

3 Do blogs as a virtual space foster students' learner autonomy? A case study

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Abstract

UK higher education institutions strive to foster learner autonomy in their students to create more successful learners, yet due to its complex nature, educators and academics continue to search for effective ways to achieve this. This case study investigates how one virtual blogging space on the Independent Learning (IL) pre-sessional module at the University of Southampton seeks to cultivate learner autonomy. This qualitative study was driven by a lack of empirical research exploring both perceptions *and* practices in social learning spaces. Investigations into both of these elements help to gain a deeper understanding of how learning spaces function, which is essential to recognising how they can meet their pedagogical goals. Whilst the blogging space was effective in fostering learner autonomy to some extent, there was evidence of conflicts in how the students, IL Facilitators (ILFs), and curriculum designers perceived the blogging space. This suggests the need for more time spent conveying the rationale of the blogging space to ILFs and subsequently students, and it also highlights the wider importance of understanding individual context.

Keywords: learner autonomy, blogs, learning spaces, learner reflection, independent learning, learner strategies.

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1. Introduction

It is widely argued that blogs increase learner autonomy by promoting active and reflective learning in an interactive learning environment (Radcliffe, Wilson, Powell, & Tibbetts, 2008; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Chang & Yang, 2013). Murray, Fujishima, and Uzuka (2014) note that “how learners imagine a space to be, perceive it, define it, and articulate their understandings transforms a space into a place, determines what they do there, and influences their autonomy” (p. 81). This case study seeks to empirically investigate these ideas in the context of the IL module on the pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme at the University of Southampton (UoS). By examining learners’ perceptions and practices in the virtual blogging space, the investigation strives to determine how learners’ autonomy may be affected.

2. Method

2.1. Context

The study took place on an eleven-week EAP pre-sessional programme at the UoS, focussing on the IL module which aims to support students’ transition towards learner autonomy. The module supports students through weekly workshops using a flipped (blended) approach, face-to-face advisory sessions and reflective blogs, as well as various other non-compulsory activities. On the programme, it is the ILF role to run all elements of the course.

2.2. Conceptualisation of IL

IL curricular developers consider IL as “the ability to take responsibility for one’s own learning” (SotonSmartSkills, 2017, p. 4), which is one of the most widely cited definitions of learner autonomy (Benson, 2013). The course designers argue that learner autonomy is achieved by learners developing their own learning strategies and subsequently being able to reflect on these. Furthermore, it involves students organising themselves, setting goals and deadlines, and

evaluating their use of time and their work. IL module developers appear to hold the view that it is reflection which reinforces development and truly helps learners to progress academically (SotonSmartSkills, 2017).

2.3. Pre-sessional blogs

IL students are given a blogging topic each week and are encouraged to write a weekly blog post of two or three short paragraphs. Chang and Yang (2013) have demonstrated that blogs give students the opportunity for learners to develop reflective thought, and in the context of the pre-sessional programme the blogging topics are designed to scaffold this reflection.

The blog also serves as a safe space for students to develop their academic skills (time management, critical thinking, and research skills). Williams and Jacobs (2004) and Radcliffe et al. (2008) both recognise the importance of blogs to provide learners with a high level of autonomy whilst allowing peer-to-peer learning spaces in promoting active and reflective learning. Therefore, the course blog space is ultimately a platform which allows the ILF to support students' learning through interaction, as well as the opportunity for peer-to-peer interaction.

2.4. Methodology

This case study was heavily influenced by ethnographic research methods, allowing the investigation of social practices in their complexity rather than viewing patterns in isolation, which Dörnyei (2007) argues is one of the key principles of ethnography.

Ten students and four ILFs took part in the study. All students were of Chinese nationality in their twenties and enrolled on the UoS pre-sessional programme in preparation for their business-related Master's degrees. The ILFs had diverse professional backgrounds and a varied number of years working on the pre-sessional programme. Data was predominantly obtained from the students' blogs and semi-structured interviews, as well as from course documents (notably the

Independent Facilitator Guide – [SotonSmartSkills, 2017](#)), and observations for contextual information.

A qualitative content analysis approach ([Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009](#)) was used to analyse emerging themes to answer the research questions below.

- How do pre-sessional students and ILFs perceive, define, and articulate their understandings of the virtual blogging space?
- What social and educational practices take place in the virtual blogging space?
- To what extent does the above possibly influence students' learner autonomy practices?

3. Results and discussion

3.1. How do students and ILFs perceive, define, and articulate their understandings of the virtual blogging space?

Students and ILFs demonstrated a mismatch in how they perceived the blogs in numerous ways. Students perceived technology predominantly as a social tool, with the majority demonstrating little awareness of how it could be exploited for educational purposes. Yet, at the same time, they believed that they did not have much choice over the content of their blogs, leading students to a perceived lack of 'learner empowerment' which [Little \(1991\)](#) views as one of the key pillars of learner autonomy.

Furthermore, the ILFs and students demonstrated conflicting views regarding the purpose of the blogs, with many students confused about its real purpose and not contributing. Finally, there was a conflict in perceptions of the social element of blogs. Although both course developers and students expected the space to

be used for student-student interaction, ILFs viewed blogs only as a space for student-ILF interaction.

3.2. What social and educational practices take place in the virtual blogging space?

The analysis found that although students did not recognise the blog to be a reflective space, almost all did engage with reflection to some extent, which is crucial to foster their learner autonomy (Little, 1991; Reinders, 2010). When evaluating the reflection, two main gaps were identified – lack of engagement with the cyclical nature of reflective processes, and reflections limited to ‘surface level’ rather than exploring the ideologies behind their actions.

In terms of the social interaction, not all students fully engaged with their ILFs as they did not see this as necessary, yet those that did were often more likely to develop their reflective practices on the blog further. An analysis found that responding to students with follow-up questions prompted further reflection than simply responding with statements. As well as scaffolding their learning, student-ILF interaction fostered good rapports between them which could in turn have a positive impact on learning.

Lastly, not only was the space used as a reflective tool, but the analysis also found that it served to reinforce some of the skills covered on the module, particularly critical thinking, which was determined to also be an important factor in promoting learner autonomy.

4. Conclusions

Interviews with ILFs and students showed there were some misunderstandings from both sides surrounding the intended purpose of the blogging space. In practice, ILFs were only aware of the use of blogs for teacher-student interaction, meaning that they were not promoting the virtual blogging space to its full potential.

Similarly, based on Waring and Evans' (2015, cited in SotonSmartSkills, 2017) emphasis on learners having 'voice and choice' to nurture their autonomy, course developers suggested that learners should have the freedom to direct the contents of their blog. However, possibly due to ILF instructions, participants did not perceive themselves to have this freedom. The findings of this study confirm how important the understanding of the pedagogy by teachers and/or facilitators can impact on both students' perceptions and practices as well as using such spaces to their full potential.

An analysis of the educational practices that take place in the virtual blogging space revealed that the blog does however, to some extent, influence learner autonomy practices, particularly in terms of reflection and practising other transferable study skills. This study reiterates Murray et al.'s (2014) claims that how learners perceive a space really does affect how they use the space, which in turn influences their learner autonomy. Educators should be aware of these claims in understanding how learners use their own learning spaces and how to help them in their learning journey.

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