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## Students' self-education: learning to learn across the lifespan

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### Abstract

A successful learner in the modern society should be able to integrate knowledge from different sources, educate and self-educate throughout the life in order to be competitive in an increasingly globalized labor market. To involve students in self-education process and encourage their independence in learning we have developed an elective course for students "Learning to learn across the lifespan". It involves studying three modules: designing students' individual educational route; designing European Language Portfolio; developing students' ability to work with different sources of information.

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*Keywords:* international integration; self-educational paradigm; learning to learn; an individual educational route; European Language Portfolio

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### 1. Introduction

The major task of modern education is to actively involve students in self-education process and encourage their independence in learning process. A successful learner in the modern society should be able to integrate knowledge from different sources, educate and self-educate throughout the life in order to be competitive in an increasingly globalized labor market.

Today we observe a shift from teacher-centered education to student-centered learning that actualizes the necessity to develop students' ability to learn and self-educate. The term student-centered learning describes learning situations in which learners are expected to take responsibility for identifying and agreeing objectives, planning and implementing their own learning activities. We consider that student-centered learning is focused on each student's interests, abilities, and learning styles; it allows them to actively participate in discovery learning processes from an autonomous viewpoint. Weimer (2002) identifies learner-centered teaching as encompassing five changes to practice: shifting the balance of classroom power from teacher to student; designing content as a means to building

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knowledge rather than a 'knowledge end' in itself; positioning the teacher as facilitator and contributor, rather than director and source of knowledge; shifting responsibility for learning from teacher to learner; and promoting learning through effective assessment. Learner-centered education is directly related to the concept of self-directed learning which means that teachers meet the needs and aspirations of students at all levels, from elementary to post-graduate and throughout their lives, in developing their cognition, emotions, behaviors, life skills, and citizenship qualities (Serdyukov and Hill, 2013).

The essence of self-education is regarded from different perspectives. According to Moore (1984) self-education is the extent to which in the teaching-learning relationship, it is the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning procedures and resources, and the evaluation decisions of the learning program. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) consider that self-directed learning activities cannot be divorced from the social context in which they occur because the social context provides the arena in which the activity of self-direction is played out. They call for more attention to the way in which global and cross-cultural factors frame this activity. Huey B. Long (1992) in turn believes that successful, self-directed learners can be described by two psychological attributes. The first, personality traits, is associated with personality: self-confidence, inner directed, achievement motivated. The second psychological attribute Huey B. Long relates to cognition. Assuming the individual has a moderate allocation of the identified personality attributes, at least six kinds of cognitive skills appear to be particularly important in successful self-directed learning. They are as follows: goal setting skills; processing skills; other cognitive skills; some competence or aptitude in the topic or a closely related area; decision making skills; self-awareness. Knowles (1975) put forward three immediate reasons for self-directed learning. First he argued that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the teachers' feet passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners). He underlined that they enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation, tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners. A second reason is that self-directed learning is more in tune with natural processes of psychological development. An essential aspect of maturing is developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our own lives - to become increasingly self-directed. A third immediate reason is that many of the new developments in education put a heavy responsibility on the learners to take a good deal of initiative in their own learning (Knowles, 1975).

Analysis of modern Russian pedagogical literature allowed us to identify several approaches to the concept of self-education: self-education in the context of lifelong learning theory; self-education in the theories and concepts of personnel training and professional development; self-education in sociological research; self-education in the context of pedagogical and social psychology (Sagitova, 2010). Having analyzed different definitions of the term "self-education" in Russian and foreign pedagogical references and encyclopedias it can be summarized as a purposeful cognitive activity, managed by the learner himself/herself and aimed at achieving certain personal and socially significant educational goals.

## **2. Self-education in the context of lifelong learning**

We live in a global world where knowledge and work is changing so rapidly that people have to learn continually. Self-education is one of the most important conditions of lifelong learning and has become a real need of each person.

The role of students' self-education has become stronger since the realization in the Russian higher educational system the main provisions of the Bologna Process, which have led the transition from educational paradigm to self-educational paradigm. Today in the Russian system of higher education there is the process of establishing a multi-level (three-cycle) system by the formula "bachelor-master-doctorate". The Dublin Descriptors presented in 2003 and adopted in 2005 (the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area), offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a (Bologna) cycle or level. The descriptors are phrased in terms of competence levels enable to distinguish in a broad and general manner between the different cycles. A level descriptor includes the following five components: knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgments; communication; lifelong learning skills. Thus in the last component - lifelong learning skills we can see the following differentiating between cycles (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005):

Learning skills:

1. (Bachelor) have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.
2. (Master) have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.
3. (Doctorate) expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

We can see that in programs of a bachelor degree there has to be a balance between special knowledge and general skills with the emphasis on further studies with autonomy. In magistracy programs it is underlined that students must have the learning skills that allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous. And at a doctorate level students are expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005).

### **3. The concept of the course learning to learn across the lifespan**

We are keen to talk to students about the importance of becoming autonomous learners. But just telling students that autonomy is in some way a good thing will have little effect unless it is a part of wider course design – and unless we find ways of helping students to become more independent (Harmer, 2007). One of the ways of helping students to become more independent is an elective course called “Learning to learn across the lifespan” which we have developed for the students of International Relations Department at Kazan Federal University.

The elective course includes studying three modules: designing students’ individual educational route; creating European Language Portfolio; developing students’ ability to work with different sources of information. The main aim of the elective course is to develop students’ ability to self-educate and to learn across the lifespan. While studying this course students have to learn to organize their self-education, manage the effective ways and methods of self-education, design an individual educational route, create the European Language Portfolio and work with different sources of information. The course includes 36 hours of teaching, consisting of 8 hours of lectures and 16 hours of practical classes, and 8 hours of individual tutorial.

The first module of the elective course is focused on the designing student’s individual educational route as one of the forms of student’s self-education. We are convinced that designing student’s individual educational route promotes students to learn forms and methods of self-education: students acquire the ability to design their educational and self-educational activity, properly manage their time, productively work with educational material and monitor the results of work. We regard individual educational route as purposefully planned individual educational program which provides students with the subject position of educational activity and promotes the formation of their self-education on the basis of psychological and pedagogical support (Sagitova, 2011). Designing individual educational route includes several stages. At the first stage students get acquainted with a discipline and its topics. At this stage, students present their trajectory in the form of a graph with the starting point of their level of competence in this discipline. On the same graph students indicate the desired level which they want to achieve while studying the discipline. This level should not be lower than the baseline of the discipline stipulated by the program. At the next stage of designing individual educational route students consult their lecturer (tutor), make a plan, choose the form of individual learning strategies, think over their final educational products and forms of presentation, establish a system of monitoring and evaluation of their activities. Together with their lecturer (tutor) they develop “Individual technological map of a discipline” (Appendix 1) which reflects individual educational route designed for study of the discipline. At the third stage of designing individual educational route students carry out individual tasks using different means, training materials, facilities of resource centers, laboratories, computer classes and Internet. At this stage the role of a lecture (tutor) is particularly important. He/she helps students to organize their activities, choose appropriate literature, techniques and methods of work, and also promotes the development of their ability to self-analysis and self-esteem. The last stage of designing individual educational route includes summarizing of students’ work on the studied discipline. Students together with their lecturer (tutor) analyze and evaluate their work, identify errors and omissions. At this stage, indicators of individual educational route which has been designed at the beginning of the studied discipline are mapped with the actual indicators

obtained by students at the end of the course. Thus, we believe that individual educational route in terms of international educational integration is one of the forms of students' self-education development which will help them properly organize their lifelong learning.

As most of the students of International Relations Department have been studying two or more foreign languages and have expressed their willingness to design language portfolio the second module of our elective course is devoted to the European Language Portfolio. The European Language Portfolio is connected with the Common European Framework (CEF, 2001) as a pedagogical language learning and reporting instrument. It allows students to maintain a record of their language learning experience, both formal and informal. According to the Principles and Guidelines accepted by the Educational Committee of the Council of Europe, the European Language Portfolio is a tool to promote learner autonomy (Council of Europe, 2006). We are convinced that language portfolio offers new possibilities for supporting self-directed language learning by providing tools for evaluating the learning processes and outcomes. While studying this module students are introduced with the structure of the European Language Portfolio which consists of three parts: the language passport, the language biography and the dossier. The Language Passport section provides an overview of students' proficiency in different languages at a given point of time, evaluated according to the skills and the levels of proficiency in the Common European Framework. Here students record formal qualifications, language competences and significant language and intercultural experiences. This part of language portfolio includes information on partial and specific competence (e.g. spoken language skills, or specific content areas). The Language Biography facilitates the students' involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing their learning process and progress. It encourages learners to state what they can do in each language and to include information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts. It is also organized to promote plurilingualism, i.e. the development of an underlying unified competence in a number of languages. Here we include a list of assessment of language skills in relation to global descriptors (Appendix 2) for self-assessment, teacher assessment. The Dossier offers students the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Passport or Biography. In this part students are invited to select samples of their own work to show growth and learning over time. Each selected work is usually accompanied by a brief commentary and analysis, identifying its positive and negative sides. We believe that language portfolio will help students to manage their own learning, to support learning how to learn, and thus to foster the development of lifelong learning skills.

The third module of the elective course includes techniques of working with different sources of information which will help students to develop more independence and become more effective learners. Today, there is an open access to many educational websites where students can find the best audio and video materials for their education and self-education. Modern students have an opportunity to listen to lectures of the best university scientists all over the world, which certainly promotes effective development of their self-education. Successful students should possess modern methods and techniques of searching, collecting, information processing; students should be able to use reference materials of different types (dictionaries, encyclopedias), catalogs in libraries and compile bibliographic records and lists. That's why the main task of this module is to equip students with different self-education techniques on working with educational information, IT technologies and multimedia resources.

#### **4. Conclusion**

At the end of the elective course students should be able to demonstrate self-education skills and abilities which can be formed into three basic groups:

1. The first group consists of skills and abilities of independent learning activity/organization: ability to identify educational needs, define appropriate tasks according to self-education activities and draw up a program (plan) of self-education; rationally organize education and self-education activities, manage time and place; choose the appropriate learning materials, methods and techniques of self-education; carry out self-control and self-esteem.
2. The second group contains skills and abilities of getting information from different sources: ability to search, analyze, select, organize, process information; use reference materials of different types, catalogs in libraries, compile bibliographic records and lists; read professional terms.

3. The third group includes skills and abilities related with cognitive activity: ability to define logical, chronological sequence of facts; reproduce information, make comparison, analysis, synthesis, summarizing, and classification; carry out interdisciplinary communication and systematize them; integrate knowledge.

We believe that this elective course will effectively prepare students for further self-education and lifelong learning and help them be competitive in an increasingly globalized labor market.

**Appendix A. Individual technological map of a discipline**

Student's name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Department \_\_\_\_\_  
 Course \_\_\_\_\_  
 Group № \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Course (Discipline) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Level of Education (Bachelor, Master) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Number of credits \_\_\_\_\_

Compulsory modules	Forms of work	Dates of studying a module	Independent work	Control / Self-control
Module 1 "Theme" Theme 1 "Title" Theme 2 "Title" Theme 3 "Title"	Group work/Team work (project) Report presentation development Press review Compilation of test questions Individual homework Written work (classroom) Testing			
Individual consultation time: Lecturer's e-mail:				
Additional modules	Forms of work	Dates of studying a module	Independent work	Control / Self-control
Module 1 Theme 1 "Title" Theme 2 "Title" Theme 3 "Title"	Group work (project) Report presentation development Press review Compilation of test questions Individual homework Written work (classroom) Testing			
Individual consultation time: Lecturer's e-mail:				

Conclusion about the effectiveness of student development of individual educational route:  
 Progress \_\_\_\_\_  
 Failures and problems \_\_\_\_\_  
 Causes of problems \_\_\_\_\_  
 Recommendations for adjustments of individual educational route: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Lecturer's name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Approved at the department meeting // date// month//year // \_\_\_\_\_  
 Department chair \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B. Assessment of language skills in relation to global descriptors**

	A1 (Breakthrough)			A2 (Waystage)			B1 (Threshold)			B2 (Vantage)			C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency)		
	With a lot of help	With a little help	With no help	With a lot of help	With a little help	With no help	With a lot of help	With a little help	With no help	With a lot of help	With a little help	With no help	With a lot of help	With a little help	With no help
	<b>2013– 2014(Self Assessment)</b>														
Listening															
Reading															
Spoken interaction															
Spoken Production															
Writing															
	<b>2013-2014 (Teacher’s Assessment)</b>														
Listening															
Reading															
Spoken interaction															
Spoken production															
Writing															

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