

ADULT STUDENTS' AUTONOMY: LITERATURE OVERVIEW

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The paper presents the overview of literature on adult students' autonomy in higher education and distance education environments. It has been concluded that the word "autonomous" is used in two basic meanings in a narrow and wide sense: a person who can arrange and organise his/her learning environment without help, directions and guidance; and an intellectual ability to be confident and bold with one's own ideas rather than to be well organized.

Key words: adult learning, adult student, autonomy, autonomous learning.

АВТОНОМІЯ ДОРОСЛИХ СТУДЕНТІВ: ОГЛЯД ЗАРУБІЖНОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ

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Представлено огляд зарубіжної літератури з автономії дорослих студентів у вищій та дистанційній освіті. Аналіз дозволив дійти висновку, що поняття «автономний» використовується у двох основних значеннях – у вузькому й широкому сенсі: людина, яка може організувати і організовує своє навчальне середовище без сторонньої допомоги, керівництва та контролю; та інтелектуальні здібності для упевненості й сміливості щодо своїх власних ідей.

Ключові слова: навчання дорослих, дорослі студенти, автономія, автономне навчання.

PROBLEM STATEMENT. Over the last decades, the idea of learner autonomy has taken a core position as the responsibility for learning has shifted from the teacher to the learner. This paradigm shift is less driven by rote memorization of facts than traditional models. The learner-centered paradigm intends to promote the goals of learner autonomy and self-directed learning envisioned as the ultimate goal of adult education. So the education processes in formal learning environments must seek to develop attitudes that foster the development of autonomous lifelong learners. According to Canadian scholars C. Bereiter and M. Scardamalia, successful learning is not simply a matter of attending classes but rather the act of intentionally making learning itself a goal instead of an incidental means to an end. Helping individuals become successful learners requires supporting and nurturing the intentions necessary for lifelong learning. An individual's behavioral intentions to learn are dependent upon a wide variety of characteristics that include learning styles, prior experience, perceptions of the learning environment, and other factors. We agree with G. Confessore, who concluded that autonomous learning manifests in individuals who feel the need to learn and who then utilize internal and external resources, both human and material, to enhance their efforts [6].

It should be noted the problem of learners' autonomy has been investigated by many scholars all over the world, such as P. Benson, D. Boud, Ph. Candy, P. Carr, G. Confessore, L. Dam, M. Derric, H. Holec, B. Holmberg, D. Little, E. Park, M. Ponton and others.

In our paper we try to make an analysis of literature on the problem of learners' autonomy to make clear this concept and relate it to other important concepts of adults learning.

Learner autonomy is defined as the characteristic of the individual who exhibits agency (i.e. acts done intentionally) [1] or intentional behavior with respect to learning activities [16]. Further, learner autonomy can be perceived as the personal or individual characteristics leading to the behaviors or processes of autonomous learning. M. Ponton [15] and P. Carr [5] differentiate between learner autonomy and self-directedness as personal psychosocial dispositions, and on the other hand, autonomous learning and self-directed learning as observable behaviors. According to G. Confessore and E. Park, learner autonomy focusses on understanding the capacity to productively participate in learning experiences [7]. This capacity consists of a range of functional learner autonomy that is bounded by two relatively dysfunctional learner states, which are dysfunctional learner dependence and dysfunctional learner independence. G. Confessore and E. Park postulate that functional learner autonomy is a range of ability and willingness to participate in selecting and shaping learning experiences in which the learner may function independently or in concert with others [ibid.]. Finally, the degree to which an individual is engaged in functional learner autonomy is expressed in the extent that the learner optimizes the learning process by making efficient and appropriate use of their personal resources and the resources of others.

The word "autonomy", with its overtones of independence and self-determination, invites a focus on the individual rather than the group, which is no doubt responsible for the widespread misconception that learner autonomy is essentially a matter of learning without a teacher. Particularly in universities this misconception has been further encouraged by the frequent discussion of learner autonomy in relation to self-accessed learning, where learners work on their own, at their own speed, and according to their own understanding of their needs [10, p. 77-88].

French scholar H. Holec describes the autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". On a general note, the term "autonomy" has come to be used in at least five ways:

- for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning [2, p. 2].

It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process. The relevant literature is riddled with innumerable definitions of autonomy and other synonyms for it, such as "independence", "self-direction", "andragogy"

etc., which testifies to the importance attached to it by scholars.

In D. Little's terms, learner autonomy is “essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning – a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action”[12, p. 4]. It is not something done to learners; therefore, it is far from being another teaching method (ibid.). In the same vein, L. Dam defines autonomy in terms of the learners willingness and capacity to control or oversee their own learning [8].

More specifically L. Dam holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation. To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes a (pro-)active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, D., Kohonen, V., Knowles, M.). As we see, this line of reasoning operates within, and is congruent with, the theory of constructivism.

Ph. Candy in his book “Self-direction for Lifelong Learning” gives various points of view on the problem of autonomous learner. Within the context of education, due to C. Rathbone the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world. Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorisation; “it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events”[4, p. 271].

The Director of Centre for Promoting Learner Autonomy in the Sheffield Hallam University I. Moor considers that conceptualising learner autonomy involves two factors:

1. An autonomous learner has developed the capacity to take at least some control over their learning; and
2. The learning environment provides opportunities for the learner to take control of their learning.

Developing capacity requires a set of personal qualities: confidence, motivation, taking and accepting responsibility, and ability to take initiative. It also involves a set of skills: academic, intellectual, personal and interpersonal.

Within the context of Higher Education, effective autonomous learning requires the learner to have an appropriate conceptual stance towards their learning, which leads to an appropriate orientation to learning. In addition, learning is a social activity, and socializing their learning requires learners to recognize the benefits of working with others and to be able to share and negotiate with other learners. The employability agenda within Higher Education also requires learners to develop appropriate professional skills and the diverse nature of the student body requires learners to recognize difference. This involves developing tolerance, empathy and understanding of other values and cultures; and to be able to explain, discuss and negotiate in an acceptable manner.

The Sheffield Hallam University definition of learner autonomy starts with the

premise that an autonomous learner takes responsibility for his/her own learning. In doing this:

- they can identify: their learning goals (what they need to learn), their learning processes (how they will learn it), and how they will evaluate and use their learning;
- they have well-founded conceptions of learning;
- they have a range of learning approaches and skills;
- they can organize their learning;
- they have good information processing skills;
- they are well motivated to learn [13].

Without doubt the problem of learner autonomy is very topical in the area of distance education. So H. Hermod of Sweden and W. Lighty of the USA based their arguments in favour of autonomy on the special character of the adult distance students they worked with. They paid attention to the life and work situations and to the maturity of the students. They insisted on freedom for students to arrange their learning as it suited them, to start, interrupt, pace and finish study as they saw fit. Thus H. Hermod repeatedly described the distance student as constituting “a class of his own”. Both H. Hermod and W. Lighty advocated initialization and promotion of autonomy within the framework of pre-produced distance education courses [9].

Several scholars have tried to identify and promote independence, among them M. Moore and F. Saba. M. Moore at an early stage conceptualized autonomy, his word for independence, distance, dialogue and structure. The latter three concepts used to qualify degrees of autonomy. Due to M. Moore autonomy is the extent to which the learner in an educational program is able to determine the selection of objectives, resources and evaluation procedures. Distance in an educational program is a function of dialogue and structure. Structure is the extent to which the objectives, implementation procedures of the teaching program can be adapted to meet the specific objectives, implementation plans and evaluation methods of a particular student’s learning program. Dialogue is the extent to which interaction between learners and teacher is possible [14, p. 33].

Really far-reaching student autonomy would imply not only complete flexibility and independence for students in the process of study but also the right and possibility to decide the learning content. This freedom is usually a fact in so far as students can choose courses. Only in exceptional cases it is possible for a student to select his or her own study objectives. It is technically possible to provide a wide range of study opportunities, with clearly defined study objectives for each small unit, and to offer a completely free choice of such units in individual combinations, but this hardly occurs in practice. Constructive approaches which engage students in the selection of objectives were developed at an early stage by Potvin and E. Ljosa and K. Sandvold.

Awareness of the role of learners in the construction of knowledge, what is called constructivist thinking, is relevant here: knowledge does not exist independently of those who possess it. It cannot be transmitted unchanged to the learner. It always fits into the existing framework of understanding of the learner and is shaped by this framework [9]. As D. Boud says, “learning for meaning and tight

teacher control sit uneasily together. Learners must make their own maps of knowledge”[3, p. 65].

Well-known theorist of distance education B. Holmberg identifies the following degrees of student autonomy in distance-education practice:

1. Voluntary study and free choice of course.
2. Autonomous execution of study based on prescribed curricula.
3. Free choice of optional elements as part of autonomous learning according to 2.
4. Possibilities to add to and reduce curricula, by including course units from other curricula and omitting units from the curriculum to be studied, as part of autonomous learning according to 2.
5. Free choice of learning objectives, course units, optional supplements etc. combined with autonomous execution of the study.
6. Autonomous work under the guidance of tutors (representing interdependence).
7. Autonomous project work [9, p. 116].

B. Holmberg also states if students are to be treated as mature people, and if student autonomy is to be promoted, this must have methodological consequences. So he postulates the following principles of autonomous learning:

1. Student participation in the planning of the study is to be aimed at in order to secure its lasting relevance to the individual students.
2. Students’ individual interests and/or experiences should influence the study content and process.
3. Flexibility in the structure and use of pre-produced courses is indispensable condition: modular principles, study-guide approaches, student-initiated deep study of selected subject areas are applicable.
4. Problem-oriented discussion of subject matter should supplement and guide endeavours to impart knowledge; as an alternative to presenting “ready-made” systems of knowledge, courses can start out from particular problems.
5. Conversation-like, pre-produced presentations of subject matter, inviting students to query, check, investigate on their own, and pose explicit questions, are to be aimed at.
6. Dialogue, contiguous or non-contiguous, causing awareness of problems and attempts to solve them and making students consider and try to reach positions of their own, must be catered for.
7. Empathy related to the independence orientation of the students should characterize the work of the supporting organization in subject-matter presentation, tutoring and counseling [9, p. 116-117].

Hereby, defining the learner autonomy we should take into account that:

- Learners take their first step towards autonomy when they recognize that they are responsible for their own learning.
- Learners exercise that responsibility through their involvement in all aspects of the learning process – planning, implementing, evaluating.
- Learners autonomy grows as a result of their never ending effort to understand the WHY, the WHAT and the HOW of their learning.
- Learner autonomy entails a variety of self-regulatory behaviours that develop

– through practice – as a fully integrated part of the knowledge and skills that are the goal of learning [11].

CONCLUSIONS. In the conclusion we can say that in the literature we have reviewed the word “autonomous” is used in two basic meanings: in a narrow and wide sense. In common everyday language the notion of autonomous is used as equal with independent. It can be used to describe a person who can arrange and organize his/her learning environment without help, directions and guidance. It underlines the ability to create a supportive environment for learning based on the personal needs of a student: the choice of the curriculum, the methods and techniques of learning, the schedule, but also the ability to set goals and accomplish tasks and projects as parts of the courses. The wider meaning of the term “autonomous learner” refers to the intellectual ability to be confident and bold with one’s own ideas rather than to be well organized. The autonomy is meant as a state of mind, in which an adult is able to perceive knowledge as a social construct and feel comfortable and confident choosing his own path, even if it collides with a traditional way of thinking.

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АВТОНОМИЯ ВЗРОСЛЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ: АНАЛИЗ ЗАРУБЕЖНОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

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Представлен обзор зарубежной литературы по автономии взрослых студентов в высшем и дистанционном образовании. Анализ позволил сделать вывод, что понятие «автономный» используется в двух основных значениях – в узком и широком смысле: человек, который может организовать и организовывает своё образовательное пространство без дополнительной помощи, руководства и контроля; и интеллектуальные способности для уверенности и смелости в отношении собственных идей.

Ключевые слова: обучение взрослых, взрослые студенты, автономия, автономное обучение.

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