

Affect and Learner Autonomy in an Online Environment

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Although most online educators would agree in principle that affect must play a significant role in online learning, in practice most theories and research in the field concentrate almost exclusively on cognitive processes. This includes theory-based research growing out of cognitive-constructivist (Piagetian) and social-interactionist (Vygotskian) perspectives as well as a theoretical research. We believe that case studies that include close analyses of the individual learner represent a significant first step toward achieving a real understanding of the role of affect.

Typical of existing research is Salmon's (2000) engaging theory of computer-mediated communication (CMC.) According to Salmon, CMC develops through a five-stage process. Stage 1: Access and motivation. Stage 2: Online socialization. (Participants make contact with each other.) Stage 3: Information exchange. Stage 4: Knowledge construction. (Discussion becomes more collaborative and leads to proposing new concepts.) Stage 5: Development. (Participants use the eLearning interface to achieve personal goals and to reflect on the learning process.) Although Salmon clearly recognizes that affect is involved at all stages of learning, her account nevertheless is striking for the peaceful way in which in which learners appear to progress from one stage to the next. As they move from beginners needing basic access to the medium to reflective and autonomous learners, there is little evidence of intense anxiety or deep conflict. And to the extent that these exist, Salmon pictures them as barriers to overcome, not positive features of the developmental process.

We believe just the opposite. Based on our experience with highly motivated but nevertheless culturally disadvantaged online learners, we believe that intense emotions, such as anger, resistance and anxiety are the norm in the development of learner autonomy, not the exception. Indeed, we see the development of learner autonomy in an online learning environment as quite similar to other instances of growing psychological autonomy and independence, familiar from the study of personality development and from clinical practice. These include the emergence of autonomy from the family during adolescence and early adulthood (Gould, 1972), the experience of primary attachment in infancy and early childhood (Bowlby, 1973, 1982) and the analysis of transference in psychotherapy (Freud, 1920).

Like these other examples, we observe the following features in the emergence of learner autonomy: (1) An initial period of dependency, (2) A period characterized by conflict, resistance, anger and anxiety, (3) Identifiable points or periods of transition, and (4) The achievement of autonomy accompanied by greater self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Course Description and Research Method

The present study represents a first attempt to answer the question: can the emergence of learner autonomy be understood as a process of cognitive growth or is it the result of conflict, struggle and anxiety, as are other more familiar instances of the development of personal independence? To investigate this question, we looked at a course in critical thinking that employed a blended learning

approach. Based on this, we will present two case studies that provide prima facie evidence in support of our viewpoint.

The course delivery involved alternating between classroom sessions and electronic discussions using the Blackboard™ platform. The student population had limited previous experience with the computer and Internet and no prior experience with online learning environment. The course was structured so that the theoretical concepts of critical thinking (e.g. fallacies) that were learnt in the classroom were applied to open-ended debates on controversial topics (like cloning and euthanasia) using electronic discussion boards. Alternating between traditional classroom sessions and electronic discussions helped maintain continuity in the learning process and maximized the impact of blended learning.

The students showed resistance to and fear of learning in the online medium initially that we attribute to their cultural disadvantage with respect to the digital divide. During the course of our observations, we noticed a close tie between affect, (mainly overcoming fear of the new learning medium) and progressively less and less dependence on the instructor. We were especially struck by the positive contribution of unpleasant emotions (such as anger, fear, and anxiety) in the emergence of learner autonomy.

To study the significance of affect in the process of developing autonomy over the semester, data was compiled from a variety of resources: direct observation, critical thinking task performance, self-reports and student questionnaires. Analysis of the data revealed a noticeable change in terms of improved learner autonomy. In this paper we present two case studies of students whom we consider representative of the larger sample to help shed light on the learning processes that underlie the observed increase in autonomy. The discussion that follows will outline our emerging view of best practices.

Results

We observed that the two students experienced breakthrough points in overcoming their fear of online learning. Without this transition in their affective state (by mid-point), it would have been impossible for them to do well in this course. We identified six salient factors that were crucial to overcoming fear and highly influential in the development of learner autonomy:

1. The relationship between a positive self-concept and learner autonomy. Despite experiencing anxiety in the beginning, the two students perceived themselves to be self-confident learners, a trait often considered predictive of the later development of autonomy (in response to a student survey at the beginning of the course).
2. Structure of the course and nature of the tasks: Much excitement and interest was generated by the debates, even though the electronic discussion board was a new experience. The methods of collaborative and discovery learning also added to the creation of a suitable learning environment. That the tasks challenged them to exhibit critical thinking and employ logical reasoning to support their argument, rather than worry about a right or wrong answer seemed to empower the students with greater control over the learning.
3. The dynamics of the tutor-student computer-mediated communication: The classroom sessions were extremely useful in establishing a healthy tutor-student rapport early on. This level of comfort transferred to the online medium, so much so in fact that the tutor became less of an authority figure and more of a “fellow participant”.
4. Computer training and the advantage of asynchronous communication: With minimal training (a single orientation session), the students became familiar with Blackboard™. The

flexibility of space and time and the opportunity for reflection without being put on the spot greatly reduced their anxiety.

5. The power of peer learning: Besides being able to hone critical thinking by learning from their peers, they also gained in confidence from the genuinely felt encouragement from the group. Questioning from peers (part of the coursework) stimulated the thoughtfulness and inquiry, and offered stronger support than interacting with an authority figure such as a tutor.

For example, when we look at an extract from Candy's definition of autonomy, (Candy, 1991, p109):

“Has the will and the capacity **fearlessly and resolutely** to carry into practice, and through to completion, plans of actions...without having to depend on others for encouragement and reassurance, and regardless of opposition.”

we are led to believe that anxiety as an emotion is a detriment to the development of autonomy.

On the contrary, we observed that the breakthrough stage was crucial for the simple reason that a conscious acknowledgement of anxiety (related to technology and more importantly to failing) motivated the two students to come up with effective personal strategies for eliminating anxiety as an impediment in their learning process. This is evident from their strong performance by the end of the course. That is, an autonomous learner views fear not as a negative emotion, but as an integral part of the learning process.

While the contribution of reflection and self-awareness (cognitive component) in the development of autonomy is indisputable, we argue that educators must be prepared to work with fear and anxiety as useful and powerful emotions that can contribute just as equally in the long-term lifelong development of learner autonomy.

Best Practices

Based on this research, we recommend the following best practices in the design and delivery of online learning when increased learner autonomy is a major pedagogical goal.

When designing courses in which learner autonomy is an issue, we recommend:

1. Choosing blended solutions over pure eLearning.
2. Offering offline sessions more frequently near the beginning of the course.
3. Adopting a course structure flexible enough to accommodate students with dependency issues as well as learners who are comfortable in the medium (Disregard any one-size-fits-all model because it doesn't.)

When *delivering* courses in which learner autonomy is an issue, we recommend:

1. that instructors be prepared to schedule face- to-face sessions, by telephone or in person for students showing fear of the medium.
2. that instructors view conflict and anxiety as normal features in the development of learner autonomy, not as signs of learning failure.

3. that instructors provide emotional as well as intellectual support for students who show anxiety.
4. that instructors should expect that most students would make the transition from dependence to autonomy as long as they receive adequate support at the beginning.

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Biographical Sketches

Dr. Jaya Kannan is an Asst. Professor at Metropolitan College of New York. Her expertise in the field of online learning began in ESL and has branched out to multi-disciplinary studies. Her international teaching experience has included teaching and research in India, Singapore and USA. Current research involves studying learner autonomy and assessment of the learning process in the online learning environment. She has a PhD in Computer Assisted Language Learning from Anna University, India.

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