

**Assignment Title:** Exploring the Use of the Moodle Learning Environment as a Tool for the Development of Autonomous Learning Skills in Language Learning in 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Students.

**Module:** On-line Learning Environments

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I work in an Institute of Technology, lecturing in Spanish and Italian on a range of Business and Humanities courses.

The college instigated an Autonomous Learning programme for students who are planning to go abroad next year. I was given responsibility for eight 2<sup>nd</sup> year students who study Italian. I was interested in exploring autonomous learning theory, in relation to the study of Italian.

The first issue is to discuss the meaning of the word ‘autonomy’? Benson puts it simply, when he says “...autonomy is not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner’s approach to the learning process”(2001:2).

Taking for granted that some learners are more autonomous than others in their approach, one must ask - how can autonomy be engendered in those who do not naturally demonstrate this attribute? A level of training is required. Benson, discussing preparations for a self-access course for adults states that:

Learners who were accustomed to teacher-centred education would ... need to be psychologically prepared for more learner-centred modes of learning. (2001:10)

Students who are used to being receptive learners need to practice in order to become active learners. Barnes’ 1976 critique of the curriculum is still relevant in this context. He discusses the difference between ‘school knowledge’ and ‘action knowledge’. The former remains someone else’s knowledge and the latter is integrated into the learners view of the world, becoming one’s own and affecting how one lives (1976:81). It is this principle of the construction of knowledge through active learning that is central to the notion of autonomy in language learning, particularly in the work of David Little.

Another point to remember is that 'autonomy' does not imply working alone. Boud (1988:28) discusses the importance of the interdependence of the participants of a learning community on each other, that is, the importance of the social context in which learning takes place. This issue is also reflected in later literature.

I wanted to investigate using the Internet as a tool to develop the students' skills in autonomous learning. My particular pedagogical areas of interest were firstly the acquisition of new language (deep learning), and also an understanding of cultural or social issues (in preparation for going abroad). I set up a course on the Moodle virtual learning environment. Moodle suited my needs due to the fact that it is based on the principles of:

a) Constructivism - These students have little or no life experience outside an Irish context so one of the aims was to familiarise them with aspects of Italian life. These tasks required them to challenge their own world-view, and to assimilate aspects of another experience of life, which they would add to their own store of experience.

b) Constructionism - The obligation to provide written assignments ensured reflection on the content. In each case they were asked to list new linguistic structures or vocabulary they had come across as part of the task. Also, when they were finished, they were required to write a journal entry on the process of learning involved in the completion of each task, which allowed them to reflect on their own learning strategies. Each task had its own educational rationale. They were intended to involve the students in the discovery of information that would be essential to them when they were abroad. (For more information see Appendix 1).

c) Social Constructivism – I provided the students with a social forum in which they could discuss issues arising from doing the tasks. The hope was to establish a net based learning community in which they might learn from each other's experiences.

d) Connection and Separation as learning strategies – This involved students assessing how they view the input of others, whether critically (in the negative sense), or empathetically. The provision of journals, and the social forum allowed a record to be kept of the students' thoughts.

(source: moodle.org)

My findings are limited for practical reasons. I do not teach these students any other subject, and the programme was perceived by them to be unimportant since there was no assessment connected with it. They were not interested even though there was an intrinsic value and relevance to the tasks they were asked to carry out. Relevance was not enough. They needed some other incentive. Consequently, an attempt at training failed.

One student did get involved. I would consider her to already have a high level of autonomy in her approach to learning, which she proved by her behaviour. Time was in short supply and she only managed to complete one task on-line. However, her response to the experience was positive, and she reported learning facts and vocabulary, which she otherwise would not normally have come across. She also reported feeling more confident about dealing with websites in Italian. She also identified cultural differences, and stated that she found it enjoyable and interesting to find out information about the place she will visit next year (an example of the value of learning in context). She then demonstrated her autonomy by deciding, inspired by this task, to research the Italian university that she will be attending next year. Even after a few weeks she still retained most of this knowledge, demonstrating that a certain degree of deep learning had taken place.

Regarding obstacles, resources seem to be a problem, and not only in relation to this programme. Other students said to me that they did not have a computer at home, and that getting access to

the computers at college was difficult. That is an issue that needs to be addressed if computer mediated courses are to become commonplace in all colleges.

The focus of the study was to research the possibility of using the Internet as a tool to develop autonomous learning skills in 3<sup>rd</sup> level students. What came out of the study is that students are unwilling to engage with anything that does not directly relate to the core course work. Benson's statement on the need for psychological training is relevant in this context since students are generally used to a more didactic teaching approach. In this case there was not enough time to do that. However, when students take the trouble to participate the findings seem positive (of course, this is judged solely on the response of one student). It appears, though, that even highly autonomous students can get something from such a programme, which demonstrates the subjective nature of active learning. Even though the tasks are guided the lecturer is not completely in control of what knowledge the student chooses to assimilate.

Regarding my own learning my first point is that, initially, a lot of time is required for a course designer to get used to the Moodle site. My main problem had to do with not getting access to Moodle soon enough in order to put up assignments that the students could access earlier in the semester, giving them enough time to complete the tasks.

The remaining learning involved design issues. Initially, I was confused because the students' browser window, for submitting assignments, did not appear in the designer's version of the site. Only when I logged on as a student did I realise that the window did actually appear.

I designed the course as a block, rather than uploading assignments week by week. The idea was that students could do the activities in any order they chose and when they chose, before a certain

deadline. The intention was to encourage them to take control of their own learning by first choosing what to do. I may have to rethink this strategy until such time as the students are comfortable with computer mediated tasks.

One technical issue involves web pages and websites, which can be integrated into assignments. Web pages appear as part of the Moodle site, but websites appear in a separate window, outside the site. I chose the website option, accessed directly from the web addresses in the assignment briefs, because I found that the imported web pages sometimes would not let you back to other pages on the Moodle site.

Having had the experience of setting up this course, I plan to continue using it next semester. As a paradigm for course presentation it works very well. It is now time to instigate some psychological training for reluctant students.

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## References

Barne, D. (1976) *From Communication to Curriculum*, London, Penguin cited in Benson, P. (2001) *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*, Essex, UK, Pearson Education. (p. 38)

Benson, P. (2001) *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*, Essex, UK, Pearson Education.

Boud, D., (ed.)(1988) *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*, London, Kogan Page.

<http://moodle.org/doc/index.php?file=philosophy.html>

## Other Reading

Breen, M.P., (ed.) (2001) *Learner Contributions to Language Learning*, Essex, UK, Pearson Education.

Roed, J., (2003) Language Learner Behaviour in a Virtual Environment. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, Vol.16, Nos 2 and 3, p. 155- 172.

## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1 – The pedagogical content of the tasks.**

**Appendix 2 – The designer's view of the site.**

**Appendix 3 – The students' view of the site.**

## **Appendix 1 – The Tasks**

The tasks were designed around real life artefacts (websites, news reports, newspaper articles).

Tasks 1,2 and 6 dealt with social and current affairs and tasks 3, 4 and 5 were designed for the purposes of information gathering.

The linguistic skills the students needed to demonstrate in order to complete these tasks were:

Task 1: comprehension and translation, and an awareness of linguistic tone and register;

Task 2: a transfer of learning from aural to written format;

Task 6: the ability to critically read a text, and to transform comprehension of text into production of text.

In Tasks 3,4 and 5 the students' specific learning had to do with the acquisition of new vocabulary and language structures while they attempted to make sense of the information presented to them.

See appendices 2 and 3 for the specific content of the tasks.

## **Appendix 2**

### **The Designer's View of the Site**

## **Appendix 3**

### **The Students' View of the Site**