Self-direction in on-line language learning

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Abstract

This paper presents design based research on the role of self-direction in online learning by exploring elements of both individual and collective engagement as significant aspects of learning. By making the claim that online instruction draws on autonomous and social aspects of learning, this paper examines how online teaching environments are informed through an orientation of social constructivism in learning that requires educators and learners to recognize the value of inquiry and higher order of learning through individual reflection and collaborative discussion. Recognizing specific challenges for educators and learners through the combination of high learner expectation and autonomy, this discussion proposes how a focus on individual control and group responsibility can address complexities in online learning through an action learning approach to education.

Keywords: online learning, adult education, self-directed learning, inquiry, learner autonomy, collective engagement, action learning

Self-direction in on-line learning

As online learning gains more popularity and reputability in 21st century learning environments, learners and educators alike need to adapt to the growing need to participate in a variety of learning projects, including online learning. A derivative of self-directed learning, online learning has replaced the project based notion of independent learning and created educational situations that rely on highly interactive and cooperative styles of learning (Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012). Colorado & Erberle (2010) define online learning as textual, graphic, audio and video representations of the World Wide Web forming components of learning. As opposed to traditionally static forms of independent learning, online learning establishes dynamic and transactional educational environments that recognize a framework that is individual and, at the same time, social (Garrison, 2011). Through a detailed discussion of learner needs, context and readiness, this paper explores how online learning combines elements of autonomy and social collaboration that establish platforms for action learning through design based inquiry.

On-line learners: motivations and needs

Tough (1971), in his exploration of adult learning, notes that adults typically embark on learning projects to achieve personal goals of pleasure, satisfaction and self-esteem. Though these elements still represent motivations for entering into adult and post-secondary learning environments, learning in adulthood has become more commonplace, complex and competitive than in past generations due to a focus on workplace values and attitudes influencing adult learning situations (Plews, 2016; Colorado & Eberle, 2010) . This results in an emphasis placed on the social and autonomous nature of learning that includes: active engagement, collaborative discourse, reflection and opportunities for critical thought (Lewis, 2010).

A generation of independent yet socially motivated learners comes with high expectations for learning and for achievement in their desired areas of study (Allen, 2005; Garrison, 2011). In a recent study of online learning, Plew (2016) outlines a sampling of online learners as Caucasian females in their mid-thirties who (a) work for an employer that offers reimbursement for learning and (b) are not likely the first from their families of origin to attend post-secondary learning. Viewing this group as representative of online learners reinforces the notion that online learners may come to the learning situation highly motivated yet under pressure to perform or achieve for a number of reasons, including: (1) there may be a need to meet requirements set out by employers who are paying for the education; and, (2) learners may be competing with previous family members who have had successful learning experiences.

Recognizing the conditions of this particular sampling, learners who appear to be highly motivated may also be under stress to succeed. This creates a paradox for self-directed learning where learners may be looking for straightforward or prescriptive avenues to achieve success while educators are anticipating a high degree of autonomy, creativity and self-direction in learning. The result of these dynamics creates learning situations where learners risk becoming apprehensive about learning in environments that lack close proximity to others, which is an element that can serve to reduce worries and doubts about learning. In other words, although learners may desire a high degree of autonomy; at the same time, they are faced with the task of having to learn how to self-advocate and understand learning tasks without the benefit of an on-site instructor (Garrison, 1997; Lieberman & Linn, 1991).

In fact, having perhaps come from traditional educational environments, learners may be unsure about how to navigate in environments with lessened control. The need, therefore, to facilitate the transition from traditional to technical learner must be addressed (Garrison & Cleveland-Innis, 2005; Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012; Colorado & Eberle, 2010). It is this shift in teaching and learning that

requires adult educators to be cognizant and responsive in managing learner self-direction and motivation, particularly in environments where learners hold a high expectation for success.

A constructivist approach to learning: combining the autonomous and the social

Knowles (1975) defines self-direction in learning as a process where individuals take initiative to determine needs, assess goals, and identify resources and strategies for learning. These are necessary skills learners must acquire in moving from face to face formats to online learning where an educator's presence is more of a guide or facilitator of knowledge rather than a director and manager of activities. Though Garrison (2011) indicates that there are times for direct instruction within online learning environments, the role of educators primarily involves the facilitation of learning and moderating discussions.

Because of the isolated nature of online learning, the onus for self-direction in consolidating autonomous and social aspects of learning is placed on the learners. In these types of situations, learners themselves generate knowledge through active learning and exploration of concepts through learner initiated consultation and dialogue (Allen, 2005; Garrison, 1997). This combination of the social and autonomous creates situations where learners must lessen their dependence on the instructor and think critically about concepts presented during instruction and engagement with others. Garrison (1997) refers to self-direction that is evidenced in these types of learning environments as "collaborative constructivist". He defines this in the following way:

> A collaborative perspective has the individual taking responsibility for constructing meaning while including the participation of others in confirming worthwhile knowledge. Meaningfulness and worthwhileness reflect the cognitive and social perspectives of an educational experience. Therefore, meaning and knowledge are both personally and socially constructed. This balanced

> integration of cognitive and collaborative learning processes, therefore, defines learning outcomes as both personally meaningful and socially worthwhile. (p. 18)

In other words, online learning relies on learner ability to make meaning through an ability to take initiative in learning, engage with other learners using writing as the primary form of communication, self-advocate, and construct understanding through active engagement and limited immediate feedback.

Developing the confidence, social skills and sense of autonomy to successfully complete these activities requires a good sense of self and a balanced identity (Allen, 2005). In this case, reliance on the group of learners for reinforcement of learning and constructing knowledge transfers attention from the educator as primary source of knowledge to the establishment of collective knowledge that is informed through course materials. The result is that learners who may be accustomed to directing their activities towards educators' expectations rather than deriving their knowledge primarily through the textual materials and educational content must become self-reliant and able to self-assess with respect to course participation and completion of learning tasks.

With an educator who is only partially present, learning becomes constructivist in nature where the objective is to construct knowledge through individual reflection on the content and resource materials and active engagement with other learners. According to Garrison (2011), this type of inquiry is representative of a transactional view of learning that requires learners first to construct meaning through reflecting on content and then verify understanding within a community of inquirers. According to Garrison and Cleveland-Innis (2005), this approach to teaching invokes a higher-order of cognition that emerges from a supportive, flexible and critical community of learning. Drawing on Dewey's (1938) notion of control and responsibility in learning, this is an overlapping process of individual effort and control of learning combined with a group process of collective responsibility that can be visualized as follows:

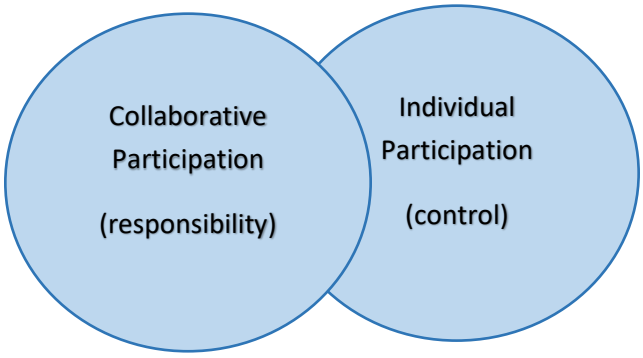

Figure 1.

As noted in the diagram above (Figure 1), on-line learning has transformed the nature of self-directed learning by creating a desire to communicate through inquiry based, collaborative spaces (Garrison, 2011; Karakas & Manisaligil, 2012). This changes the nature of self-directed learning in that it responds to the human need for community and contact with others for support, verification and exploration of contextual meaning. In other words, motivation for self-direction and autonomy in learning is supported through a desire to form online communities of learning.

Elements of learning: motivation and readiness for learning

Adults, whether or not they are traditional learners seeking to add to their educational portfolio or non-traditional learners who are re-entering learning situations after a period of absence, need to reframe their perception of learning in order to be successful in self-directed or computerized learning environments (Lieberman & Linn, 1991). In this case, learners must adapt to a new framework by "learning how to learn" (Lieberman & Linn, 1991; Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007).

Merriam et al. (2007) indicate that the process of learning involves acquiring and applying knowledge to learning situations by taking into consideration learner needs, individual learning style, and training for specific instructional formats. For learners in self-directed environments, this translates

to a focus on three main components of learning: “topic knowledge, procedural skills, and self-monitoring” (Lieberman and Linn, 1991, p. 374). To accomplish the task of learning how to learn, Lieberman and Linn note that self-directed learners must develop an extensive repertoire of problem solving strategies, or procedural skills. Educators are able to facilitate learner adaptation to new instructional formats by including: (a) explicit instruction on topic, strategies and learning skills; (b) scaffolding through prompts, feedback and remediation to support learning; and (c), encouragement to develop confidence in self-directed learning.

Colorado & Eberle (2010) suggest a list of learning strategies that enable learners to prepare for and succeed in online learning, these include: “rehearsal, elaboration, metacognitive self-regulation, time and study environment, effort regulation, peer learning and help seeking” (p. 6). Many of these points and skills are related to Garrison’s (1997) proposal of a three tiered model for self-directed learning that includes: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. Key to success in online learning is the ability to self-manage, recognize what is required at significant moments in learning, and develop a responsive attitude towards performing learning tasks.

The capacity for learners to recognize what is required of them in learning situations is essential to taking on a responsive attitude and self-managing; still, this ability is dependent upon the development of rapport amongst the educator and learners. In research on web-based learning, Ng (2008) discusses the concept of disparity amongst educators and learners when they find themselves in ambiguous learning situations. He highlights the importance of learners being able to conceptualize course requirements and seek clarification in the following remark:

> The disparity in students and teacher's thinking highlights desires and expectations that are not quite in tune with each other. This type of conflict may not create harmony between teaching and

> learning processes and could hinder learning. The computer is able to offer a wider variety of teaching formats at the one time, catering for different learning styles, interests and abilities. Hence, teaching students to ask appropriate questions when in doubt and how to search for answers from various resources are important skills that will help develop them into better self-directed learners. (p. 30)

Negotiation and questioning skills that are often taken for granted in traditional learning environments that need to be specifically addressed in online learning situations (Colorado & Eberle, 2010). Most significantly, the absence of an instructor poses challenges for learners in that they can no longer rely on gestures and body language for reinforcement of learning. This is a disadvantage because the strength of many educators lies in the ability to fill in gaps of information for learners (Duelen, 2013). In essence, decreased facility to relay essential information through physical presence impacts educator effectiveness and learner ability to respond to educator expectations.

It is realistic to claim that online learning environments do not easily relay subtleties and nuances that are normally a part of learning. These are aspects of learning related to managing emotions and stress. Colorado and Eberle (2010) expand on the connection and incorporation of individual responsibility into collective tasks as part of learning by exploring how self-regulation strategies include a use of metacognition to manage learning tasks and to understand content and expectations to support collaborative efforts within the learning environment. They explain:

> Students must actively control their behavior by monitoring progress and adjusting the use of a strategy to assist with the task. The second component of self-regulated learning is the degree to which this task is completed, or the goal. The student must adjust the use of a cognitive strategy in order to achieve his or her objective. The third component is that the individual student must

> control his or her actions. A student may change a behavior in reaction to an instructor requirement; however, after the requirement is removed, the student may no longer engage in the behavior. These three self-regulated learning components are necessary to regulate student behavior and use of cognitive strategies. (p. 6)

In this case, what is normally the responsibility of the instructor to motivate, praise or encourage learners may fall upon collaborative activities of other learners within the learning context. Garrison (2011) suggests this in the following: “While student motivation may initially be high, sustaining this motivation throughout the course of studies will, to a considerable extent, be a function of cohesion and collaboration” (p. 89). Lewis (2010) reinforces the idea that effective critical collaboration is dependent on allowing time for processing course expectations and reflection on content. Both of these elements relate to how learners must negotiate ways of constructing understanding through periods of communication, discussion, and personal reflection on meaning.

Still, learners need time to perform these functions, and in time-pressured on-line learning environments, this may be difficult to achieve (Cameron & Limberger, 2004). This reinforces the necessity of learners understanding the requirements for learning at the onset of course and program delivery and reflecting on the content before participating in discussion. Garrision (2011) notes how educators need to set the tone for learning and ensure their availability throughout the course of instruction. He indicates that course design and preparation should reinforce teacher presence through establishing feelings of trust and a sense of belonging to a critical community of learning; promoting a conversational tone and questioning approach to learning; supporting learners’ willingness to engage and exercise control within the learning process. These objectives can be achieved in a number of ways

including prioritizing explicit expectations for course requirements and initiating contact with course participants.

Action learning: combining the social and autonomous

Karakas & Manisaligil (2012) suggest that there is a natural affinity between self-directed learning and global connectivity. They reinforce the association of these elements by stating that "self-directed learners are embedded in a set of relationships and networks within the digital ecosystem, they are well equipped to be active citizens and informed decision makers in a hyper-connected society" (p. 718). In fact, the combination of active collaboration on a global level in learning supports action learning in online learning environments. Though there may be varied conceptions about action learning, Cameron and Limberger (2004) note how it is a holistic and developmental view of learning that incorporates individual reflection on knowledge with a collective interpretation and analysis of learning and experience.

Marqhardt (2011) defines action learning as a process whereby a group collaborates to solve problems through critical discussion, active questioning and reflective thought. This problem solving approach to learning relates well to the active dialogue moderated through facilitation that is evidenced in online learning. According to Noe, Tews and Dachner (2010), this type of interpersonal dialogue responds well to an "action-focused reflection" that reflects transactional styles of learning by combining individual reflection to intra and interpersonal dialogue (p. 289). Noe et al. explain how dialogue in this case means individual reflection or group discussion that involves "hypothesizing, questioning, interpreting, explaining, and evaluating issues and problems" (p. 289).

Action learning offers an active way to participate in discussion that is guided and directed through questioning (Marquardt, 2011). This is particularly evident in the focus on textual representation and writing that is a feature of online learning. Garrison (2010) acknowledges how the written word reinforces higher order learning through a more intense scrutiny of self and collaborative engagement. He reflects on the significance of text based communication in the following:

> Text-based communication has always been the preferred means of storing and sharing knowledge. This form of communication is central to e-learning and its use can only strengthen the educational experience through sustained online discourse and reflection. In short, text-based communication has considerable potential to facilitate critical discourse and reflection. (p. 17)

An emphasis on participatory discourse based on responding to questions in a reflective and collaborative manner reinforces the notion of educator as guide and facilitator and recognizes the idea that the "learner is at least as important as the instructor" (Noe et al., 2010, p. 281). Moving from an educator centred focus to learner inspired motivation puts the onus on the learner to construct meaning and achieve understanding through "dialogue, collaborative learning, and cooperative learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 292). This view of learning connects well to self-directed aspects of online learning that encourages the personal control of autonomy and social responsibility of collaboration.

Conclusion

Online learning presents several challenges for both the educator and learner, particularly in situations where learners have been conditioned to rely on a strong instructor presence, motivational strategies that include immediate feedback, and close monitoring of progress. However, once learners develop a capacity for reflection on ideas and self-monitoring, they are able to recognize the value in

allowing time and space for a reflective communication process that is a part of this type of learning. Taking time to suspend judgment and evaluate their own approaches to learning, learners become more self-reliant through a collective learning process that is driven by self-management and individual input. The hope is that this focus on individual effort within collective educational environments has the result of forming learners who become highly engaged in the learning process and are able to appreciate learning as a lifelong pursuit.

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