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University Wide Conversations on Learner Autonomy:

A Roundtable Discussion

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Abstract

Results from three university-wide student-faculty-staff conversations on learner autonomy will be discussed at this roundtable. While this work is perhaps more about scholarly teaching than SoTL, it grew from our work in the "Students as Scholars of Teaching and Learning" theme group for the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). We held face-to-face conversations about learner autonomy on our campus with over 60 students, faculty, and staff three times during 2008 and 2009. We broadly defined learner autonomy as self-directed learning that occurs when students take responsibility for their learning, are willing to collaborate, partner with faculty and peers in their learning, are reflective about their learning, and are involved in shared governance. In informal, but structured, sessions with discussion questions and a facilitator, we talked with both undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and staff about definitions of learner autonomy, what it looks like in terms of behaviors, what promotes and motivates it, what discourages it, the level of agreement about learner autonomy between students, faculty, and staff, why we might disagree, and when too much autonomy can limit learning. Notes from each session were taken and posted to our learner autonomy web page. Based on the themes we heard, suggestions will be offered at the roundtable on how to foster autonomous learning at the classroom and program levels and in out-of-class opportunities-- what instructors can do and what students and staff can do. Documenting examples of learner autonomy can be useful to accreditation and strategic plans that have the mission to promote life long learning in students and faculty. We will invite the audience to discuss with us how these conversations might occur across various schools, disciplines, and nations as well as possible SoTL research projects on the topic. These conversations could also occur at conferences (set aside a few hours, a long shared meal) or, perhaps, during visits to each other's campuses. We will also solicit suggestions from the roundtable participants for our future conversations or other campus activities to promote learner autonomy. Finally, though the main topic of this roundtable is promoting learner autonomy, we would like to discuss whether this work is viewed by roundtable participants as SoTL and why or why not.

Learner Autonomy Tips

The following tips were gleaned from three university wide conversations with students, faculty, and staff on fostering learner autonomy at Illinois State University in 2008-2009:

Undergraduate Students should be encouraged to do the following to be more autonomous learners:

- Be persistent and inquisitive;
- Follow curiosity and suspend judgment;
- Complete assigned reading, read in advance of class, and read beyond the class;
- Ask questions and participate;
- Attend class and participate;
- Seek out-of –class experiences that connect in-class learning to your world out of class;
- Pursue honors and/or research opportunities with faculty and graduate students;
- Set high/realistic goals;
- Seek to become a life long learner;
- Show an interest in self-improvement;
- Avoid too much autonomy whereby you do not read the web pages/assignment or follow the directions as you think you already know all the information;
- Never be completely satisfied with what you know; there is always more to know;
- Develop intrinsic motivation where you learn for the joy of knowing over extrinsic reward (grades, degree requirement completion);

Graduate Students should be encouraged to do the following to be more autonomous learners:

- Take more ownership of their learning than they did as undergraduates;
- Seek learning outside the borders of a class, major, department, or the university;
- Work more independently than undergraduates or develop this ability over the course of graduate study;
- Have no fear of seeking help if needed;
- Be more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically focused on grades (learn for the love of learning);
- Focus on becoming life long learners;
- Develop proficiency in scheduling their commitments and in time management;
- Be proactive in seeking faculty time after they are prepared for such meetings;
- Seek additional enrichment opportunities (attend lectures, meetings, volunteer);
- Perform beyond what is minimally required for courses;
- Take advantage of resources prepared for them;
- Be self-reflective and motivated to learn;
- Be confident about their learning;
- Learn from their mistakes;
- Be willing and eager to participate;
- Adapt to the culture and academic environment of the department they are studying in;

- Possess excellent problem solving skills and have high fluid intelligence;
- Read for pleasure or enrichment and pursue other intellectual activities in their leisure (cross work puzzles);
- Be open minded and not judgmental; and
- Accept and embrace diversity.

More Tips for Faculty for Fostering Learner Autonomy

- Offer a choice of assignments to foster a sense of control over one's learning in the learner;
- Collaborate with students in designing course policies, syllabus, assessments, etc. as much as possible and then stick with the plan;
- Communicate expectations and consequences clearly and in writing;
- Avoid "lecturing" students;
- Do not tell students what they have already read;
- Encourage class discussions between students and with the instructor and listen to the voices of students;
- Encourage a shared responsibility for learning;
- Have high but realistic expectations for students;
- Do not do a student's work for them; rather scaffold learning tasks;
- Model autonomous learning;
- Avoid negative behaviors (cancelling class, too little interactions with students);
- Be aware of contextual factors that impact autonomous learning (length of class, time of day of class, room temperature, personal factors in student's lives that impact their learning);
- Use praise and positive reinforcement;
- Create an active learning environment;
- Make students aware of learning opportunities outside of class;
- Provide and recommend additional readings and assignments;
- Recognize that students have many responsibilities beyond your class; and
- Show empathy and foster connections with students as individuals in an authoritative teaching style more than an over controlling, authoritarian, or permissive/indulgent style.

Selected References

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Pintrich, P. R., Roeser, R. W., & de Groot, E. A. M. (1994). Classroom and individual differences in early adolescents' motivation and self-regulated learning. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *14*(2), 139–161.

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Thanasoulas, D. (2000). What is learner autonomy and how can it be fostered? *The Internet TESL Journal*, *6*(11), 1–11.

Also see: Midgely's Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scale as it taps learner autonomy. See: www.umich.edu/~pals/PALS%202000_V13Word97.pdf