Fostering Learner Autonomy in Higher Education through Coaching and Mentoring for Non-Traditional Learners

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Abstract

This article considers the potential ways for coaching and mentoring practices in higher education to support the development of learner autonomy, a key espoused aim of university education. I argue that coaching and mentoring can foster self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and goal-setting among students, empowering them to take greater responsibility for their learning, and that higher education institutions should make greater use of coaching and mentoring practises, particularly for non-traditional learners[what in the UK are identified as 'widening participation' students]. The aim is to stimulate reflection and discussion among higher education practitioners.
Keywords: Autonomy, Higher Education, Learner-Autonomy, Coaching, Mentoring, Non-Traditional Students, Widening Participation

Introduction

The development of learner autonomy is widely acknowledged as a central goal of higher education, as it is instrumental in the development fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991). These skills are regarded as being essential for preparing students to navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century and adapt to the ever-evolving demands of the global workforce (Barnett, 2007). However, despite the importance of learner autonomy, there has been considerable debate in the literature regarding its precise definition and the feasibility of assessing it within formal credit-bearing programmes (see, Holmes, 2018; Holmes, 2021). Furthermore, there is a recognition that traditional assessment methods, such as tests and exams, the assessment of learning, may, albeit inadvertently, encourage superficial learning and compliance, rather than the development of genuine autonomous learning skills and behaviour (Boud, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Consequently, there is a need for approaches that can more-effectively support the development of students as autonomous learners and that are authentic (i.e. realistic and relevant to real-world or real-life activities, solving real-life problems).

The Challenges of Defining and Assessing Learner Autonomy

The concept of 'learner autonomy' has been the subject of considerable research, yet there remains a lack of consensus regarding its precise definition and operationalization (Benson, 2011; Holmes, 2018). This ambiguity has led to challenges in its assessment, and concerns about the reliability of assessments (see, Holmes, 2019, 2021). Learner autonomy has been variously described as the ability of students to take responsibility for their own learning, to set their own goals, and to self-regulate their learning processes (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991). While these descriptions share a common emphasis on the active role of

the learner in shaping their own educational experience, they differ in terms of the specific skills, behaviours, and attitudes that are considered to be indicative of 'autonomy'. This lack of clarity has led to a range of overlapping and sometimes slightly contradictory conceptualizations of what exactly constitutes what we understand as being 'learner autonomy'. This means that the development of valid and reliable assessment measures is problematic (Holmes, 2018; Holec, 1981). Further challenges arise because learner autonomy is not infrequently confused with independent learning' in the literature (see Holmes, 2021 for discussion of the differences). As I have previously argued, autonomy in higher education

> "would seem to be an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie, 1956), i.e., something that is impossible to conclusively define, but perfectly possible and rational for people to discuss and justify their holding of one interpretation rather than a competing one. Yet, if it is acknowledged that autonomy may not be possible to conclusively define and that there are different interpretations, it implies that its assessment is problematic" (Holmes 2021, p 8).

We must also acknowledge Sadler's (1985) work on evaluative assessment criteria where he argued that meanings of words may have fuzzy (i.e. unclear) rather than sharp (i.e. clearly defined or absolute) definitions. In previous work (Holmes, 2018; Holmes, 2021), I have argued that the traditional methods used for assessing learner autonomy, such as tests and exams, may not be suitable for capturing its complexity,primarily for two reasons, firstly because of the complexity of clearly defining the term 'autonomy' and, secondly, because they are assessments of learning, typically focusing on evaluating the student's acquisition of knowledge and skills, rather than the underlying processes of self-regulation, goal-setting, and reflection that are more closely related to contemporary views of assessment for learning (Boud, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that traditional assessment methods may inadvertently encourage superficial learning and compliance, as students may prioritize the achievement of high grades over the cultivation of genuine autonomous

learning skills (Boud, 2000; Biggs & Tang, 2011). I have also argued that assessing autonomy, per se, i.e. as an outcome, or competency, rather than a process may be extremely problematic (Holmes, 2021).

The limitations of traditional assessment methods in evaluating learner autonomy highlight the need for alternative approaches that can more effectively evaluate its development. One potential solution is the use of formative assessment practices, which emphasize ongoing feedback and reflection, as opposed to summative assessments that focus solely on the final outcome of a learning process (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Well- designed, authentic, formative assessment incorporating regular, structured, developmental formative feedback has been shown to promote the development of self-regulated learning strategies and critical thinking, both of which are essential components of autonomy (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Authentic assessment has also been found to promote the development of learner autonomy (Villarroel et al., 2018). However even when using well-designed formative assessment processes, there remains a need for strategies that can more authentically assess the development of genuine learner autonomy in higher education settings, rather than something that manifests as autonomous behaviour, yet may not be genuinely autonomous. I have previously suggested that autonomy should be regarded as being a process, rather than an end-product and that it may not be possible to assess whether or not a student was an 'autonomous learner', because

> "If a tutor/assessor explains to learners that they are,or will be, assessing their autonomy in any way, some students will demonstrate behaviour that they believe the tutor/assessor will perceive as being autonomous, although it will not be genuinely autonomous behaviour. Almost by default, as soon as it is indicated to learners that their autonomy may be assessed, it may be impossible to do so authentically" (Holmes, 2021, p.13, emphasis mine).

As a potential solution to overcome that I have argued that universities should, instead, focus on assessing whether or not a student was in the process of 'becoming autonomous', and through doing so they they could legitimately assess if they were

'more autonomous' at the end, [of a programme of study] compared with when they commenced it" (Holmes, 2021 p.12).

The Role of Coaching and Mentoring in Developing Learner Autonomy

Coaching and mentoring offer a promising approaches way forward for fostering learner autonomy, due to their focus on supporting the development of self-regulated learning, independence, critical thinking, and goal-setting among students (Kram, 1985). Coaching and mentoring practices emphasize the cultivation of the underlying processes that are central to the development of autonomy (Boud, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In addition, they can support the well-being of both staff and students, (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019) and their social integration into academic programmes (Wallace & Haines, 2004). Whilst well-being and social integration may not be central aspects of autonomy, they are both positive benefits that may enhance a student's overall learning experience, particularly so for students from non-traditional backgrounds such as those classed as first-generation to study in higher education.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching and mentoring are often conceptualized as distinct, yet complementary, practices that share a common goal of facilitating personal and professional growth (Garvey et al., 2009). While both practices typically involve a one-to-one relationship between an experienced individual (the coach or mentor) and a less experienced individual (the coachee or mentee), coaching is typically characterized by a more structured, goal-oriented approach, with an emphasis on the development of specific skills and competencies (Cox et al., 2011). In contrast, mentoring involves a more holistic, long-term relationship, which encompasses a range of support processes, such as guidance, counselling, and, particularly in the American context, sponsorship (Kram, 1985). It should be noted that the 'more experienced' coach/mentor may only be more experienced in certain areas, and that the coachee may be equally well experienced in other areas.

'More experienced' does not necessarily mean older. And for some peer-coaching/mentoring relationships neither may necessarily be 'more' experienced than the other.

The theoretical foundations of coaching and mentoring can be traced back to various psychological and pedagogical theories, including social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). These theories emphasize the importance of self-regulation, motivation, and social interaction in the learning process; suggesting that the development of autonomy is best supported through a combination of individual reflection and collaborative dialogue (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). Accordingly, coaching and mentoring practices provide a context in which students can engage in meaningful conversations about their learning, set realistic, achievable, yet challenging, learning goals, and receive personalized, constructive and developmental, feedback on their progress. All of these align well with processes of assessment for learning. However, it should be noted that Crisp and Cruz (2009) found there were over 50 different definitions of coaching and mentoring, which varied in scope and depth, and that there was "ambiguity surrounding the definition of mentoring" which was "further obscured by inconsistencies in how the "mentoring" has been used throughout the literature" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 527). Therefore, it should be recognised that it may not always be possible to compare and contrast the benefits and disadvantages of different processes operating in different institutions and different countries.

Coaching and Learner Autonomy

A number of studies have demonstrated the positive impact of coaching on the development of learner autonomy. For example, a study by Moen and Federici (2012) found that students who received academic coaching exhibited improvements in self-regulated learning and academic performance, compared to a control group that did not receive coaching. Similarly, work by Gyllensten and Palmer (2005) reported that coaching led to increases in students' self-efficacy, goal-setting, and problem-solving abilities. Whilst research

by van Nieuwerburgh and Tong (2013) explored the experiences of higher education students who participated in a coaching programme as coaches, not coaches. They found that the process facilitated increased self-awareness, goal clarification, and the development of strategies for managing academic challenges through better study skills, increased emotional intelligence and improved communication skills. However, they suggested a potential limitation to their study in that "it could be argued that the coaches' perception of improved self-efficacy and self-confidence were the result of social persuasion rather than the coaching programme per se" (van Nieuwer burgh & Tong 2013 p.19). Overall, the research literature suggests that coaching may work most effectively as a catalyst and foundation for the development of the skills and competencies necessary for the development of students as autonomous learners.

Mentoring and Learner Autonomy

As with coaching, the positive effects of mentoring on the development of learner autonomy have been well-documented in the literature. Eby et al. (2008), for example, found that mentoring relationships were associated with a range of positive outcomes for mentees, including increased self-efficacy, goal attainment, and academic success. Similarly, a study by Allen et al. (2004) reported that students who participated in a mentoring programme exhibited higher levels of autonomy, critical thinking, and self-regulation than non-mentored students. A comprehensive review of literature on mentoring from 1990-2007 by Crisp and Cruz (2009) found there was evidence that non-traditional learners including first-generation college students and minority students who participated in mentoring programmes, particularly benefitted. However, they also identified that some of the research literature on the benefits of mentoring was methodologically flawed. In the context of widening participation and supporting non-traditional students, though, it would seem, that coaching and mentoring process are beneficial.

Peer Coaching and Mentoring

Peer coaching and mentoring have also been shown to contribute to the development of learner autonomy. A review of peer learning and co-operative learning by Topping (2005) found that peer coaching and mentoring processes could lead to improvements in students' self-regulated learning, motivation, and academic performance. He argued that "The research evidence is clear that both peer tutoring and cooperative learning can yield significant gains in academic achievement" (ibid. p.635) as well as "gains in transferable social and communication skills", although this was in reference to school-age children, not university students.

Similarly, a study by Colvin and Ashman (2010) reported that peer mentoring enhanced students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and goal-setting abilities and that "both peer mentors and students saw benefits, ranging from individual gains to helping students become connected to the campus as a whole" (p.131). Though there were gender differences. They also identified potentially negative aspects, including some risks, arguing that "the nature of the relationship, mentor and mentee, reflects hierarchical ordering. Thus help, power, and resources tend to flow in one direction, creating the possibility for misunderstanding or misuse of such power and resources and leading to challenges and resistance" (ibid. p 131). This is something that needs to be carefully considered when developing and implementing any programme, particularly for peer-mentoring processes.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Given the evidence supporting the potential for coaching and mentoring processes to contribute to the development of learner autonomy it would seem to be important for educators and university management and administration to consider the integration of these practices into existing educational programmes in some way. Incorporating coaching and mentoring practices within higher education programmes has the potential to enhance the learning experience for all students, by providing an environment in which the development of autonomy is acknowledged, identified as being important, prioritized, or given equal priority to that of developing subject or discipline-specific skills and knowledge, and supported (Kram, 1985). For instance, faculty members could act as coaches

or mentors by offering individualized guidance, feedback, and support to students throughout their academic journey. This personalized approach would enable students to take greater responsibility for their learning, as they are encouraged to actively engage in the process of setting goals, monitoring their progress, and reflecting on their achievements (Zimmerman, 2002). In effect, a form of heautagogy, or self-determined learning (Hase and Kenyon, 2000, 2001).

In addition to faculty-led coaching and mentoring, peer coaching and mentoring programmes can play an important role in the development of autonomy. These programmes involve students supporting each other in their learning process, by sharing experiences, offering feedback, and collaboratively problem-solving (Topping, 2005). Here it would not be assumed that the coach was a 'more experienced' person. There is good evidence to suggest that peer coaching and mentoring processes enhance students' self-regulated learning skills, motivation, and academic performance, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness within their learning community (for example, see Topping, 2005) as well as encouraging self-reflection (Topping, 2018).

Implementing coaching and mentoring practices in higher education settings, however, does necessitate a shift in the way educators and institutions approach teaching, learning and assessment. This shift requires a move away from the traditional, teacher-centred model, towards a more learner-centred co-constructivist approach. One that emphasizes the active role of students in shaping their own educational experiences (Barr & Tagg, 1995). In order to be able to effectively integrate coaching and mentoring practices management must be willing to embrace this shift, and to invest in the necessary resources, training, and support structures that can facilitate their successful implementation (Cox et al., 2011) and recognise there may be disciplinary differences and different understanding as to how to do this most cost-effectively and in alignment with the pedagogical approaches of teaching teams. Professional development programmes for university staff should be designed to equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to serve as effective coaches and mentors. Skills such

as active listening, empathy, andhow to set realistic and achievable, goals at the appropriate level for the learner (Garvey et al., 2009). These are skills which educators should already possess, yet they may need to be further developed through actual coaching and mentoring practices. From a personal perspective, as an educator who has acted as both a coach and mentor over many years, my experience is that there is a not inconsiderable difference between knowing how to be a coach/mentor; and actually being one. For many people, the practice of being a mentor/ mentee or coach/coachee facilitates a much deeper understanding and recognition of how the processes actually 'work' and the benefits they bring, far better than simply reading about them. Accordingly, I believe that universities should establish support networks and communities of practice that can provide ongoing guidance, feedback, and resources for faculty members engaged in coaching and mentoring (Cox et al., 2011), to disseminate best-practice.

Inclusivity and Cultural Responsiveness

Implementing coaching and mentoring practices in higher education should be carried out in a culturally responsive and inclusive manner, ensuring that the unique needs, preferences, and characteristics which recognise the diverse needs of contemporary student populations are taken into consideration. This entails designing inclusive coaching and mentoring programmes that acknowledge the specific challenges and barriers faced by students from non-traditional backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). By adopting a culturally responsive and inclusive approach universities can ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies necessary to become, or move towards becoming, autonomous learners (Gay, 2010). Implementing coaching and mentoring practices requires careful consideration of the unique needs, preferences, and characteristics which accommodate the diversity of today's diverse student populations. For instance, non-traditional, international, widening participation, and first-generation to higher education students may face particular, specific challenges and barriers which may necessitate specific, bespoke coaching and

mentoring support (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Encouraging Peer Coaching and Mentoring

Higher education institutions should also promote the establishment of peer coaching and mentoring programmes. These can be facilitated through formal initiatives, such as peer-led study groups and learning communities, or through encouraging informal networks within the student body (Topping, 2005). Encouraging peer coaching and mentoring not only supports the development of learner autonomy, but also contributes to the creation of a collaborative, inclusive, and supportive learning environment. It has also been identified as being a relatively cost effective process compared with other initiatives. However, we must recognise that for many students "assessment directs student learning, because it is the assessment system that defines what is worth learning" (Havnes, 2004, p.1), and "from our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum" Ramsden (1992 p.187), therefore informal and non-assessed interventions may have less impact than ones that are more formalised and directly assessed, contributing academic credit to the learner's programme of study. Universities may see better uptake and interest from students where they offer credit -bearing modules in coaching/mentoring. Yet, conversely, credit-bearing assessed modules may lead to student behaviour that is not genuinely autonomous.

Conclusion and Future Directions for Research

I have presented an argument for the integration of coaching and mentoring practices in higher education settings to support the development of learner autonomy. The evidence highlights the positive impact of coaching and mentoring on the growth of self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and goal-setting.

Further research is needed to explore the nuanced and contextual factors that may influence both the pedagogical effectiveness and the cost-effectiveness of coaching and mentoring in developing learner autonomy. For instance, future studies could investigate the specific coaching and mentoring techniques and strategies that are most effective for fostering autonomy among specific types of student within diverse student populations, as well as the potential benefits of combining these practices with other learner-centred pedagogies, such as problem-based learning, experiential learning, and collaborative learning (Kilgour et al., 2015; Kolb, 2014).

Finally, as higher education institutions increasingly embrace online and hybrid learning models, it will be important to examine the ways in which coaching and mentoring practices can be adapted and implemented for online learning models (Chen et al., 2018). Future research could explore the potential of digital technologies, such as video conferencing, online discussion forums, and virtual learning environments, to facilitate effective coaching and mentoring interactions, and to investigate the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting learner autonomy in digital learning spaces. There is already a growing area of research focusing on online interventions (e.g. see Tinoco-Giraldo et al. 2020, for a review of activity).

Further longitudinal research is also needed to assess the long-term impact of coaching and mentoring practices on students' development of autonomy, as well as their academic and professional success outside of, and beyond, the confines of higher education. Particularly so for non-traditional students, post-university. By tracking students' progress over time, researchers may be able to gain valuable insights into the lasting effects of coaching and mentoring on each learners' ability to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world, characterized by complex challenges and increasingly uncertain opportunities after graduation.

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