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In Pursuit of Autonomy: A Fallacy or Reality? A Case Study of Egyptian Students in Higher Education

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Abstract: Learning to be self-directed involves taking responsibility for the objectives of learning. This paper will consider the challenges involved in the promotion of independent autonomous learning and the taking of an active role in learning within the confines of a British institutional higher education setting in Egypt. The paper raises the discussion that if autonomous learning is to be encouraged at Egyptian universities, faculty staff need to develop new conceptions of teaching and learning; be willing to test various methods and techniques of instruction; and acquire new skills as they shift from the role of knowledge provider to the role of being a facilitator or resource person. On the other hand, it argues that Egyptian students need to develop new learning strategies as they make the transition from being passive learners to becoming autonomous learners. It will also raise issues concerning the provision of support for such learning and discuss implications for future work in this field.

Keywords: Independent Learning, British Higher Education, Autonomous Learners, Self-directed Learning, Student Support Services, Egypt

Introduction

Defining Learner Autonomy

DESPITE THE CORRELATION between taking responsibility for the objectives of one's learning and academic success, autonomous learning is still a growing concern in many higher education classrooms (Nilson, 2003, Nilson & Jackson, 2004; Sorcinelli, 1994). The agreed functions of autonomous learning include learner initiative, motivation and personal involvement. In fact, some educators believe that the "unprepared mentality" of high school graduate students may be one of the main reasons behind the challenges involved in the promotion of autonomous learning within higher education settings (Berger, 2000). In theory, Agota Scharle and Anita Szabo (2000) define autonomy as the "freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions," it is also consciously making an effort to contribute to one's own learning. Holec (1981), states that learner autonomy consists of making decisions in learning, including setting objectives, defining content, selecting methods and evaluating the outcome of learning which means students decide on what, when and how they learn. Autonomy requires active involvement and undertaking responsibility away from the teacher—not waiting to be told what to do. Furthermore, Pemberton (1996) explains that autonomy, is a capacity to learn on ones' own, and further explains that learning does not necessarily take place in a vacuum but it is also the capacity to work independently in cooperation with others (Dam 1955).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges that hindered autonomous learning of adult learners, and determine effective strategies used by faculty staff to promote and develop learner autonomy in a British higher education institution established in Egypt, The British University in Egypt (BUE). It is important, however, to first understand the background of private universities in Egypt and highlight some of the existing challenges in higher education.

Background

Adult learners enrolled at private universities in Egypt over the past recent years have been characterized as passive, dependent and lacking in initiative. A large percentage of the students in Egypt who complete high school regardless of the quality of teaching, lack the basic skills that allow them to transition academically into a university system; many of the students are simply not ready for the demands higher education is making of them and simply find it a 'shock' (Murray and Kirton, 2006). This generalization is not specific to any one school, but it is an education system flaw that has permeated all the primary and secondary levels. On the other hand, a lack of concrete teaching strategies, which aim to develop autonomous learning in the higher education classroom in Egypt, is absent and is the main cause behind the extreme dependency of students on their instructors. To further compound the problem of student dependency on the classroom instructor for academic achievement, quite a large percentage of instructors often depend on outdated teaching strategies as a result of inappropriate staff development programmes or the complete absence of professional development in some instances. The situation however at the BUE is not so dim; nevertheless it suffers from similar ailments, particularly from the inadequacies of part-time staff coming from institutions less rigorous than the BUE.

Over the course of the past six years, there have been efforts to record students' views regarding autonomous learning at the BUE in an attempt to use the feedback to enhance teaching and further develop learners' autonomy. In line with the university's efforts to enhance teaching and learning, academic staff in the English Department, were determined to continue to reinforce learner autonomy within the English language classroom. Efforts were hoped to help raise learner autonomy in the English language classroom and also in their relevant degree areas. Students enrolled at the BUE, are fortunate enough to study at a university which supports effective autonomous learning and higher-quality education.

Literature Review

Because adult learners enrolled at private universities in Egypt in recent years have been characterized as passive, dependent and lacking in initiative, studies conducted on autonomous learning, have provided some support to the perceived problem's wider scope. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), points out that the first two years of university study are the main factors instigating the development of students' cognitive skills in relation to reliable predictors of academic performance such as autonomous learning. According to Baxter and Magolda (2001), most students are comfortable absorbing others' knowledge. Many have also been accustomed to "teacher-centered environments, where they can be

passive observers and preserve their anonymity” (Machemer & Crawford 2007). Many learners joining higher education institutions in Egypt today, not only are they not prepared to make the transition from high school to university but also lack the skills which allow them to become autonomous learners. The responsibility of developing autonomous learners does not solely fall on the shoulders of the learner but it is vital to acknowledge that instructor behaviours such as being unprepared for class, not allowing open discussion, lack of interest, belittling or taunting students, and not being available for office hours after class (Clarke & Springer, 2007) are elements considered deterring to autonomy.

Prosser, Trigwell, & Waterhouse (1999) point out, that it is the teachers who have the ability to influence the learning context and invoke deep approaches to learning; helping the students to believe that their performance is primarily in their own hands. Kuh et al. (2005) reported that when faculty supported students’ efforts to meet high expectations, students rose to the challenge.

Sorcinelli (1994) and many later researchers support the notion of instructors’ ability to influence the learning context but also offer practical advice for troublesome situations that commonly arise when attempting to cultivate a culture of learner autonomy in higher education. These include acting as a role model, reviewing course material (Berger, 2000), providing more active learning (Brewer, 2005, Carbone, 1999), and balancing a projected personality of friendly responsiveness (Berger, 2000; Carbone, 1999; Nilesen, 2003). One reason for sharing these many different strategies is because the concept of learner autonomy is complex. On the other hand, promoting it to the millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 2000) must be a goal addressed by all higher education institutions. Keeter and Taylor (2009) wrote that millennials “are the first generation in human history that regard behaviours like tweeting and texting” [...] as everyday parts of their social lives and their search for understanding. Despite the proven strategies and practical advice which promote autonomy, instructors within the English Department developed a survey to help determine the challenges which hinder learners from becoming autonomous and highlight the strategies found to be most effective in developing autonomy.

Methodology

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges which hindered autonomous learning in the university classroom and the most effective strategies used by academic staff to promote learner autonomy. Findings were hoped to help raise the autonomy level of students not only in their English language study but also in their degree areas as well as improve teaching strategies. The study addresses three research questions:

1. What are the challenges which deter autonomous learning?
2. Are Egyptian students in a UK higher education system able to acquire the necessary autonomous learning skills to succeed? Which behaviours hinder autonomous learning?
3. What student support systems are most effective for developing student autonomy?

Institution and Participants

British universities have always assumed that it was the responsibility of schools to prepare students for college (O'Neill, 2008). The British University in Egypt (BUE) established in 2005 adopts the slogan "Learn how to think, not what to think" emphasizing the call for autonomous learning. It is also acknowledged that the quality of any learning environment is to a significant extent dependent on the degree to which that environment acknowledges the need to support learner autonomy. Today an important component of any learning environment is the perceived economic value of its knowledge in the marketplace, either as an asset for finding employment or as a means of production in the knowledge economy. Based on this consideration, learners must not only decide why and what to learn, but also where to learn it and who to learn it from.

English language at the BUE is a progression requirement and as a result plays a pivotal role in the academic success of the student learners registered in the different degree areas. It was important to reinforce through the English programme the message that effective learning does not only take place in the classroom but also by studying independently. For many of the students enrolled at the BUE studying independently is a challenge. Few schools in Egypt cultivate a culture of autonomous learning.

Operating the Advising and Language Support Office-ALSO

The question of whether a specific learning environment will support or hinder the expression of autonomy is an important one for educators. Contemporary literature in higher education has focused on learner self-direction as a core value associated with the notion of facilitation, rather than the dispensation of learning (Knowles 1980; Long, 1992). In an effort to support students to become autonomous learners, in September 2010, the English Department at the BUE, established the Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO), a self-directed language learning centre. The objective of ALSO was to assist students in becoming autonomous learners, and help them improve their English language skills, which would in turn enhance their academic performance in their degree areas and boost their employability chances in the future. Most mediated learning environments require such participation from learners, varying results based on the study will be described below.

Academic staff operating the self-directed learning centre ALSO were aware that a 21st century education, includes a wide range of skills, such as analysis, teamwork, problem solving, ethical reasoning and intercultural competence; and by acquiring them, students would become "future-proofed" (Hill, Popovic, Elland, Lawton, and Morton, 2010). In this sense, it can be said that autonomy is related to the number of "tasks" appropriated by the learner (Tough, 1965). Nevertheless, it was still necessary for the academic staff working in ALSO to take a number of crucial factors into account when offering the necessary support for students who came for additional language support and autonomous learning:

- Students if coerced into autonomous learning may not necessarily benefit from the support offered;
- Personality traits, learning styles and cultural backgrounds may set limitations to the development of learner autonomy;

- A supportive and flexible learning environment is crucial to cultivating a culture of autonomous learning;
- Establishing rapport and a good relationship with students assists them in formulating their goals;
- Modifying the role of the instructor from being a teacher to becoming a facilitator allows room for student re-orientation and self-discovery;
- Learner autonomy is also the capacity to work independently in cooperation with others (Dam 1955).

Survey and Interview Instrument

The primary means of data collection for this study were a survey and an interview. The survey was electronically distributed to forty students of different English language levels and varying degree areas ranging between Business Administration, Informatics, and Engineering; all of which had volunteered to participate in the study. The survey questions were crafted to 1) help identify the techniques students used for learning, 2) determine what changes students perceived were important for them to make in order to reach a turning point in their learning experience as autonomous learners, and 3) highlight the challenges obstructing the transition to autonomy. Collecting feedback from the study survey was regarded by many of the enlisted students as a new experience which they were happy to be part of.

The interview was held in two parts; a group discussion and one to one interview. The interview was two hours long, repeated in two consecutive weeks during the students' blocked hours in order to enable them to participate without having to skip classes. The interviews were held by staff operating ALSO in addition to volunteer faculty staff members from the English language programme. Among the 40 survey respondents, 65% (26 students) were male and 35% (14 students) were female. The same forty students participated in the interviews. The interviews' two open-ended questions, focused on whether students felt they were being prepared to be autonomous learners and second what they thought academic staff can do to or not do to help cultivate an environment which promotes learner autonomy (the actual survey is available at <http://prepyearenglish.pbworks.com>). The students were assured that the information collected would be used for staff development purposes and for modifying the support services offered to students seeking self-directed learning at ALSO. An informal staff development discussion circle was also initiated around the same time of the study in the English Department to discuss and brainstorm key issues related to learner autonomy. The informal feedback collected is discussed subsequently in the analysis.

Procedure

The survey was administered during the 2010 Spring semester to the forty students who had volunteered to participate. The participants were given one week to complete the survey. The same participants were asked to meet for one to one in-depth interviews to assess the effectiveness of the efforts exerted to promote autonomous learning and the support systems provided for this purpose. Extensive research has been carried out by Johnson (2008) regarding using interview questions for different pedagogical reasons particularly in real life situations in order to determine several key aspects that usually would entail decision making of some sort. Questions were formulated to explore the four areas of learner autonomy a)

motivation level, b) use of meta-cognitive strategies, c) perception of one's own learning, d) application.

The data from the survey and the interviews were processed manually based on the traced patterns found in students' comments. Interviews were taped, transcribed, coded and analyzed using standard content analysis techniques. Coding was done by grouping units of meaning. During that time fifteen additional students started the survey but did not finish it and two students did not show up for the one to one in-depth interview. Their responses were not included in the survey or interview analysis and results.

Results

The survey data were interpreted by an experienced group of faculty members including the information gathered through the in-depth one on one interviews with students. The oral feedback from the interview discussions were a major source of qualitative data (Patton, 1990).

When asked to identify the modules in which private study was a main component of the learning process, 96% of the students identified English language modules. It may be surprising to learn that almost all of the students who had enlisted for autonomous learning at ALSO had deliberately rejected all class assignments posted under private study on e-learning. Eighty percent of the assignments rejected by the students were compulsory while 20% were additional support targeting differentiation. Respondents indicated that the difficulty they face in transitioning into an independent learner was their primary challenge, 45% of the respondents reported that patterns of thought and task response led to a lack of understanding of what is required hence for them this was the most outstanding issue, 15% felt there was no need to complete private study assignments on the e-learning because they were not graded. Because elearning required some higher degree of learner autonomy than traditional classroom instruction; clearly, lack of autonomy was considered as the main reason why students failed to complete their e-learning workload. Holmberg (1986) on the other had explains that producing a standard learning framework to be followed by all learners in the same sequence, usually within a set of prescribed deadlines, can in itself become a constraint imposed on the learners. Seen within this context, elearning can be said to constrain "autonomy" among learners.

Research Question 1

What are the Challenges which Deter Autonomous Learning?

Overall, 4% of the student respondents reported that learner autonomy is a new term for them. According to Long (1982), the first area of learner autonomy includes the motivational intentional forces that drive the learner to apply some determination (or "vigour") to the act of learning. It appeared in the results that 16% felt because instructors did not attach any weighting to the quality of the interactions in the classroom or e-learning they were de-motivated. The second set of elements identified by Long (1982) as a subset of learner autonomy were the "pedagogical" aspects of learning. These involve the control over the specifics of the act of learning, such as defining learning goals, deciding on a learning sequence, choosing a workable pace of learning activities, and selecting learning resources (Hrimech & Bouchard,

1998). In traditional learning environments, most of the specifics of learning are the responsibility of a teacher. Learning at private universities on the other hand, has been reported by 45% of the respondents as requires some higher degree of learner autonomy than traditional school and government higher education instruction. The remaining 35% declared that procrastinating and poor study skills interfered with their success as autonomous learners. Students indicated that they have been used to being spoon-fed information at schools as opposed to being trained how to acquire information independently.

Research Question 2

Are Egyptian Students in a UK Higher Education System able to Acquire the Necessary Autonomous Learning Skills to Succeed? Which Behaviours Hinder Autonomous Learning?

One of the main behaviours which hinder autonomous learning was identified by 34% of the students as procrastinating work. Also because nowadays, learning materials include rather diverse media, 34% reported the use of new teaching mediums such as hypertexts, smart-boards and e-learning were with varying degrees a constraint which hindered the expression of their autonomy. Some students indicated that the imposition of online discussions was superfluous, but nevertheless felt their learning was validated when their work was read by others. The remaining 32% said that their lack of autonomy was reflected in “feeling lost” and believed that some support from the teacher like monitoring their progress in class is still required. Students participating in the study reported that they were not accustomed to accessing prior knowledge in order to link new information to what is already known. Many (n=36) also claimed that the opportunity of being in classroom environments that encouraged “autonomy” was synonymous to them with “freedom.” On the other hand, students who had the opportunity of being in classroom environments which promoted autonomy believed they were able to acquire the necessary skills within the first year of university.

In support of the above, Kuh explains that many students have not developed the habits of the mind and heart that will stand them in good stead to successfully grapple with the more challenging intellectual tasks of university study (2007). The analysis of the survey responses and the interviews, indicated that although the majority of the students were aware of the learning experiences they had undergone and made note of what they needed to change in order to succeed academically, some had not completely adjusted to the university level expectations and found autonomous learning burdensome.

Research Question 3

What Student Support Systems are Most Effective for Developing Learners' Autonomy?

By encouraging students to focus on the process of their own learning, we help them to consciously examine their own contribution towards developing autonomy, formulate an idea about their level of language proficiency and plan the direction of their progress. Empowering students with knowledge about their learning was identified as one of the key support systems that 13% of students believed to be effective. Office hours were regarded

by 28% of the respondents as a chance to meet with instructors outside the classroom to inquire about their learning styles and seek help to assimilate and apply knowledge.

Social activities organized by the Student Union were indicated by 19% of the respondents as supportive measures that helped build their confidence and give them a leading role outside the classroom. Strategies identified as being most effective by 28% of the respondents in promoting and developing autonomy was the English Department Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO), while the remaining 12% indicated other effective support strategies such as the Writing Centre workshops, Library Study Skills workshops and the instructors' teaching approaches. In the open-ended interview questions, respondents had the opportunity to add narrative comments to clarify their concerns and explain their preference of using certain support services as opposed to others.

The interview questions raised issues such as the effectiveness of the English language module, the relevance of the skills developed in the module to their degree area of study, the effectiveness of the teaching instructor and recommendations for improvement. Unfortunately, 49% of the respondents indicated that they did not see the relevance of their English language study to their degree area. This was further explained to the interviewers as having mixed English language ability students in the same lecture in the faculties which not only put constraints on students who were able to work autonomously but also on the instructor. It also affected the weaker students by dragging them further down academically. The English language modules vary in developing students language skills according to their level but mainly focus on developing the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in addition to research writing. Predictably, about half of the students said it took some effort to prevent procrastination when facing the prospect of doing assignments online, in the absence of grades.

Few of the respondents, 15% were able to make a connection between the skills they develop in the English language classroom, and the necessity to transfer these skills to their degree area of study. The students also believed that developing autonomy was not solely their responsibility but the responsibility of the teaching instructor; encouraging learner autonomy through classroom practice was regarded by 20% of the respondents as the most effective means to support students to develop autonomy. It is here that the role of the instructor shifts from being didactic to facilitator. There is also the tendency as observed by 16% of the respondents for instructors to use technology and systems that are available in class, rather than those that are appropriate; and that in a way they believe, affected their autonomy. Additionally, students indicated that faculty staff who share the rubrics and "discuss the assessment criteria" then allow students in class to apply it to their own assignments or other students' work" (Rust, 2003) helped them understand about their own learning process. Although sharing assessment criteria and rubrics were found to assure students that marking is fair and accurate, informing them about the standards against which their work will be judged was not sufficient to improve their understanding of the assessment process or enable them to perform better in most cases.

The students' responses in the survey further indicated that feedback and commentary from peers and instructors impacted their approach to assignments helped them become better prepared for assessments either by using the same learning strategies which resulted in good grades or by altering their flawed study habits.

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to obtain from the learner's perspective some indication of the factors that encourage or deter the development of autonomy in mediated learning environments. In light of the data collected through the survey and interviews, it was possible to make some recommendations that relate to the dimensions of learner autonomy (see table 1).

Table 1: Learning Experiences Identified by BUE Students

		Percentage of Students
1.	I am satisfied with the overall environment provided to develop autonomous learning.	64%
2.	I understand the pedagogical objectives behind the varied feedback approaches utilized to address differentiation and language needs including peer editing.	14%
3.	I am satisfied with the motivation strategies used by my instructor to initiate autonomous learning.	43%
4.	I sometimes study or read things not assigned by my instructor.	9%
5.	I take the initiative to book an appointment at the Advising and Language Support Office.	68%
6.	I feel that independent learning is tedious and de-motivating.	83%
7.	I am satisfaction with the Library and the student study skills workshops.	49%
8.	I make use of the Writing Centre student workshops every week.	40%
9.	I have the freedom to make choices in my learning process.	49%
10.	I am satisfied with e-learning and the posting of independent learning assignments.	44%
11.	I do as little as possible for my private study.	80%
12.	I am satisfied with my current learning strategies.	16%
13.	I understand that academic success is largely on the part of the student.	56%
14.	I often give my opinion about a lesson or in a discussion.	25%
15.	I understand that the instructor's role is a facilitator or resource provider.	12%

Many of the students who had low self-esteem during the one to one interview sessions expressed concerns about their capacity to become autonomous learners seeing this as developmental and difficult. One student stated his concerns about autonomy as follows:

"I find it hard and confusing, it's difficult. I try to work by myself on the assignment with no input from the teacher but I can't work – I need the teacher to tell me what I need to do. I get help from my colleagues but I don't feel confident like when I get feedback from the teacher."

Some students expressed that they felt a continuous tension between wanting to achieve and adjusting well to the new environment and the demands of higher education. Antwan a first year student in the faculty of Engineering when asked to evaluate his work and reflect on his learning achievement stated:

“I feel lost. I prefer work with the teacher in class and class time not enough, not enough for me anyway.”

However, there were students such as Mirna who also acknowledged the value of having to work things out for herself and having to organize herself by setting priorities and seeking information independently:

“I regret that I did not put more time into the module as I realize that the more effort I invest the more I get from it.”

Gamil on the other hand believed more in the traditional image of a lecturer who distils and dispenses knowledge and is in control of the learning environment:

“It is safe. I learn, maybe I think I learn. I am less worried about getting the right answer but alone I am worried.”

In context of the above, Derrida (1987) alerts us to the need of recognizing the problems inherent in our use of concepts such as “autonomy” explaining that the difficulty experienced by students in the process of learning to assess their own performance, indicates that students have expectations of external moderation even when they have shown to resist learner-controlled learning. Students doubt their own ability to self-assess and see grading as staff responsibility; hence rejecting the concept of autonomy.

Students’ feeling of frustration and impotence with the lack of structure inherent in independent learning uncovered some of the underlying messages being transmitted to and received by the students during the process of developing autonomy. The practice of assisting students to develop transferable independent learning skills, and acquire knowledge may be after all a fallacy of independence. Research results identified that students who actively participated in their own learning were not functioning in isolation but rather to a certain degree operating in co-operation and collaboration with others.

The Blindside to Behaviour that Hinders Independent Learning

The survey results and one to one interviews shed light on other underlying students’ concerns, as the discussion steered towards the effectiveness of academic staff. The survey results were used to determine whether the teaching strategies commonly used were effective. It also became apparent that faculty behavior had an indirect impact in hindering autonomous learning which included: the reluctance of some lecturers to relinquish their control of the learning environment and demonstrating their expertise. This is what Powell (1981) explains as the concept of learner-controlled learning which challenges the basis of the instructors’ authority. A leap of faith to learn and acquire experience in facilitation (Simpson, 1992; Taylor, 1987) requires that faculty staff overcome some of the discomfort which they face. Facilitation skills encompass being able to foster a positive learning environment, involve learners in the changes, refer students to other means of seeking information or “experts” and allowing intellectual challenge to take place (Hammond & Collins, 1991). Additionally important was the need for instructors to give students choices not necessarily in selecting their learning outcomes but more in the methods of how to reach the outcomes.

Bringing a New Understanding to the Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Faculty

The analysis of the data collected from the survey and one to one interviews clearly indicated that classroom management, faculty staff roles, student understanding and support services were all inter-related factors which together fostered an autonomous learning environment.

A quite obvious deterrent to learner autonomy which had been overlooked was the expectation made of the non-native English-speaking students (majority of the students enrolled at the BUE), to transition seamlessly into university and function academically without any major disruptions. Furthermore, because the language of instruction at the BUE is English; the linguistic demands on the students at the BUE across all disciplines were great, and these demands were compounded when the student was pressured to comply with the academic environment of a UK higher education system that requires students to master information which was essential to academic progress (Trudgill & Hannah, 1994). This study has shown that it is important for students and teaching staff to cultivate an atmosphere of learner autonomy “simultaneously” (Bernstein & Bass, 2005) if they are to achieve the desired outcomes of autonomous learning.

Developing Autonomous Learners

Through an informal staff development discussion circle initiated in the English department, it became apparent that quite a large number of the staff believed that many of the enrolled high school graduates start university without the appropriate study skills. Low student motivation (Crone, 2007) and procrastination were also aspects which faculty staff believed to deter students from achieving steady academic progress. Students who procrastinated in beginning their assignments to the extent of putting themselves in jeopardy of failing the module, was also an issue which the academic staff believed required their immediate attention. Faculty staff reported that within the programme framework it was necessary to introduce students to time management strategies and academic honesty sessions to help reduce the percentage of plagiarized student work and promote the exploring of ideas independently with integrity. Students were encouraged by the staff operating ALSO to tackle tasks where they would be able to pursue a problem, or speculate on professional knowledge without having to experience the consequences of failure (Aitken, 2010).

The staff discussion circle outcomes showed that students who “had a go” at autonomy appreciated being recognized as thinking individuals. Students had also indicated that transferring their autonomous learning skills from the English language modules to their degree areas was not so easy but to a certain degree the standard of their work was improving and commended by external examiners.

Whitston (1998) indicates that transferability is a key feature of the concept of skills. Other commentators such as Brookfield (1993), Pratt (1993) and Knowles (1990), have highlighted some of the key features of autonomous learning:

- Able to plan
- Manages time
- Think critically
- Control the learning process

- Able to identify personal/academic needs
- Highly motivated
- Reflective

Almost all of the student respondents who participated in the study come from academic backgrounds which do not promote autonomous learning. This diminished their sense of independence and was also the cause of low-self esteem. Faculty staff operating ALSO played a key role in promoting learners' autonomy to these students by creating the conditions that assist the students to construct their own knowledge. Learning support systems at the BUE which endeavor to promote autonomous learning such as ALSO continue to seek further development.

Learner Autonomy in ALSO

Based on the findings discussed above from the survey, one to one interviews and the informal staff discussion circle, it was necessary to evaluate the appropriateness of the student support systems and their effectiveness in promoting learners' autonomy. The English department Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO), over a short period time, proved to be a successful and resourceful student support facility. Evidence of this success was the growing number of students registering for the ALSO appointments, the students continuing with their language sessions over a long period of time as opposed to sporadic sessions. A new culture clearly had been created by ALSO where students were able to openly discuss their learning needs without fear of scrutiny. Students who made use of the language services offered by ALSO acknowledged that developing autonomy was definitely a key element to their academic success. It is worth noting that ALSO, is still in its piloting phase. One of the student's commented:

“Although she did not give any lectures the contribution was valuable because of the gentle guidance and the willingness to talk things over and share knowledge. Thank you for setting up this office to promote thinking and you took a risk to be different. I came by this office by chance to ask about my English schedule.”

Students have reported leaving ALSO more confident of their learning abilities and new found skills. Students' motivation levels were higher after having worked in groups (it is important to note that most of the students found it difficult to work totally independently and in the absence of another pupil or teacher; hence the fallacy of independent learning within the context of BUE). What the students demonstrated was the ability to acquire knowledge, resources and the support they needed in a monitored learning environment where the instructor's presence was only to reassure students that they were still in a structured learning environment. The mediated learning environment was a middle ground. Although the number of participants in this study is small, the results can be generalized.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to obtain from the learner's perspective some indication of the factors that encourage or deter the development of autonomy in mediated learning envir-

onments in higher education institutions. The model application was run through the English Department Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO) at the BUE.

Although students at first did not respond well to the challenges of autonomous learning in the English language modules; the mediated autonomous learning environment offered to students by ALSO proved to be most effective. The study has also highlighted some of the main learning experiences defined by students at the BUE, such as what they perceived was a turning point in their development of learner autonomy, which behaviors hindered autonomy, which teaching practices were effective in promoting autonomy and the student support strategies they found to be most effective.

The conclusions reached based on the analysis of data and the in-depth interviews, suggest that students are willing to develop autonomy if appropriate student support strategies (many of which are directly connected to the millennial students' expectations and needs) are in place. There will however, always be, some students who may resist the use of such support strategies due to their inability to become autonomous learners or simply because of a disinterest in taking an active role in their own learning. Training academic staff on how to develop autonomy in the higher education classroom and shift from instructor to facilitator requires professional development workshops and appropriate resources.

The evaluation of the effectiveness of ALSO indicated that a mediated learning environment which promotes learner autonomy is vital to the successful development of life-long learners at the BUE.

Future Research

Carrying out this study was important at this time as there was little insight into how effective autonomous learning is within the confines of private higher education institutions in Egypt. It was also necessary to carry out this study in order to raise awareness of faculty staff to the importance of shifting from the role of instructor to facilitator to develop student learner autonomy while taking into consideration the varying needs of Egyptian students at the BUE. The English Department at the BUE, by endorsing learner autonomy through the English language classroom and the Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO), continues to offer students the necessary support strategies which promote and develop autonomous learning. Further research is required in the future to explore the relationship between ethnicity and learner autonomy.

Recommendations

For now we will limit ourselves to a number of recommendations that are supported by the data acquired from the survey and interviews. This information should be useful for academic staff who value autonomy as a central goal of education.

1. Instructors must go beyond being the class authority. It is not sufficient for an academic to behave as the traditional lecturer but must make the shift to become a facilitator and resource provider.
2. Instructors should encourage student involvement in creating policies, or setting goals in order to help students gain the confidence needed for autonomy.

3. Staff development workshops, should aim to train academic staff on how to use new resources which develop learner autonomy.
4. Set up a two way system for giving and receiving feedback using various strategies that address the needs of all learners. Feedback here is not only from tutor to student but also from student to tutor.
5. Appeal to the students' sense of responsibility. Students often see university as the entrance to adult-hood and a chance to prove themselves in a new context.

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