



## Lifelong learning in nursing: A Delphi study

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### SUMMARY

*Background:* In order to foster a culture of lifelong learning in nursing, it is important to identify what the concept means in the nursing profession as well as the characteristics of a lifelong learner.

*Objectives:* The purpose of this Delphi study was to conceptualize lifelong learning from the perspective of nursing, and to identify characteristics and essential elements of lifelong learning.

*Design and Method:* A Delphi Study technique in three phases was completed using an online survey tool. Data were analyzed for conceptual description, ratings of characteristics and attributes, and expert consensus in these three phases.

*Setting:* An online survey tool was used in this study.

*Participants:* Recognized experts in nursing education, administration and public policy participated in this study.

*Results:* Lifelong learning in nursing is defined as a dynamic process, which encompasses both personal and professional life. This learning process is also both formal and informal. Lifelong learning involves seeking and appreciating new worlds or ideas in order to gain a new perspective as well as questioning one's environment, knowledge, skills and interactions. The most essential characteristics of a lifelong learner are reflection, questioning, enjoying learning, understanding the dynamic nature of knowledge, and engaging in learning by actively seeking learning opportunities. Keeping the mind active is essential to both lifelong learning and being able to translate knowledge into the capacity to deliver high quality nursing care.

*Conclusions:* It is hoped that a clearer understanding of lifelong learning in nursing will foster more discussion and research about intentional, active inclusion of lifelong learning behaviors in nursing curricula.

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### Introduction

Lifelong learning has been clearly identified as an imperative for professional nursing. The Institute of Medicine *Institutes of Medicine* (2011) recommends that nurses engage in lifelong learning, and further, that healthcare organizations and schools of nursing create a culture of lifelong learning. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing and the National League for Nursing identify lifelong learning as an expectation for professional nursing practice ([NLN, 2011]). Advocates for radical transformation in nursing education acknowledge the importance of lifelong learning to nursing education and practice (Benner et al., 2010). However, no curricular elements to foster this culture have been identified. Furthermore, no assessment criteria for determining the achievement of lifelong learning outcomes have been established. Before this culture can be fostered, it is important to identify what the concept of lifelong learning means in the nursing profession as well as the characteristics of a lifelong learner.

Lifelong learning is defined in education as the “development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments” (Longworth and Davies, 2003 p. 22). The purpose of this Delphi study was to conceptualize lifelong learning from the perspective of nursing, and to identify characteristics and essential elements of lifelong learning.

### Review of Literature

Although lifelong learning is discussed at length in educational and philosophical literature, there is no clear understanding of how to promote lifelong learning nor are specific characteristics of the lifelong learner articulated. Lifelong learning is identified as necessary, but rather vaguely in nursing literature. Eason (2010) states that lifelong learning allows for development of critical thinking and supports introspection and detail in client care. A requisite to lifelong learning is not a cognitive capacity to learn, but the ability to recognize and understand information (Winch, 2008). Beyond this ability, the desire to learn, based on confidence in being able to conceptually infer, evaluate and appreciate what is learned is required. Independence (self-direction) as a learner is an attribute of successful lifelong learning (Winch, 2008; O'Shea, 2003; Ponton

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et al., 2005). This independence is built on confidence, patience, persistence, diligence, and attention to detail. Janssen et al. (2007) concur with the need for independent thought and add that lifelong learning also includes actively seeking a variety of sources in order for the learner to make informed choices.

While studying undergraduate college students' use of computers, Tan and Morris (2005) concluded that lifelong learning involves both formal and informal learning. This learning must include both content (knowledge) and the process of learning (acquisition of knowledge) over time. Tuijnman (2003) proposes that the process of acquisition of knowledge is the more important of the two and Boshier and Huang (2008) add that it is a basic human developmental activity. Indeed, lifelong learning is central to the concept of professionalism (Frost, 2001; Raidal and Volet, 2009).

Critical thinking and problem-based learning have been associated with lifelong learning. Currently nursing education programs believe that they are working toward problem-based learning and critical thinking exercises but entry level coursework is still primarily lecture-based learning leading to knowledge acquisition and application (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2010). Unfortunately, understanding of what constitutes a problem-based or critical thinking approach to learning is not universally understood. In addition, the term lifelong learning is often used synonymously with continuing education (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2010), and while continuing education can certainly be integral to life-long learning, it does not define it. Boulhuis (2003) discussed self-directed lifelong learning in terms of education, economics and society and concluded that the concept is so complex that a multi-dimensional approach to determining how to foster lifelong learning is warranted. Defining lifelong learning and determining the characteristics of a lifelong learner are necessary to determine how to foster this attribute which is deemed so important to the profession of nursing.

## Methodology

This study was conducted using the Delphi method. The Delphi method is appropriate to develop a range of possible responses, to explore underlying assumptions that would lead to different judgments, to seek information which may generate a consensus, and to correlate informed judgments (Delbecq et al., 1975). After approval from the Institutional Review Board, the researchers identified thirty potential participants through a current review of the literature and major nursing organizations. Publishing in the area of nursing education, participation in national and international nursing policy workgroups related to nursing education, and leadership in major nursing organizations were the criteria for inclusion. Recognized experts were selected to participate because of their contributions to nursing education, administration, clinical practice and public policy in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Introductory letters were sent to the selected participants to inform them of their selection to participate and the expectations if they decided to participate. Participants were also provided the opportunity to decline to participate by contacting the researchers and requesting that no further correspondence be sent. No such requests were received. Participants were asked to identify others who might have expertise or interest in participating in the study. Three additional contacts were made based on this request. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that responses would be treated confidentially. If participants wanted their names associated with their comments in any publication of the work, they had the option to consent to being identified in the first phase of the study.

Survey Monkey™ was used as the vehicle for distribution of the questionnaires. Participants were provided the link to the questionnaires through e-mail correspondence. The study had three distinct phases. Phase 1 of the study included the distribution of the first questionnaire that consisted of three, open-ended statements/questions. These prompted responses about general conceptualizations of the

meaning of lifelong learning and the characteristic behaviors of lifelong learners. These prompts were, "Describe your conceptualization of lifelong learning"; "What are the characteristics and/or behaviors of lifelong learners?" and, "What is essential for lifelong learning?" The researchers gleaned the responses for those that were mentioned frequently and those that were similar. In those cases, the researchers analyzed the responses for the essential qualities and collapsed them into statements that retained their collective conceptual meaning. Unique responses were also identified, analyzed and statements were developed that captured their meaning.

In phase two of the study, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the characteristics and attributes identified through phase one using a four-point, Likert-type scale. Descriptive statistics were used to rank the responses to the second questionnaire. In phase three of the study, the rankings were distributed to participants. Participants were asked to respond to the results by adding what they believed was missing or reconsidering the second round responses by commenting. The third round of responses was analyzed to determine areas of consensus among the expert participants.

## Results

A total of 38 introductory letters were sent. Of those, respondents (N = 12) to the lifelong learning Delphi study self-identified as having multiple areas of expertise: nursing education (n = 12), administration (n = 7), research (n = 3), clinical practice (n = 4), theory (n = 4), policy (n = 5) and health futures (n = 1). These experts described their conceptualization of lifelong learning in terms of both a personal and professional commitment. While the responses varied, several responses appeared to have common components. Table 1 provides a full list of concepts gleaned from the responses to conceptualization of lifelong learning along with mean ratings on a Likert-type scale of 1–5 with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.

Respondents were then asked to rate level of agreement with characteristics or behaviors of lifelong learning (1 = strong disagreement and 5 = strong agreement) which were identified from their responses in round 1. These characteristics and behaviors are listed in Table 2. Finally, the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) with a list of statements derived from the first round as important to lifelong learning. These statements, along with level of agreement with these statements are presented in Table 3.

The concepts, characteristics and behaviors rate in round 2 of the study were analyzed, using the rating of 5.0 as being most essential to life-long learning. These data were then presented to the respondents again, in round 3 of the study for ranking the most essential concepts, characteristics and behaviors of lifelong learning. Concepts ranked as most essential for defining lifelong learning, with 1 being ranked highest are presented in Table 4. Characteristics and behaviors of a person engaged in lifelong learning were ranked, with 1 being the most important, and are presented in Table 5.

In the third round, respondents were also asked to comment on the statements which were identified as important to the experience and development of lifelong learning. The comments all alluded to the importance of reflection to lifelong learning as well as the importance of both practice and scholarly communities to foster lifelong learning, with the goal of best serving the community within nurses' care.

Two exemplars of these ideas eloquently sum up the importance of lifelong learning to nursing:

Lifelong learners find learning in all they do. If faced with a tradition, values, or mores, they contemplate how what they are facing fits within their own framework...then they are able to integrate others' points of view in their community and understand perceptions, concepts and behaviors that may be different from their own because of the learning they acquired.

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