

Towards Learner Autonomy

George Camilleri

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Among the many innovative ideas and practices gaining ground in the educational field world-wide is the concept of the 'autonomous learner'. More than a concept, it is an entire perspective of the teacher's and the learner's roles in the classroom, the way they go about teaching and learning and the expectations they have from their respective roles.

Why Learner Autonomy ?

As the term implies, Learner Autonomy involves a transfer of decision-making from the teacher to the learner, and it is justified in part by the realisation that in the contemporary world the teacher is no longer an indispensable source of knowledge and information for his or her students, on account of two main and obvious reasons. First, means of communication and information are today highly developed and readily available to one and all, and the learner can have access to these resources without the mediation of the teacher. Secondly, the amount of knowledge and information that is available has long surpassed the capacity of any individual to hold such knowledge in its entirety. The teacher, so to speak, has already 'lost control' over what pupils are capable of learning.

Modern pedagogical thinking also suggests that the learner is capable of making important decisions that have to do with the matter and manner of his or her own learning. By involving the learner in the decision-making process, and, in some cases, giving him or her decisive roles, there is the likelihood that learning becomes a more meaningful and effective process. This view of learning is in fact endorsed by the recently-published National Minimum Curriculum.

Changing roles of teacher and learner

The implementation of autonomous learning in our schools requires a change in mentality of both learner and teacher. The teacher should perceive himself or herself not as a supplier of skills and knowledge, but more of a facilitator, or intermediary, in the process of the acquisition of skills and knowledge by the learner. This role requires the mastery or the refinement of new skills by the teacher, skills related to communication, management and psychology. The spoon-feeding, autocratic, or 'I-know-all and I-know-best' approach [to take an extreme example] needs to be replaced by a more collaborative and open-minded one. The teacher has to be ready to negotiate with the learner, to 'concede' areas where he or she has long been the sole decision-maker in order to make the learner the key player in the learning process.

On his or her part, the learner should get used to taking decisions about matters that affect his or her learning, and the responsibilities which decision-making brings with it. For this to take place, learners need to be accustomed to taking decisions in their early school life. There is a wide range of areas where even the young learner could be given the opportunity to exert influence on decisions taken. Such areas concern content, methodology and classroom management. Giving young learners choices of tasks for them to decide which to take on, asking them for their preferences on topics to be covered, encouraging them to decide which materials or resources should be used, and giving them a say in decisions on where they should sit in class---all these are examples of how learner autonomy could be nurtured from a young age. Autonomous learning is a process that is gradual, cumulative and collaborative. Carried to its logical conclusion, learner autonomy could lead to a stage where a learner in later years even decides on his or her learning objectives.

Research Project

The required change in mentality among teachers was explored in a large-scale European research project undertaken by the undersigned.* The objective of the project was the exploration of teachers' attitudes to learner autonomy, and the results show that teachers are willing to involve the learner in decision-making in many areas. However, the findings show that teachers are less optimistic about passing on decision-making to learners in areas which would affect the running of the school or a change in the administrative set-up, such as the time and duration of lessons. This implies that once autonomous learning is accepted as a worthwhile goal by a school administration, it must be ready to change former structures to accommodate its requirements. Indeed, in an ideal situation, autonomy should characterise all levels of the educational hierarchy. Learner autonomy in the classroom in fact should exert a washback effect on the entire system by creating pressure on the school authorities to gain more autonomy.

*G.Camilleri [ed.] *Learner Autonomy: The Teachers' Views* ISBN 92-871-4078-2 Council of Europe Publishing 1999

The above publication contains the findings of a European research project on Learner Autonomy co-ordinated by the author. Anybody who is interested in acquiring copies or would like to share views on the topic may contact the author at george.camilleri@magnet.mt

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