


Autonoesis

A mode of consciousness that embodies an individual’s awareness of continuity over time, allowing for a mental exploration of the trajectory of personal experiences in the remote or recent past.

**Autonomous Learning and Effective Engagement**

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**Synonyms**

Effective learning; Self-regulated learning

**Definition**

The educational literature is replete with alternative interpretations of what is meant by autonomous learning. More extreme interpretations of this notion, which take autonomous learning to mean independent learning, are based on the idea of the individual being resistant to external influence at all stages of their learning. Consequently, it is important to stress that while autonomous learning is self-managed and self-monitored, learning, sometimes referred to collectively as self-regulated learning, (Entwistle and McCune 2004) such learning may also be informed through interaction with peers or by reflection on the views of the educator. Here, the learner uses other persons’ views to sharpen their own views without compromising their personal contribution to knowledge construction with its nuances and insights, so that transmission is not their principal route to knowing. They also accept their individual accountability rather than that of the educator for setting of goals, identification and use of resources in achieving these goals and for the perspectives they develop within a knowledge domain. Thus, autonomous learning may also involve personalized learning. It is not, however, synonymous with student-centered learning, as the latter may tolerate higher degrees of instructor-directed learning, even where an emphasis is placed on student participation. The attribute of learner autonomy has also come to be recognized as one to be acquired through a journey of self-discovery. This is a “cultural journey” involving initial “disorientation” and “emotional turmoil” while learners’ early expectations on “learning, knowledge and authority” conflict with their experiences and they progress to the stage of being comfortable with uncertainty (Taylor 1986; Baxter Magolda 2001).
Effective engagement is also a term which is open to interpretation. A more recent interpretation, influenced by Baxter Magolda’s work on self-authorship, is that of a quality of participation in the learning experience which is not only supportive of knowledge retention, but also, transformative. Precisely, the learner is empowered to reconstruct what they already knew or believed into a system of beliefs, conceptualizations, values, and forms of reasoning which are symptomatic of a more mature state of cognitive development (MacDougall 2008).

This interpretation takes a deep approach to learning as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for effective engagement. Different characterizations contrasting deep and surface learning exist, including a greater degree of semantic or cognitive analysis versus repetition of analyses carried out, intention to understand versus intention to reproduce and meaning directed versus reproducing directed (Entwistle and McCune 2004). In turn, Biggs’s notion of internalizing, reflected by an intrinsic interest in content, the intention to understand and openness to fresh perspectives on existing knowledge has at least become a part of what is recognized as integral to deep learning.

In applying these definitions to course design, it is critical to appreciate that the presentation of material and the approach of the educator can influence learner traits and that these traits may be evolutionary rather than static.

Theoretical Background
Clearly, according to the above definitions, autonomous learning and effective engagement are inextricably linked. Central to this link is the sense of authenticity that arises when learners acquire some degree of ownership of learning through autonomous learning. The need for such authenticity to facilitate transformative learning has been recognized. However, the role of the educator in cultivating a student’s self-efficacy as an autonomous learner at an early stage is also clear. As Baxter Magolda observes (Baxter Magolda 2001), use of the learner’s current knowledge and experience is perceived as a “sign of respect” and simultaneously furnishes the learner with an awareness of their capacity to enhance their own learning.

The importance of assessing preparedness of students for autonomous learning in advance of their learning experiences has been partially recognized through production of the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). The value of such preparatory work, aimed at recognizing the individuality of the learner, is clear when one considers the evidence in the literature that considerable variability in readiness for self-directed learning may occur within any given cohort based on psychosocial and cultural factors. For example, British students from overseas have in some studies shown a tendency to assume that ownership of academic knowledge lies mainly with the host country. In turn, they have perceived their responsibility as that of becoming acquainted with British ways of thinking concerning their fields of study. Consequently, they have been less inclined to question the objectivity of beliefs and practises within their host institution and to recognize their own capacity for ownership or construction of knowledge. Moreover, in some East Asian countries, conformity to popular beliefs and practise is seen as a cultural norm, and thus the idea of autonomous learning requires some explaining. Such observations can help inform the design of personalized E-Learning resources for entrants to undergraduate courses in higher education.

The concept of readiness for self-directed learning itself has a firm grounding in learning theory literature, both through the multifarious studies through which the SDLRS has been validated and through Grow’s Stages of Self-Directed Learning Model. The latter model (Fig. 1) highlights the various contexts in which students and educators can be situated in their respective stages of self-directed learning.
which mismatch can arise between teaching style in terms of control of learning and student preparedness for self-directed learning.

Such mismatch can occur when ellipses on the left and right of the figure are aligned in a different manner to that shown. Take, for example, the case of teaching statistics to students enrolled in profession-orientated courses. Here, the educator may be employed to assume the role of facilitator when students are still at the dependent stage due to their lack of preparedness specifically in statistical learning.

According to Grow’s model, it is the responsibility of the educator to adapt their teaching style in such a way that the student’s ability to manage their own learning increases. His underlying philosophy of education includes the doctrine that “[t]he goal of the educational process is to produce self-directed, lifelong learners.” This doctrine itself rests on the seemingly paradoxical assumption that “teachers can be vigorously influential while empowering students toward greater autonomy.”

In assessing potential for effective engagement, the wide range of inventories available for diagnosing learning styles or approaches can be informative (Entwistle and McCune 2004). In assessing learner predisposition to disengagement, the relevance of volition, defined as “students’ ability to maintain the effort needed to achieve their goals, even in the face of adversity” has been recognized. This construct may be viewed as a component of self-efficacy. However, more recently, it has also been represented more specifically within the context of assessing effort regulation, thus illustrating further the strong connection which exists between autonomous learning and effective engagement.

Educators with an interest in promoting effective engagement through deep learning ought to be aware that there is a wealth of recent literature available providing innovative illustrations of constructive measures to ensure that short-answer question styles involve the assessment of higher orders of learning. Also, they should appreciate the relevance of the psychologist Carl Rogers’s earlier work on experiential learning as informed by his earlier experience as a psychotherapist. Experiential learning involves constructing authentic meaning based on one’s personal encounter with a relevant event which necessitates re-evaluation of personal knowledge and belief systems. Rogers recognized two learning styles, cognitive and experiential, as representative of meaningless and significant learning, respectively. Cognitive learning is typified by memorizing vocabulary and recommended facts purely for reproduction. Experiential learning, by contrast, is affective and far more pervasive. In this case, learning involves the whole person, thus influencing their behaviour and attitudes and possibly their personality. The latter form of learning might occur, for example, when participating in clinical research to gather evidence before reaching an optimal decision for patient care. These learning styles are likely to have provided some essential groundwork for conceptualizations of deep and surface learning. However, Rogers’s appreciation of the importance of “evaluational interaction with others” (Rogers 1967) and an environment of empathy and unconditional positive regard for feelings, views, and ideas in allowing learners to reach their full potential and develop creativity and confidence concerning their own choices has also contributed greatly to the democratic nature of autonomous learning. Rogers’s work has also informed educators of the importance of context-driven learning, including case-based inquiry learning, in facilitating effective engagement. This type of learning involves integrating the learning of new knowledge with scenarios which the learner is likely to consider important to living. Thus, for example, in Medicine, students may learn to choose appropriate methods for estimating patient risk within the context of a case scenario where it is imperative that the appropriate treatment pathway is selected for the patient.

Phenomenographic research has formed the basis for, not only the deep-surface dichotomy but also, a profusion of related conceptualizations for representing learning styles and approaches. However, in recent years, the notion of threshold concept has also become prominent in learning theory as a basis for evaluating teaching contexts. A threshold concept has been described “as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress . . .” (Meyer and Land 2003). Thus, the identification of threshold concepts ought to be highly relevant to any program aimed at promoting the transformative element of effective engagement.
In the current age, distance learning and the use of Web 2.0 technology to allow students to manage their use of learning resources are becoming increasingly popular. Within such contexts, particularly in higher education, instructors are typically limited in terms of both contact hours and their available support network of co-facilitators. Such developments point to the need to foster learner autonomy and effective engagement, not only as a basis for enhancing the quality of student learning but also, in developing a realizable working model for the educator in terms of student expectations.

Important Scientific Research and Open Questions
Given the very close link between the notions of autonomous learning and effective engagement, it is unsurprising that the SDLRS should already contain questions which measure self-efficacy in terms of self-concept as an effective learner. Nevertheless, since self-efficacy in this sense is so fundamental to effective engagement, it is important to explore how it may be measured more fully in preparing students for their learning tasks. Such work can be informed by consideration of the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GES) of Schwarzer and Jerusalem. The GES is the most commonly accepted measurement of self-efficacy and like the SDLRS, its construct validity has withstood scrutiny from a number of sources. Within the SDLRS, important items from the GES have been omitted, particularly those relating to the capacity to handle unforeseen difficulties, solve difficult problems, and remain focused on personal goals. As the GES comprises only ten items, with a total average response time of about 4 min, it could conveniently be merged with the SDLRS inventory. However, style of the available response categories for this add-on would need to be highlighted for the benefit of the respondent and would preclude the possibility of conveniently combining scores from the SDLRS and GES in any meaningful sense.

Low self-efficacy scores can assist in identifying the need to promote positive behavioral changes in individuals who are particularly vulnerable to discouragement and hence disengagement. The call for a revised version of the GES in assessing readiness of students for self-directed learning in subjects which they encounter as nonspecialist learners is implicit from the finding that degrees of individual autonomy are not uniform across disciplines.

Moreover, to optimize the use of such a scale in improving student learning, more work needs to be done to ensure that it is itemized to capture the specific types of task to be performed and that it is adapted accordingly as these tasks change. In making such distinctions, however, it is important that the level of specificity is not so high as to preclude its utility beyond the level of an individual institution.

The relatively recent work on threshold concepts opens the way for further case studies on subject-specific and context-specific threshold concepts. For example, in the case of learning statistics, it may be the case that distinctions need to be made between threshold concepts encountered by specialists and non-specialists.

Cross-References
▶ Approaches to Learning and Studying
▶ Case-Based Inquiry Learning
▶ Constructivist Learning
▶ Cultural Influences on Personalized E-Learning Systems
▶ Deep Approaches to Learning in Higher Education
▶ Experiential (Significant Learning)
▶ Phenomenography
▶ Rogers, Carl R. (1902–1987)
▶ Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning
▶ Statistical Learning

References