career prospects. Participants rated the relevant questions as follows: received job opportunities (12.2% somewhat disagreed, 83.9% disagreed), received monetary rewards (6.7% somewhat disagreed, 80% disagreed), made industry contacts (16.2% somewhat disagreed, 77.4% disagreed), and received national and/or international exposure or recognition (10% somewhat disagreed, 66.7% disagreed). However, almost 97% of the participants agreed (75%) or somewhat agreed (21.9%) that they explored their creativity in competitions. The participants agreed (64.5%) or somewhat agreed (22.6%) that they completed garments, accessories, or sketches that contributed to their portfolios. In fashion professions the portfolio is a communication tool that helps promote and display students' creative endeavors, such as artwork, fashion illustrations, graphic designs, and garments. Portfolios accompany the r?sum? during the job interview process, showing samples of students' accomplishments and skills.

Over 81% of the participants agreed (46.9%) or somewhat agreed (34.4%) that they improved their design and technical skills. The acquisition of design and technical skills is important for graduates entering the work force, for example, pattern drafting, fashion illustration, garment construction, magazine editorial spreads, and graphic designs. The participants agreed (37.5%) or somewhat agreed (46.9%) that they improved their time management skills. Participants entering competitions spend numerous hours creating, developing, and completing the prototype for their design projects. Time spent on competitions often takes priority over class work. Individuals that are improving their time management skills establish project goals and plan deadlines.

Participants identified feedback from faculty members and industry as areas to improve in competitions. This result implies that the nature of feedback from advising faculty members and industry contacts needs to be considered. The participants somewhat disagreed (45.2%) and disagreed (32.2%) that they received valuable direction and feedback from faculty members that were monitoring competitions. Over 35% of the participants somewhat disagreed and 51% disagreed that they received valuable industry feedback.

Curriculum Development Questions

As a result of incorporating competitions into our curriculum, a number of issues related to completing competitions resulted in the following participants' responses: Participants were satisfied to enter competitions even though they might not win (77.4% agreed, 16.1% somewhat agreed), and participants did not experience a change in their grades while they completed competitions during the school year (46.7% agreed, 26.6% somewhat agreed). Fifty percent of the participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they had time to enter only competitions offered through courses. Over 93% of the participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they believed there should be additional competitions incorporated into courses.

Open-Ended Question

There were limited participants' responses to the open-ended question asked: Is there anything about competitions that you wish to add that we haven't asked you? Both authors developed themes of the participants' responses to increase reliability. The themes included communication, competition structure, and personal fulfillment.

Communication. Participants of the study identified areas of communication that needed improvement in design competitions. The participants stated:

- There should be more publicity for students. (S-11)
- I think students should be encouraged to enter competitions. Students shy away from competitions because they don't want their grades to drop. Instead of giving extensions the faculty

should really try to convey to the students that marks don't matter, and that we are here to learn and get a job. No one does this by getting good grades. People get jobs based on experience and contacts. (S-12)

- We never hear the outcomes. (S-13)
- There should be information posted in the school about competitions so that students are aware and know where to look. (S-20)
- I think we should receive emails about competitions because most of the time I didn't even hear about it until it was over. (S-23)
- I feel there is not enough advanced warning before competitions happen, with our busy schedule we do not have the time to enter. (S-24)
- I felt additional competitions should be added to the classes as projects. I did not know about a lot of competitions until they were over. I feel we should get emails about competitions, because posters are easy to miss. (S-30)
- I think that the competitions offered are an excellent way to get into the industry and make a name for yourself. The faculty should be motivated to encourage students to participate and seek this opportunity for individual and professional growth. (S-32)

The majority of the participants' comments referred to competitions offered outside of courses. In our program there is a competition bulletin board that provides information regarding competitions inside and outside the curriculum. However, the competitions committee needs to inform faculty members of upcoming competitions and the competition details available on the board. Faculty members can make class announcements regarding all aspects of competitions to assist in the communication process. Since email is one of the preferred methods of communication among today's youth, emailing students and faculty members regarding competition details would be a viable alternative or addition to the board postings. A competition website may be another consideration.

A number of students identified communication as a barrier in competitions. Some part-time faculty members have been instructors assigned to monitor the competition. Part-time faculty members are on campus a limited number of hours, and students have limited access to part-time faculty members outside of class time. An alternative would be assigning full-time faculty members to monitor the competitions, thus providing consistent direction and feedback to competition participants.

Competition structure. Participants of the study identified competition structure as an area that needed improvement in design competitions. The participants stated:

- There are not enough competitions. There should be a variety of competitions, not all should be women's eveningwear. (S-3)

- Make more competitions possible in classes for the lower year students. (S-15)
- I think that most of the competitions do not provide enough prizes to make competing worthwhile. (S-16)
- I think the sponsors are creating competitions to own the final designs taking fresh young designers' ideas and using them without having to pay. (S-23)

The competitions committee decided on the skills that were needed to complete the competitions incorporated into courses. Curriculum decisions were made based on course competencies, necessary skill levels to complete the competition requirements, and benefits to the students. The competitions that incurred the greatest amount of technical expertise and time management skills have been open to upper level students. The participants of this study were second- and third-year students; the second-year students may not be aware of the competitions in the upper level years of the program. Only 10% of the competition participants win first, second, and third place awards given by competition sponsors. The competition committee initiated contracts to protect the students, department, university, and sponsor outlining their expectations and responsibilities. The contents stipulated in detail the financial obligations of the sponsor such as royalties, financial compensation, and ownership of final designs.

Personal gains. Participants of the study identified personal gains from completing design competitions. The participants stated:

- Competitions allow a sense of achievement that goes beyond school boundaries. They can allow creativity that may not always be attainable within a strict school atmosphere. Overall, I find that entering competitions creates a very gratifying sense of fulfillment. (S-29)
- Competitions provide a place for students to be very creative and really go above and beyond the average entry and show what they have to offer. I think competitions are an excellent learning key that furthers our expectations of self and others. (S-39)

Competitions help individuals to develop skills such as the abilities to solve problems, generate numerous ideas, look at data and choose relevant resources, create original ideas, and conduct assessments of their performances. Self-directed learners may feel a sense of achievement or satisfaction that helps them attain their personal goals.

Conclusion and Further Research

The researchers' interests in competitions, self-directed learning, and curriculum development drove the study. The majority of the participants positively rated their skill development as self-directed learners as a result of completing design competitions. The

participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they explored their creativity in competitions, completed pieces that contributed to their portfolios, improved their design and technical skills, and improved their time management skills. The perceptions of participants that won competitions differed from their nonwinning counterparts in questions related to jobs, monetary rewards, and recognition. Participants identified feedback from faculty members and industry contacts as areas to improve in competitions. The main question guiding the study included: Do fashion students believe they developed the necessary skills to become self-directed learners? Our findings confirmed that participants in this study perceived they developed high to average skill levels as self-directed learners as a result of being participants in competitions.

One of the research questions included: What are students' ratings of their skill level as self-directed learners after completing design competitions? Over 80% of the participants perceived that they had developed a high or average skill level for all self-directed questions listed in the survey. The questions included the ability to commit to work on goals, generate numerous ideas, conduct a self-assessment, question and problem solve, continually motivate yourself, and create original ideas. Two questions received an average skill rating by the majority of participants: the ability to look at data and choose relevant resources; and the ability to transform learning needs into learning goals, plans, and activities to improve performance. There was limited evidence from previous studies to show the value of competitions to student learning. Incorporating competitions into the curriculum may provide opportunities for students to be self-directed learners, leading to lifelong learning.

The second research question was: What are students' ratings of design competition benefits? The participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they explored their creativity in competitions; completed garments, accessories, or sketches that contributed to their portfolios; improved their design and technical skills; and improved their time management skills.

Participants identified feedback from faculty members and industry contacts as areas needing development. Ways to improve feedback from faculty members and industry contacts may include assigning specific faculty members the responsibility for the direction and feedback provided to students and requiring industry contacts to present student feedback in written format. In addition, the departmental competitions committee may monitor the feedback.

The majority of participants did not agree that competitions contributed to job opportunities, monetary rewards, industry contacts, and national and/or international exposure or recognition. Students that won competitions reaped additional benefits from entering competitions, for example, national and/or international exposure or recognition, monetary rewards, industry contacts, and in some cases job opportunities. The difference in participant responses stems from

the competition winners receiving the aforementioned benefits.

Further research is warranted to examine important issues that were raised in our investigation. Soliciting participation from graduates that completed competitions may provide information about the benefits of participation in competitions and the link to career development. Generation of portfolios, prestige from winning, industry contacts, publicity, and numerous job opportunities could ultimately be connections to provide graduates with successful fashion industry careers. Asking graduates the same questions as the undergraduate participants in this study could provide additional support for the importance of incorporating competitions into the curriculum. Possible questions to consider adding into a graduate survey include:

- Are competitions a vehicle for launching careers or gaining employment in the fashion industry?
- What effect did competitions have on graduates' career development?
- What kinds of self-directed learning activities are graduates engaged in?

According to the findings of the study, over 93% of the participants believed that there should be additional competitions incorporated into courses even though only 10% of the participants win awards. Increasing the number of competitions in courses may cause the curriculum to be dictated by competitions, a concern of our faculty members. Students were interested in entering competitions and believed they developed a high skill level as self-directed learners. Over 93% of the participants in this study were satisfied to enter competitions even though they knew they might not win.

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Contents
