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Learner Autonomy in the Undergraduate Years: Findings from a three-year longitudinal study

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Background

The ability to be autonomous remains an important required outcome of higher education (QAA, 2008). It features prominently in institutional policies of higher education (UEL, 2009) and remains a characteristic sought-after by employers (CBI, 1994, 2008). Despite this, the ways in which the undergraduate student can be supported to develop autonomous behaviours and thought at University remain largely unexplicated (Perumal, 2007). The widening participation agenda, introduced in the post-Dearing expansion of higher education (HE) provision, has precipitated a growing diversity of undergraduate populations. Such diversity extends beyond conventional intersections of culture and ethnicity (Perumal, 2009), and can manifest in the short term as a lack of academic engagement, which can then go on to adversely affect retention (Walker, 2009). These issues form a necessary part of the discourse on how self-initiated behaviours can be fostered in the HE learning and teaching context.

This paper reports the findings of the final phase of a three-year longitudinal study to measure and track the propensity of university students to engage in autonomous behaviours and thought in their learning. It builds on the findings of previous phases, which sought to:

1. measure participants' potential to think autonomously in learning contexts,
2. examine ways in which 'demographic factors' (Matthews, 1994) can influence student engagement.

In the initial phase of the study, an encouraging profile of autonomy for beginning undergraduates was found, with relatively self-determined levels of motivation discerned (Perumal, 2008, 2009a).

In the second phase, the mean cumulative autonomy scores across the constructs fell, despite an increase in the mean score in the underlying motivation construct. The more salient findings in the second phase included: a stronger positive correlation between age and autonomy, as well as some support for early trends (identified in the first phase of the analyses) in some participant groups differentiated by previously identified demographic characteristics (Perumal, 2009b).

This study of third-year undergraduates will examine similar variables with the aim of consolidating and expanding those previous findings, and, where appropriate, drawing conclusions from a general overview of the analyses of the data gathered over the three-year period.

Research Questions

1. A re-evaluation of the synthesis of a paradigm of autonomy relevant to the higher education (HE) context.
2. A comparative analysis of the findings from all phases of the study, with particular attention to trends discerned from analyses of the data from the first- and second-year participants.
3. Delineate the extent to which, if at all, the experience of HE influences the development of autonomy in undergraduate students.
4. In the light of the new knowledge gained in 1.-3. above, refine the previously identified learning and teaching strategies that can foster learner autonomy in HE.

Methods

Mapping of Literature

Informed by a review of the academic literature this paper proposes a paradigm of autonomy appropriate to HE contexts. The concept is disassembled into its three component psychological constructs, selected because autonomous behaviours are commonly associated with high scores in intrinsic motivation, perceptions of competence and and internal locus of control (Fazey & Fazey, 2001).

The concept of motivation, which has been described as the driver of autonomous behaviours (Deci & Ryan, 2000), receives close attention and is disassembled into its various classifications (determined by the level of self-determination inherent in each one) and considered in the HE context. Synthesised from the literature, a 'continuum of motivation' is proposed which depicts each of the classifications of motivation and autonomy derived from various sources (Ecclestone, 2000; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Deci *et al*, 1991). This theoretical framework underpins the research questionnaire employed and the structure of participant interviews.

Research Method

The third phase of this study measures the autonomy-related characteristics of eighty-two third-year students in the Cass School Education, University of East London. A twenty-item questionnaire probes participant responses to the psychological constructs of autonomy noted above, with further analyses undertaken using participant personal supplied in the questionnaire.

Additionally, a series of recorded face-to-face interviews have been undertaken with eleven third-year students who completed questionnaires.

Frame

The data analysis, which is in progress, will provide:

1. cumulative indices indicative of participants' predisposition for autonomous learning, tracking changes over three years of undergraduate study,
2. indices differentiated by each of the psychological constructs, examined over three years as in 1. above,
3. indices differentiated by individual participant variables, with a view to discerning changes over three years, and
4. any other salient trends that may emerge during analyses of all phases of the data.

Research findings

The findings from the initial phase of the study indicated relatively self-determined levels of motivation in the first year undergraduate participants (Perumal, 2008, 2009a).

In the study of second year students, levels of autonomy were found to be lower than the levels of the first year students, despite an increase in the mean score in the underlying motivation construct. A stronger positive correlation was discerned between age and autonomy. Participants who identified themselves as Black African continued to produce the highest scores for autonomy across the constructs. Participants identifying themselves as Bangladeshi again produced lowest scores. Supplementary analyses indicated this group in the sample is predominantly female with an average age of 22.5 (2009b).

The third phase of analyses will aim to confirm and consolidate these findings, and explore the possible underlying causes of such trends.

Contribution to knowledge

The quality of student motivation and, in turn, autonomy, has been said to partly depend on the teacher's motivating style (Deci, et al, 1991; Reeve, et al, 1999). This research aims to enhance understanding of the characteristics of an 'autonomy-supportive' teaching style (Reeve, et al, 1999) that can facilitate students' developing levels of learner autonomy. It achieves that objective in two ways: by mapping the contours of students' developing autonomy at university over three years; and exploring patterns of diversity in the undergraduate population to enable a better understanding of how classroom strategies can be targeted to better enhance academic engagement.

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