The role of education guidance in students' transition to autonomous learning

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
Promoting Learner Autonomy
Sheffield Hallam University
http://extra.shu.ac.uk/cetl/cplahome.html

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Sheffield Hallam University

28,000 students
4,000 staff
6th largest in the UK
'Best modern university' in the UK
Government white paper: 'The future of Higher Education' 2003

Two main aims:
reward excellent teaching practice
ensure substantial benefits to students, teachers and institutions

January 2005: funding awarded for 74 centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs)

£2,000,000 capital
£500,000 per year to 2010

At Sheffield Hallam University
CPLA, Employability, Inter professional education

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A definition of autonomy

An autonomous learner takes **responsibility** for his/her own learning. They can identify:

- their **learning goals** (what they need to learn)
- their **learning processes** (how they will learn it)
- how they will **evaluate** and **use** their learning
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### Willingness to Learn
- Balance of vocational, academic, personal and social motivations to learn
  - Intrinsic motivation
  - Extrinsic motivation
  - Goals
  - Short - Medium - Long
  - Confidence

### Stance Towards Learning
- Orientation to learning
- Appropriate conceptions of learning
  - Deep approach to learning
- A range of appropriate learning strategies
  - Active in their learning

### Information Skills
- Recognise information need
- Addressed information ‘gap’
- Construct strategies for locating information
  - Locate and access information
  - Compare and evaluate information
- Organise, apply and communicate information
  - Synthesise and build upon existing information

### Management
- Study Skills
  - Planning and problem solving
  - Evaluation & Metacognition
    - Self-assessment
    - Focus & ‘stickability’
  - Time and project management
- Balancing social, work and learning needs
  - Assessment

### Context, Method, Process, Constraints, Support, Conclusions

**Context**

- **Method**
- **Process**
- **Constraints**
- **Support**
- **Conclusions**
Learner autonomy

• Pedagogical approaches and educational theories associated with learner autonomy
• Characteristics of the autonomous learner

‘Constructivist techniques can even seem deceptive and manipulative. Betty Fable might sometimes find herself asking, “Why don’t you just tell me what you want me to know instead of making a big secret of it?” This is not always an unreasonable question.’

(Perkins in Meyer and Land, 2006: 36)
Learner autonomy
• Pedagogical approaches and educational theories associated with learner autonomy
• Characteristics of the autonomous learner

Five sorts of ‘troublesome knowledge’:
• Ritual knowledge
• Inert knowledge
• Conceptually difficult knowledge
• Foreign knowledge
• Tacit knowledge

(Meyer and Land, 2006)

Constructivist learner:
Active, social and creative
(Perkins in Meyer and Land, 2006: 36)
**Learner autonomy**

- Pedagogical approaches and educational theories associated with learner autonomy
- **Characteristics of the autonomous learner**

  'Autonomous people are *intrinsically-motivated*, perceive themselves to be *in control of their decision making*, *take responsibility* for the outcomes of their actions and *have confidence* in themselves...In order to translate these underlying attributes into behaviour, McCombs & Marziano (1990) argue that metacognitive skills, such as *self-appraisal, reflective practices*, strategy choice and implementation, need to be acquired and applied.'

  (Fazey & Fazey, 2001: 345)
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**Education guidance**

• An agency of learner autonomy
• Promoting reflection
• Supporting transition into HE

'Guidance is not about telling people what to do: rather it is a process of finding and interpreting evidence, self exploration, planning and review. Above all, it is a process of helping individuals to learn to be autonomous, to take control of their own decisions and to make decisions wisely... This is a very different notion from the common perception of it as a kind of welfare service, picking up the pieces when students or systems fail.'

(McNair, 1996: 12)
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**Context**

**Method**

**Process**

**Constraints**

**Support**

**Conclusions**

**Education guidance**

- An agency of learner autonomy
- **Promoting reflection**
- Supporting transition into HE

**Noticing**

'Noticing is an act of becoming aware of what is happening in and around oneself. It is active and seeking, although it may not be formally planned: it involves a continuing effort to be aware of what is taking place in oneself and in the learning experience.'

(Boud & Walker, 1990: 68)

**Intervening**

'the deliberate actions of the learner, the strategic interventions over which the learner can exercise some influence on the situation'

(Boud and Walker, 1990:74)
Empirical phenomenology

'focused less on the interpretation of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants' (Creswell, 2007)

'develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of 'what' they experience and 'how' they experienced it.' (Moustakas, 1994)

Sample
In-depth, semi-structured interviewing:
30 students who had used the Education Guidance Service

Interview questions
• The process of adapting to autonomy
• Constraints/ support mechanisms for learner autonomy
• Noticing issues and taking action

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The process of understanding autonomy
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**Shock**

*Student 18:*
‘There is a big difference between college and university and I don’t think that college do enough to prepare you for university - it is a big shock. Really big step. It is a bigger step from college to university than it is from school to colleges. A lot bigger step. And I feel you need half a year - a year just to get your head around things. And it really is a big change.’

**Confusion**

*Student 2:*
‘From A level you have been spoon-fed. You get the notes - what you are going to be reading, you get the homework, and what date it is supposed to be in. Whereas at university you have to go on Blackboard, print off your notes, find out what you have to do for the next seminar. And I think - now I am quite organised, I realise it is not an unorganised course, but in the beginning I was really confused about everything.’

**Failure**

*Student 18:*
‘In my first year I was working full time while studying so I didn’t really get a lot of private study time. Which was shown in my grades.

Researcher: You were working full time?
Student 18: Yes in the evenings.

Researcher: And did you think you would be able to manage full time study as well as full time work?
Student 18: Yes. And it just didn’t work. And I wouldn’t recommend that to anyone. But I have left that job now.’

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constructing an understanding

**Student 7:**
‘Their approach is based on your willingness to learn, and your self study. Everything here is based on your self study. So you have to have a desire to learn. Nobody really will help you, they will guide you, they will give you a reading list, but if you want to gain knowledge you have to go to the library and read it for yourself... So what I learned was to care for myself. If you want to learn something, do it yourself.’
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The process of understanding autonomy

• Becoming independent enquirers
• Taking responsibility

What are the constraints?
What supports this process?
The process of understanding autonomy

• Becoming independent enquirers
• Taking responsibility

*What are the constraints to learner autonomy?*
Mixed messages

**Researcher:** ‘Are there other people on the course who feel the same way about this module?’

**Student 5:** ‘Everybody, hardly anybody has started on it because we just don’t know where to start or what to do - we are all just trying to ask each other and somebody has done a few drafts and they’ve sent drafts off to people. One person emailed drafts off and the **lecturer said it was wrong** and another lecturer said it was right so it is just - we don’t know what to do.’

‘And I think that’s a big thing - **when it is not clear enough, you just struggle to start and you just don’t know what to do.** And then one of the lecturers got back to us and I thought that was really good but then when we got our assignments back we were all marked down for the way that he told us to do it. **And it is which lecturer to speak to because they all have different ideas, and I personally think that they have not got a set structure that they work to and it’s all about opinion.**’

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Lack of advice and guidance

**Student 7:**
'It is so difficult to write assignment because they give you just two lectures and then they ask you to write assignment and you don't have a base you don't have knowledge to write assignment. And guidelines for assignment are not clear at all.
For example what I did - I approached my tutor and we went through that again and again, but what I found for example - interprofessional learning - even tutors don't know, they don't have a clear idea what to write for that assignment. '

‘And it's not just my word, I mean we always communicate to each other in our group, our group is just very friendly and small and we always communicate and we just say the same things, we have to do a dissertation now, and nobody really knows how to write a dissertation. Because they just told us - 'write a dissertation'. Here are the guidelines. And that's it.'
• Mixed messages
• Lack of coherent advice
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The process of understanding autonomy

• Becoming independent enquirers
• Taking responsibility

What supports learner autonomy?

‘noticing’ and ‘intervening’
Student 17: ‘I always knew that guidance was there but I never really wanted to speak to them because I didn’t have a clue myself, I didn’t have any ideas of what I wanted to do. So it was after that lecture that I thought I want to be an educational psychologist and I thought about it more. So then talking to the education adviser it helped… it did help a lot by telling me how I can go about it - so ‘things that I can do if I don’t do that’.

Researcher: ‘So you didn’t go to guidance earlier because you didn’t feel like you had a question?’

Student 17: ‘Yes I didn’t feel like I had anything to ask them. So it was near the end of my second year when I went to see them.’
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**`noticing`**

**Student 2:**
‘I don’t know why I didn’t go I just - noone else went. And I always knew I had a problem, but I just thought I just get on and get through... I just thought in third year it clicked - I’m really struggling, my friends are doing fine and I’m getting more and more behind, and that’s when I just started to go.’

comparison with peers; problem avoidance
Factors influencing 'noticing':

• underlying reflection
• comparison with peers
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'Researcher: ‘What was the triggering event, what made you realise you had to...’

Student 3: ‘Come and talk to guidance? Ok - I had been working on my dissertation and it’s just - it’s a difficult process, and I was hitting a wall and I needed to talk it out with somebody. And my tutor’s really great and he’s very supportive but he always - he’s spent so much time with me and I didn’t want to take up more of his time and -I don’t know I wanted to talk out my ideas with someone else to see what they thought. And so I came into guidance I figured - ok if I could get someone else’s opinion, someone else’s view. This could hopefully get me more back on track.’

Frustration; regaining control over learning
### 'Intervening'

**Student 4**

‘The result I got for that really disheartened me because it was like - the assignment was in for February and I completed my assignment in December, and I kept suggesting to the tutor that may be she can have a brief look at it, and they can tell me whether I can improve it or not but she wasn’t willing to do that, whereas some tutors are willing to do that, other tutors are not, and she was one of the tutors who was not willing to do it, whatsoever at all.

I think in that sense - it was pretty poor because I have colleagues at other universities, colleagues from work and other universities and their tutors have actually gone through assignments with them and gone ‘may be you can do this may be you can cover this section. Which is always good and encouraging, it shows good support to someone, rather than just saying to somebody 'no I can’t have a look at it'. So I went to learning support...’

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**The role of education guidance in students' transition to autonomous learning**
'intervening'

**Student 5:**
‘I think it was this first assignment - it was me and some other people off the course we just really did not know about the assignment - what to do and - we just had quite a few questions and I'd seen this advertised and I mentioned I was going to go and my friend said I'd go with you, I really want to go. So that was why we went we were just really trying to understand what we were doing.’

Awareness; asking questions
Factors influencing 'intervening'

Forms of intervention:

• regaining control over learning
• support with formative feedback
• asking questions (remedial to mixed messages given)
**Conclusions**

**Constraints**
- Mixed messages
- Lack of coherent advice
- Instructional design approach; no formative feedback or assessment for learning built in

**The role of education guidance as a support mechanism**
- Noticing guidance – preceded by purposeful reflection
- Accessing this support is an issue
- Kinds of support – regaining control; formative feedback; dealing with mixed messages.

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Context: Noticing - self awareness
- Shock

Method: Intervening - action
- Confusion
- Failure
- Mixed messages
- Linear delivery

Process: Willingness
- Frustration
- Awareness
- Inertia
- Action

Constraints: Support

Support: Conclusions
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**Scholarship Teams**

- Conceptual stance
- Motivation and engagement
- Information skills
- Organisation for learning
- Enquiry Based Learning
- Student partnerships
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**Context**
- Small scale project scheme
  - 24 projects
  - one academic year

- Faculty project scheme
  - 4 faculties
  - two and a half years

**Method**
- Developing student autonomy

**Process**
- Enquiry Based Learning

**Constraints**
- Linkages with central support departments

**Support**

**Conclusions**
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