Chapter 6
Online Course Design Tips for Boosting Learner Autonomy With Synchronous and Asynchronous Tools

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ABSTRACT

Online learning can be useful for designing instruction with its asynchronous or synchronous forms. The teachers can reduce time and space limitations and support learners with additional materials in a cost-effective way. However, online learning heavily depends on learner characteristics/profile and course design. Even though it provides the flexibility of designing courses for different learner needs, motivation and learner responsibility remain unsolved problems. On the other hand, we can boost learner's autonomy with our course design. Autonomous learner profile is a perfect fit for online learning because of the flexibility for the learners. In this chapter, the authors define learner autonomy, describe its role in online course design, go over key elements in online course design and management, and give design tips for boosting learner autonomy in both synchronous and asynchronous online courses.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of learner autonomy has been defined variously in the psychological and educational context but there are definitions that most researchers reach a consensus on as well. According to Holec (1981) autonomous learners are the ones who take responsibility for their own learning and a person showing autonomous qualifications must be able to set goals, specify contents, choose methods and techniques, monitor his/her learning process and evaluate his/her results. On the other hand, Little (1991) created a wider list of skills and stated that the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action should be included in the concept. It is obvious that independent action, self-initiation and making decisions are key features of autonomy as Benson (2001) defines it as the capacity for taking control of one's own learning based on his/her motivations and abilities. Even though independence is commonly emphasized, autonomous learners should also be interdependent (Illés, 2012). It would be possible to describe autonomous learners as motivated and independent learners controlling their own learning process partially or fully and able to cooperate with teachers and other learners. So, independence is a preference of autonomous learners and moreover this does not inhibit their interdependent actions.

Since there are levels of learner autonomy, it would be wrong to evaluate one as autonomous or not because it doesn't have such strict borders. It can be considered as a continuum or a spectrum with categories of reactive and proactive learner autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). According to Blidi (2017):

- Proactive learner autonomy refers to the situations when students regulate the activity and its direction. In addition, Blidi states that this type is typical in Western societies.
- Reactive learner is a student's efforts to regulate an activity once its direction is regulated by a teacher or a guide.

It should be understood that there is no superiority between proactive and reactive autonomous learners in terms of skills or characteristics. The only difference between them is regulating the direction of an activity or having it regulated by someone else (preferably a teacher or a mentor). This regulation process does not have a standard. Taking proactive autonomous actions does not guarantee a well-regulated learning process for a learner. On the other hand, collaborating with a teacher on the regulation of learning activities might be useful for learners.

Background

Autonomous learners are motivated by definition and can take action initially to learn. So, being autonomous could be really helpful for one's learning process but how can we develop learner autonomy? Cotterall (2017) presents a pedagogical model to enhance learner engagement and autonomy. This model consists of five affordances which are engagement, exploration, personalization, reflection and support. Cotterall says that a pedagogic environment should allow and encourage engagement of students with what is focused on during a course. In addition, engagement is a learner autonomy supportive element in a learning environment. Secondly, the exploration affordance suggests that a learning setting should encourage learners to inquire and provide better opportunities for understanding of the content. Moreover, students should face authentic questions and issues. According to the personalization affordance, learners should feel personal relevance in activities. Open ended, learner centered and flexible learning curricula are very important for engagement and autonomy as well. Reflection is another part of the

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