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“Who Wouldn't Want to Take Charge of their Learning?” Student Views on Learner Autonomy, Self-Determination and Motivation

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, calls have grown for the implementation of heutagogy, a form of self-determined learning, in higher education settings. Although a key tenet of the heutagogic paradigm is a belief in the notion of human agency, our recent experiences as university tutors suggest that many students might not actually desire some of the aspects inherent in the approach, instead preferring more didactic, tutor-led modes of teaching and learning geared towards successful completion of assessed work. This paper reports the extent to which undergraduate students (N=35) at two different UK institutions, about to embark jointly on a module designed using a heutagogical approach, valued learner autonomy and self-determination in their studies. It also identified students' major motivators when undertaking the module. Results suggest learner autonomy and self-determination were indeed valued by students, with four themes describing their main motivators: (a) achievement, (b) knowledge and understanding, (c), self-improvement, and (d) peer learning and interaction.

Keywords: heutagogy; self-determined learning; student-centered teaching

Background

Heutagogy, an extension of andragogy, was first defined by Hase and Kenyon (2000) as the study of self-determined learning. The heutagogical learning process is characterised by highly autonomous learners taking responsibility for, and control of, what they will learn, when they will learn it and how they will learn it (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2017). This ongoing process occurs in real-time as the learner identifies deficits in their current skills, knowledge and/or capabilities by interacting with their environment (Hase & Kenyon, 2001). They then devise strategies for bridging the gap (Hase, 2009), acting as “the major agent in their own learning, which occurs as a result of personal experiences” (Hase & Kenyon, 2007, p. 112). In recent years, heutagogy has attracted increasing attention in a range of educational contexts, not least the higher education sector (Green & Schlairet, 2017). A big part of the approach's appeal is the assertion that heutagogic learners acquire not *just* competencies (knowledge and skills) but capabilities (the capacity to appropriately and effectively apply one's competence in novel and unanticipated situations). Indeed, Eachempati, Kumar, Komattil and Ismail (2017) suggest that the tutor-led pedagogical and andragogical educational methods typically employed in higher education settings are no longer sufficient in preparing learners for the twenty-first century workplace.

Although calls have grown *for* the implementation of heutagogical approaches to learning and teaching in higher education (Blaschke & Hase, 2016), students' perceptions and experiences *of* these approaches are still relatively under-explored. Indeed, although a key tenet of the heutagogic paradigm is a belief in the notion of human agency, with power and autonomy placed firmly in the hands of the learner (Ashton & Newman, 2006), our recent experiences as university tutors suggest that many students might not actually desire learner autonomy and self-determination. Indeed, our everyday experiences suggest that many students still appear to prefer more content-driven didactic approaches to learning and teaching - especially when it comes to graded assessments, where completing the task successfully, as opposed to ‘learning’, appears the key driver of behaviour. Certainly, ambiguity and doubt, which would be inherent within a heutagogical framework (Gazi, 2014), appear to demotivate many students and dissuade them from engaging in more ‘student-led’ learning activities. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to report our initial findings on whether undergraduate students do indeed value and/or want learner autonomy and self-determination, and to establish what their major motivators are when undertaking a module.

Method

We were awarded funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England's catalyst fund for “innovations in learning and teaching” to implement an 18-month project. This paper draws upon initial data from a larger ongoing study that is exploring staff and students' perceptions of a semester-long Level 6 module, designed using a heutagogic framework, as part of that project.



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Students on the module, who were enrolled on UCLan’s BA (Hons.) in Sports Coaching and SMU’s BA (Hons.) in Physical and Sport Education, were asked to engage as active participants and co-producers of knowledge, rather than passive consumers of content, by reflecting upon their on-going learning and practical experiences. Online group blogs, administered using WordPress (www.wordpress.com), provided the main teaching and learning environment, with students encouraged to find and share relevant resources to inform cross-institutional peer discussion and exploration. Thirty-five students (9 females and 26 males, $M_{age} = 21$ years, $SD = 1.03$), completed an online survey that was developed to provide feedback about their perceptions prior to commencing the module (Fraenkel, 2006). The data reported in the current paper relates to three specific questions in that survey. Firstly, students were asked if learner autonomy (i.e. the ability to take charge of your own learning) was something they want and/or value in their studies, and why. Secondly, they were asked whether they want and/or value self-determination (i.e. the power or ability to make decisions about what to think or do for yourself) in their studies, and why. Finally, they were asked, on the module in question, what their biggest driver or motivator was (i.e. what were they trying or most hoping to get out of the module), and why.

The open-ended survey responses were transferred to a Microsoft Excel 2010 spreadsheet. The first author then conducted an inductive content analysis (Patton, 2002), following a two-stage process. First, information rich statements were identified as stand-alone meaning units (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), then, they were listed and labelled, before being compared for similarities and clustered together into raw data themes. The second author reviewed the themes and codes generated by the first author, then both authors engaged in a collaborative analytic approach (Bean & Forneris, 2017), whereby the themes were refined and/or re-defined and the most relevant quotes for each theme were selected. Any coding discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached and data saturation was deemed to have occurred when no new constructs were emerging from the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Once the module commenced, observations of student behaviour and informal conversations between students and the module tutors were recorded in the form of field notes.

Results

Do students want and/or value learner autonomy?

Contrary to our expectations, all 35 students said they did want and/or value learner autonomy in their studies. Three categories or themes emerged from our analysis of the raw data that describe why students said this was the case.

Self-direction and independence.

Students suggested that they enjoy being able to plan and direct their own studies rather than being told what to do and when, and that they valued the opportunity to take individual responsibility for their learning, e.g. “I want to be able to be able to take charge of my own learning because then I know it is down to me if I pass or fail, I don't want to be relying on someone else.”

Desired skill

The survey data suggest that students perceived that being an autonomous learner was a useful skill to have both within and beyond their academic studies. One student claimed “it (autonomy) can be beneficial in later life as you will be in charge of your own learning and then help and develop yourself even further and be the best you can be,” while another stated that without it “once you graduate you will find it hard to believe in making your own decisions”.

Maturity

A minority of students who wanted and/or valued autonomy appeared to do so because they felt that it would help them to “grow up”. They appeared to appreciate being afforded the opportunity to act with autonomy and saw this as “practice” for when they would be expected to act with autonomy later in life. For example, one student said, “who wouldn't want to be mature enough to take charge of their learning?”

Do students want and/or value self-determination?

Again, contrary to our expectations and prior experiences, 34 students (97.14%) said they did indeed want and/or value self-determination in their studies. The one student who didn’t said “it’s not something that matters to me, as long as I understand the task at hand”. For the students that did, three themes emerged from our analysis of the raw data that describe why they said this was the case.

Control

Students outlined a desire to take charge of their own learning and to be “in control”. One student was clear they appreciate it when a module provides the “opportunity to pursue subject matter that interests you but still guides towards the end assessment”, while another was adamant it was “them” who was responsible for their work and nobody else: “it’s me that has to do my work”.

Self-improvement



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Students appeared to want and/or value self-determination because it offers them the opportunity to “get better”. It should be noted that this remained distinct from “getting better grades” (which we explore later), with students focused here on becoming a “better coach” and a “better individual”.

Required skill

The survey data suggest that students perceived self-determination as being a required “life skill”, hence the reason they wanted and/or valued it. One student said they believed that “to succeed you need to be able to try and do things yourself...before going to others for help”, while another said that “self-determination is a key skill in order to develop throughout life and in coaching”.

What is students’ biggest driver or motivator when undertaking a module?

Four themes were derived during our analysis of the raw data that describe students’ biggest driver or motivator.

Achievement

While responses ranged from simply “passing the module”, to attaining a “good” or “high” grade, it was clear that achievement was a driver for many students. Only a minority of students gave some indication as to why their grade was important. One student suggested that they desired a good mark because they intended to undertake teacher training upon graduation, while two other students conflated achieving a good mark with gaining knowledge and understanding of the subject area (i.e. if they achieved a good grade, then they would have developed their knowledge and understanding in the subject area).

Knowledge and understanding

Encouragingly, gaining new knowledge and developing understanding appeared to be the biggest driver for most students. One student stated that their biggest driver was “to gain a more general knowledge of coaching theories”, while another said that they were most motivated to “improve my own coaching and understand reasons for coaching how, what and why we do what we do”.

Self-improvement

The survey data suggest that students value self-improvement and are motivated by the opportunity to work on self-identified gaps in perceived ability. A common response was simply “to become a better coach”, with many students demonstrating a general desire to “enhance their abilities” and “get the best out of themselves”. Some were more specific, for example one student was clear in stating they wanted to “improve my self-reflection”.

Peer learning and interaction

Some students appeared motivated by peer learning and interaction, with value placed on being able to undertake meaningful inquiry, share knowledge and understanding and then develop knowledge and understanding by working with others. For example, one student said that they “love the fact that we can share our opinions with fellow coaches and see what other opinions are out there”, while another was clear they wanted to “share knowledge and make a difference”.

Field notes

Our initial observations highlight a potential lack of consistency between the views that students expressed in survey responses and their behaviours in the initial stages of the module. This apparent disconnect is evidenced in the following field note extracts recorded during the first six weeks of the module:

“They might be treating it too much like a written assignment...too focused on getting it right rather than engaging in the process and developing over time...It’s hard to change that culture on one module.”

“I can see now that they feel like they’re drowning in autonomy. There’s a reluctance to let peers ‘check’ work, they still prefer staff to do it... We’ve had a few saying they hate it already and would rather write an essay...it’s a case of just give me a mark, tell me how to get it and get out of here.”

“Sick of their need for certainty...X said ‘we don’t like the practical because we have to think about what to do. You just leave us with a load of kit and a task?...we’re swimming upstream against students who’ve had 15 years of teacher-led education!”

“I think they genuinely are aware and do want it (autonomy). But when the system kicks in and something has to give, then that’s the thing to go...it becomes ‘tell me what you want and how I do it’...They’ve definitely got an awareness of them lacking in the skills you need to learn autonomously and the education system failing in developing those skills.”

Conclusion



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On the face of it at least, no mismatch appears to exist between what students want and what we intended to facilitate on this module (i.e. learner autonomy and self-determination) in order to help them develop what a heutagogical approach encourages (i.e. the development of competencies *and* capabilities). As such, it would appear that a heutagogical approach to learning and teaching would be right up these students' street! Nevertheless, based on our initial observations and field notes since the commencement of the module, we still have some reservations on the utility of the approach. For example, a large majority of students do not appear to be engaging in the module in a way that aligns with the views reported in the current paper. A desire for explicit direction and regular instruction still appears to guide the behaviour of many, with increased learner autonomy and self-determination leading to discontent and anxiety for some. While a larger and more in-depth study is underway, which will report both module staff and students' perceptions of the completed module, we can begin to make some tentative suggestions that begin to explain the tension between students' initial perceptions and their emergent behaviour. Although we believe that students genuinely recognise the importance of autonomy and self-determination as a valuable *future* life skill, their focus during the module appears to be very much on the *present*. A consideration of what might be useful for future employment, self-improvement and 'growing up' may have been quickly side-lined by what is required to pass a graded assessment on a 12-week module. When reasoned with in light of the students' context (i.e. final year undergraduate, tuition fees, challenging graduate job market) the students' behavioural response and focus on immediate achievement would appear rational. In future work we aim to explore this further by using a case-study approach detailing what worked on the module for individual students in their context, how and why.

Biographies

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