Student Autonomy in Online Learning

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Abstract: Online learning has opened up rich opportunities for unlimited, life-long learning. Continuous professional development, retooling and upgrading expected from members of the knowledge society count on an individual's developed ability to learn independently. Research suggests a self-sufficient, autonomous learner is more efficient than teacher-dependent student. Though online education offers students significantly greater choices and more freedoms for independent learning compared to traditional campus-based programs, college education based on instructor-centered teaching approach still rigidly controls both the learning content and process thus restricting students' initiative and flexibility. On the other hand, there are many students who do not possess the necessary independent study skills and dispositions, and are fearful of engaging in independent learning. Online learner autonomy, however, is critical for a person's continuous development and learning efficiency, and the present research investigates students' perceptions on the matter suggesting ways to promote students independence within a college class.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is critical for the 21st century knowledge society that the educational system cultivates autonomous, life-long learners capable of independently constructing knowledge and developing skills to effectively adapt to changing markets and compete in a challenging global environment. According to Hargreaves (2003, 65), "the things most prized in a knowledge economy - creativity, spontaneity, deep understanding, critical thinking and the development of multiple forms of collective intelligence" are the qualities that only a conscious, autonomous learner possesses.

Adult learners, who make up the majority of online classes, have an acute need and considerable motivation for independence (Merriam, 2001). Knowles (1975) suggests that adults are intrinsically motivated by internal incentives and curiosity, rather than external rewards. Intrinsic motivation is the key to independent learning (Gagne and Deci, 2005). Therefore adults more than any other category of learners deserve freedom in online classes. The reality of college education, regrettably, demonstrates the opposite.

Creating conditions for nurturing an independent, autonomous learner in web-based knowledge environments, particularly in online college courses, requires a change in pedagogic perceptions, certain methodological modifications, new understanding of the instructors' and learner's roles, superior dispositions and advanced skills both from the instructor and the students. Those dispositions and skills for students include accountability for their own learning, capability to reflect on and critically assess their own learning, and confidence in their abilities, which is supported by their strong learning habits and experiences. In addition, students' basic readiness, which includes a set of fundamental skills and various literacies, is vital for successful autonomous learning.

The current paper attempts to identify major factors affecting students' independence and autonomy in online college classes, presents the current authors' findings, both theoretical and practical, on college students' autonomy from the research conducted in online postgraduate teacher preparation programs at National University, USA in 2012, and offers some insights into student independence and autonomy, as well as into student learning in general.

2 LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

One of the ultimate goals of any educational system is to develop autonomous, life-long learners who are capable of both independently and collaboratively resolving life and job problems (Hargreaves, 2003). Such a goal can be achieved through fostering learner autonomy, which Moore (1984) defined as "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" (p. 85). Autonomous learners are more successful learners who achieve their learning outcomes with the best efficacy (Albert, 2007).

Autonomy in learning is immediately related to innovation, creativity and self-efficacy. Buvoltz (2008) argues that promoting student autonomy is pedagogically sound, especially with regard to adult learners.

Developing student independence and autonomy in learning is thus one of the major tasks of education (Bembenutty, 2011), (Dillner, 2005), however little has been done to implement it. Everything interferes with this task in the college: the curriculum, course syllabus, course structure, instructor's authority, teaching habits and tradition of classroom management and control; finally, educational standards and formal tests. The regulations and practices of organized class provide students with poor preparation for highly innovative, flexible and team-based knowledge economy where routine is the enemy of innovation and risk (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 14).

The CIEL Handbook states, "Learner autonomy indicates a number of dimensions in which learners move away from dependence on the teacher and:
- Take responsibility for their own learning and learn to learn;
- Involve themselves in an interactive process in which they set short and long term learning objectives, reflect on and evaluate progress" (CIEL Handbook, 2000, p.5).

Such an approach requires a new vision of teaching and learning where the focus will be on helping students maximize their autonomy. This leads to the idea of learner-centered education which is directly related to the principles originating from the views of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, and to the concept of independent or self-directed learning (Hiemstra, 1982). The principle of learner autonomy correlates with learner-centeredness of education, social constructivism and collaborative approach.

Online learning by definition is a form of independent study, even if an institution delivers it, and promotes self-directed learning due to its own nature. An online learner, being separated from the school and instructor by space and time, gains the benefits of a more convenient self-study environment, individual learning style and pace, flexibility of scheduling, together with access to unlimited internet resources, but loses organized, mandatory, bonding face-to-face classroom activities (Serdyukov and Serdyukova, 2012, 42), which may affect their ability for autonomous learning.

Regrettably, online students generally have limited communication with the instructor, fewer opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers, do not usually have continuous and engaging face-to-face interactions with other participants of the learning community, and do not receive critically important instantaneous feedback, which is readily available in a live classroom environment. Moreover, lack of F2F interactions does not foster the development of personal relationships in the class, which inhibits the feeling of belonging to a community and trust among peers. This may negatively affect learning outcomes as learning is a social activity which requires participation in a social group (class) and interaction with members of the group (Vygotsky, 1962), (Bandura, 1997).

ClassLivePro, SKYPE and other telecommunication technologies may partially ameliorate this situation, however they do not significantly compensate for the dearth of true connection. Another option to develop a learning community is offered in blended or hybrid classes. Yet, the necessity to attend live classes at scheduled times definitely restricts student independence and undermines the asynchronous learning mode.

Social networking presents a unique opportunity for independent, flexible and collaborative learning providing students with an individual learning space and communication capabilities outside rigid course frameworks. Moving a part of the learning process into the freedom of social networking is a viable option for boosting independent learning, at the same time integrating the student in a rich communal space. The new model of contemporary learning can be portrayed as a loose organization of a number of stakeholders, where a student remains autonomous even when connected to the college and instructor, while participating together with other students in the external learning community created for a particular course.

3 INVESTIGATION OF ONLINE STUDENT INDEPENDENCE

One of the goals of contemporary technology-based education is to engage students in truly independent, life-long learning where the motivation is to attain excellence in learning that leads to higher performance on the job. To understand what contributes to and what interferes with independent learning in online classes we investigated students' attitudes and self-evaluations related to independent learning. A survey was designed for this study and run in 14 groups of the postgraduate teacher education program in the School of Education at National University in 2012 using a specially developed questionnaire that addressed key issues affecting student independence and autonomy in online classes. In all 65 students completed the questionnaire. Sample standard deviation was calculated for the first two sets of data (tables 1 and 2). The present paper will focus on the survey's major findings.

First, students were asked two questions:

1. Do you prefer to learn *on your own* (*independently, without enrolling in a college program*) or in an *organized college class*? (learning format)
2. When you take a college class, do you prefer to study *alone (independently)* or to *collaborate with others*? (learning style)

According to the responses to the first question (Table 1), the majority of students – 62.0% prefer to take organized college classes, and only 34.9% would prefer to learn independently, outside college, while 3.1% would be comfortable in either format of learning. It appears working adult students are generally not enthusiastic about learning independently.

Table 1: Student preferences for the learning format (%).

Options\Format	Independent learning	Organized learning	Both
Preference	34.9	62.0	3.1

(Sample standard deviation = 3.4)

Based on their responses discussed further, many students obviously rely on a straightforward course structure and unambiguous organization of the class, direct leadership, support and even pressure from the instructor. So they are willing to trade the benefits of independent study for the security of instructor-facilitated class, thus demonstrating their dependence on outside factors for their success rather than on their own skills and abilities. It may

be suggested that in an online learning environment, where they study predominantly autonomously due to its nature, some students feel lost and unsure of their ability to cope with course demands. The need in externally imposed structure, organization and obligation might be explained by students' lack of confidence in their abilities to accomplish their learning independently which comes, as the survey demonstrated, from poor learning habits and time management skills, lack of diligence, persistence and effort, as well as insufficient learning skills (reading, writing, critical thinking, and research), low motivation, deficient self-evaluation and scant support from family and employers.

Surprisingly, within a college class 76.9% of the same students prefer to study independently, while only 18.5 % do not mind collaborating with their peers and even fewer, 4.6%, enjoy both options (Table 2).

Table 2: Student preferences for the learning style (%).

Options\Style	Independent learning	Collaboration	Both
Preference	76.9	18.5	4.6

(Sample standard deviation = 5.1)

These numbers imply that even when students are taking an organized, instructor-facilitated class, the majority of them prefer to do their work individually. This was quite an unexpected finding in view of the growing trend for collaboration and cooperation in college education. Team work, according to students' responses, is fraught with difficulty in organizing and managing and characterized by distraction and uncertainly. Moreover, students do not have confidence in their potential partners and feel uncomfortable to depend on the people they don't know.

So, though the majority of students prefer to take classes in an organized university program, an even higher percentage of them try to avoid studying collaboratively and prefer to work independently. This paradox may be a manifestation of students' individualism which, however, is not equivalent to autonomy supported by self-sufficiency and self-efficacy. Therefore these students count on the college and instructor for guidance and support, while rejecting collaboration for fear of being failed by potential partners.

Current research identified a number of challenges students face in learning that interfere with their success the class. Students expect a clear structure and organization of the course; reasonable, meaningful and explicit course requirements and expectations, and the instructor's more effective and

personalized teaching style. At the same time, students point to their own flaws that affect their learning, such as attention issues, poor time management skills, low motivation, lack of confidence and independent learning skills.

The current research showed the ways to make significant improvement in the courses to develop student autonomy:

- Fewer restrictions and prescriptions of what and how to do;
- The right for students to critically review the course, offer suggestions for its improvement, identify their personal goals and participate in defining their own learning trajectory;
- Meaningful, developmental and creative assignments that do not impose heavy constraints on implementation;
- Availability of continuous, open and productive interactions, relationships, communication and collaborative group work in the class;
- Effective, specific, clear and prompt assessment of student performance, supportive feedback and objective evaluation together with effective self-assessment and reflection;
- Opportunities to offer and execute their initiatives in the course, modify some assignments, freely select implementation strategies, suggest their own activities, apply their professional and life experiences, and take part in situations requiring their demonstration of leadership qualities;
- A space outside the course where students can communicate and collaborate on course assignments through social networking.

The instructor's responsibility is to provide continuous individual support and guidance in developing student autonomy through effective facilitation the interactions in the course. There are numerous other opportunities in online classes to offer students learning tasks and activities that foster their independence.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Developing autonomous learners is clearly one of the main goals of education, particularly at the college level. As the current research demonstrates, however, the majority of our online students prefer organized, teacher-facilitated college classes to independent learning. At the same time, within collective college group environments the greater part of students prefers to study individually. In both cases many students lack self-confidence as well as trust in their classmates. Research also points to an inadequate student preparation for advanced college studies and, in some cases, flawed dispositions.

Further research involving students of various levels of study (undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate) will help identify other critical factors as well as effective methodological tools and techniques that are instrumental for enhancing students' autonomy in online college classes. The effect of social networking in college education on encouraging student autonomy deserves special attention.

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