

## **Developing Learner Autonomy and Critical Thinking in Masters' Students**

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### **Introduction**

The idea of student autonomy will be discussed within the specific context of the MSc in Social Research Methods offered by the University's Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS) – more specifically within the Qualitative Research Methods module. Within this module, an assessment structure and application of assessment methods has been developed, designed to stimulate and foster autonomous learning, skills and personal development in participating students. This kind of autonomy, it is argued, is a key component of best higher education practice and is an integral part of the Learning and Teaching Strategy (LTS) for DASS.

### **Context and issues being addressed**

#### *Autonomy and students*

There are a number of philosophical/theoretical concepts of student 'autonomy' and this may be related - as a 'virtue' for individuals to obtain and utilise - to how one might foster the growth of autonomy in current HE practice at London Met.

Autonomy (in higher education) may be defined as a combination of values that equate to: the recognition of the learners ability to take increasing charge of their learning by utilising self-reflective and critical thought (van den Brink-Budgen - 2000 – and while van den Brink-Budgen's book is aimed at AS-level students it adequately sums up one element of critical thinking, focusing as he does on analysing the process of argument)

*'Being a critical thinker doesn't just mean being able to identify the strengths and weaknesses in other's arguments; it also means being able to produce greater strengths and avoid weaknesses in your own,' ( p.115)*

However, there is, of course, a logical contradiction in 'making' students undertake learning that foster their autonomy - the concept of 'forcing people to be free' (cf Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*). In developing a method for fostering autonomy, one encounters very strong philosophical counter-arguments that focus on paternalism and how making decisions for students runs counter to their rights

as autonomous beings (Christman, 2005). However, in focusing on autonomy *as an end in itself* rather than as a means to an end, a case can be made for developing students autonomy, through assessment, as a skill, attribute and behaviour that will be valued *after the process* (but, hopefully, during the process as well) of the students' development (Wikipedia, 2005\*).

It may be argued that to develop autonomy as a distinct element of learning and then behaviour requires the introduction and adaptation of assessment methods, meaning that students would involve themselves in a higher level interaction with the assessment methods concerned, so moving them to a greater *understanding* of process, task, assessment and the production of an outcome. This understanding of the whole process would be a step towards developing students who take the initiative in looking critically at the 'structures' within which they find themselves – e.g. for particular courses they could look at the marking criteria to see how they could/should interact with that course; or in terms of the 'outside world', how they could/should attempt to understand what it is structures behaviours in a given situation (e.g. organisational policies, hierarchical structures).

#### *Developing 'autonomy' in social research students*

The development of critical thinking is a key component of social research, as the researcher must assess the research task, apply an appropriate research method or methods, generate appropriate data and then analyse and interpret that data within an appropriate format. Therefore, the ability to operate autonomously and to apply critical thought to all those tasks facing the researcher(s) is of high importance. The question is then, how to incorporate this aspect of student development into the module assessment format?

#### *Introducing autonomy and critical thinking into assessment practices*

Currently, the assessment format for the module under discussion is structured around three practical assignments and one 'seen' exam. The three practical tasks in the assessment are small, structured examples of the main qualitative social research methods used in 'real-world' research. They consist of an observation exercise, a recorded interview and then one method chosen by the student. For each assignment the student has to write an essay/report on the research they have conducted. This is then tutor-marked (with graded marks and written feedback given back to the student).

In introducing an assessment process for fostering autonomy and critical thinking, a five part process is proposed.

1. Initially, there would be a common, practical task that all students undertake - a taped interview, for example, where students practice interviewing a peer in a role-playing exercise and they attempt to elicit information from that peer's pre-determined 'character'

2. Students would then be given a number of common questions/topics to answer about this practical exercise as well as a number of specific, individual tasks to be researched or developed
3. After completing both parts of the exercise, students would self-assess their work on both the 'common' task and the additional individual task – this would developing their ability to engage with the specific marking criteria for that module
4. Then, each student would assess another student's work. This serves to provide a different perspective on the common task and offer a 'comparator' with other students' work.
5. The final stage to this would be marking by the course tutor to ensure that assessments meet course requirements and that objectivity in marking has been preserved.

This approach utilises important elements of both pedagogical and learning theories by taking into account aspects of student motivation, the development of competencies and capabilities, learning cycles and the importance of different 'sources' of learning (e.g. self, peer, tutor, experiential, etc). It is these aspects that support the argument for changing the assessment process to include a greater fostering of student autonomy.

### **Theoretical underpinning and application**

As Brown *et al* point out, “[p]ut rather starkly: *if you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment,*” (Brown *et al*, 1997; emphasis in the original). They argue that students pay attention to the way that they are assessed and react to that by altering their learning practices accordingly. There are other aspects such as student motivation (discussed below), but the method of assessment will dictate (to a large extent) how students' will approach their understanding of a subject.

#### *Changing nature of higher education assessment*

Higher education (HE) has changed remarkably in character since the early 1990s. There has been a much higher uptake of students onto HE courses and, as there has not been a corresponding increase in the number of Universities, it has meant that lectures, seminars and class sizes are now bigger. Mutch (2002) argues that there are now far fewer opportunities for the spread of 'tacit knowledge' to students because of this expansion of the HE sector. Whilst this may be no bad thing (i.e. assessment practices must now be codified to some extent, making them more accessible – and understandable – to staff and students) there is a loss of the particular interaction/relationship that went with the environment where tacit knowledge was able to be transferred – i.e. arguably the smaller group environment and individual interacting with the tutor. With the expansion of HE, this more 'personable' level of interaction is not as readily possible as it once was, requiring

different methods to be employed in order to foster the development of students. Mutch argues for 'strategic thinking' around how to implement this (bearing in mind the introduction of guidelines from the government, QAA and HEFCE) with a much greater emphasis, he argues, on developing more coherent and less idiosyncratic assessment systems.

Taking this point further, Gosling and Moon (2001) highlight the development of 'qualification descriptors' by the Quality and Assurance Agency (2001) that set standardised elements for what each level of qualification in HE should at least contain at the certificate, intermediate, honours, masters and doctoral level. The (selected) main points listed by the QAA at the Masters level include:

- making sound judgements in the absence of complete data;
- demonstrating self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems;
- act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional level;
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding; and
- be able to exercise initiative and personable responsibility, and the ability to make decisions in complex and unpredictable situations (QAA, 2001).

Whilst these constitute almost all of the full list of qualification descriptors, it should be noted the both implicit and explicit remarks concerning independence, autonomy and 'self-direction'. Gosling and Moon (*op cit.*) argue that many assessment criteria now focus on outcome-based approaches to learning (e.g. "After completion of the course/module, the student will be able to x, y, z...") rather than the emphasis being solely on knowledge as the prime demarcation of having 'successfully achieved' learning. Brown *et al* (*op cit*) use the concept of Performance Evaluation Guides (PEGs) to develop a set of four criteria used to develop and denote unsatisfactory, minimum, good and excellent examples of outcome-based learning task. This could be adapted to assess the demonstrable manner and level of autonomy that the student has demonstrated in undertaking the four tasks outlined earlier. Here I would also develop Brown *et al*'s use of Pickering and Crabtree's (1979) assessment of (lab based) students. 'Empiricists', 'borderliners' and 'dead-reckoners' are all developed as typologies, with the 'empiricist' students being both the most desirable students and those most able to understand methods and then apply them systematically to a new research area.

In terms of the DASS Learning and Teaching Strategy (LTS), the document contains an explicit backing of learning autonomy:-

- "To apply basic forms of critical thinking and reasoning pertinent to the subject area, i.e. what counts as observation, description, analysis, speculation, evidence, validity; questions about objectivity; differences between statements of fact and value, etc.

- To develop a (self) critical understanding of the bases for professional practices, judgements and ethics and occupational cultures,” (DASS LTS, 2005)

In terms of the practicalities of these arguments to the introduction of assessment criteria designed to promote and assess the autonomy of Masters students, there are some key points to be made. First, the content of the process must meet the QAA level that is equivalent to ‘Masters’ level. Second, in focusing on autonomy as an end in itself, it is necessary to develop an understanding and application of the method(s) one might employ in being an autonomous and critical learner. Finally, there is the (obvious) question of how to ‘action’ the concept of the autonomous critical learner in a direct manner rather than trusting an almost osmotic process where students will just ‘become autonomous’. Here, the DASS LTS provides an explicit – and ‘departmentally strategic’ – route for autonomy and critical reflection to be introduced into the assessment process; it just needs to be put into action.

#### *Student motivation, ‘self’ and ‘peer’ learning*

Newstead and Hoskins (2003) outline and develop several arguments about the different theories of student motivation and what effects they (purportedly) have on the attainment levels. They bring together competing theories, explaining student motivation as a complex combination of those who learn to achieve marks/grades alongside (‘extrinsically motivated’) alongside a smaller number who learn ‘to learn’ (‘intrinsically motivated’). Newstead and Hoskins develop these aspects alongside important elements such as ‘amotivation’, where the student has become demotivated, leading to the interesting situation where, what would normally be thought of as a ‘good student’ (i.e. wants to learn, engage and understand the subject; a ‘deep’ learner), has become amotivated, whilst a motivated ‘surface’ learning, results-oriented learner is thought of as a good student because they are seen as motivated. Leaving aside the massively normative aspect of these arguments (it depicts a set of assumptions of what desirable behaviour ‘should be’), they do bring to the forefront the question of student motivation which adds an important element to the understanding and development of assessment practices.

Newstead & Hoskins cite ‘feedback’ as the most important element for developing and sustaining motivation for students (2003 although the authors do not determine what form the feedback should take – or whether it should be formative or summative – but only that it should take place. In the proposed assessment regime there is a variety of methods available including purely formative feedback which does not count towards final grades as well as progressive formative feedback - given on marked essays but with room to improve performance on following essays. In this case, purely summative feedback would probably have very little meaning for students as they would not be able to change their behaviour/engagement as the assessment process has already ended. However, poorly-administered feedback (of whatever kind) proves greatly demotivating to students – and actually promotes surface, extrinsically oriented behaviour. This is because intrinsically motivated

students remain 'unrewarded' when utilising a deep learning approach and then 'fail' according to the assessment criteria. In a distinct, but related, comment Broekmann & Pendlebury argue that HE institutions should be made 'explicit' to students so that they can navigate themselves around the HE environment successfully (Broekmann & Pendlebury, 2002, p.294). Failure to do so may well result in the kind of amotivated students described by Newstead and Hoskins.

In developing this argument further we can refer to Rust (2002) who argues that an environment where there is a well-structured knowledge base (one where learning interlinks into a tangible and meaningful 'whole'), learner activity, interaction with other learners and one where a student 'need[s] to know' about the material, will be an environment in which students are better motivated. He also argues that when students can see a 'real world' application for their activities (including assessment activities) they will be more seriously inclined to undertake the activities given to them. Indeed, Brown *et al* (1997) are keen to show that both self- and peer-assessment and marking greatly increase levels of motivation from and engagement by students. They argue that self- and peer-assessment should be considered "primarily as tools of learning" in developing "independent active reflective learners" (Brown *et al*, *op cit.*). This is echoed by Race (2001) who argues that self- and peer-assessment are powerful methods for deepening student learning experiences, "the act of applying assessment criteria to evidence such as essays, reports, presentations, and so on is a much deeper learning experience in itself rather than just reading or observing the assessment artefacts." Indeed, Brown *et al* make the very strong point that: "If one wishes to lay the foundations of effective life-long learning then self assessment is the *sine qua non* of course design and delivery."

## Conclusion

To return to the points made earlier (pages 2 – 3). The introduction of a self-assessment and marking regime to practical research tasks (the 'common task' and the 'individual task') would allow students to engage in some critical self-reflection on their actions/behaviours and then, in turn, give them the opportunity of making decisions about future actions/behaviours based on that self-reflection.

The peer-assessment element would allow students to apply the criteria which they have used to assess themselves to the work of another student. This in turn would provide them with the opportunity of expanding their ability to interpret and apply 'external descriptors' to the activities and situations of others. In that context, having a 'common task' as part of the assessment – the tasks to be undertaken by all students and referred to earlier - provide the consistent base for this comparative exercise. Again, after generating insights from reflecting on the first, 'common task', the completion of a second assignment, the 'individual task', allows them to put those formative insights and reflections into practice.

Finally, it seems fitting to finish with the view of David Baume, who says:

*“Autonomous learning is hard. Moving towards autonomous learning can be intellectually and emotionally stressful, for both student and lecturer. The move takes time and support. ... The Lecturer’s subject expertise remains as important as it always was; but the expertise is used differently,”*  
(Baume, 1994).

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\*Wikipedia.org, 2005, 'Autonomy' definition, URL =  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learner\\_autonomy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learner_autonomy)

\* Editorial Note about Wikipedia - While the use of Wikipedia as a reference source is, in general, not condoned as it is open to a variety of influences both benign and malignant, it has been accepted in this article because of its particular subject matter.

### **Biographical note:**

During 2005/06 Nick Hardy was a Research Fellow in the Centre for Social and Evaluation Research at London Metropolitan University, and involved in teaching social science research methods to postgraduate students in the Department of Applied Social Sciences. In June 2006 he left to pursue advanced studies in Canada.