
LEARNER AGENCY AND THE “SELF”-PEDAGOGIES

Lisa Marie Blaschke, Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Germany

Summary

As a result of the rising popularity of learner-centred teaching and learning, interest has generated into established educational pedagogies that have focused on supporting learner agency. These pedagogies – referred to the “self” pedagogies in this paper – include theories of teaching and learning such as self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-directed (andragogy), self-regulated, and self-determined (heutagogy) learning. This paper describes learner agency and the “self” pedagogies, while also identifying ways in which these pedagogies can be used to promote learner agency in the online classroom.

Introduction

Within education, there has been renewed interest in learner-centred teaching and learning such as humanism and learner agency. Maslow (1943) believed that humans have an innate desire to achieve a state of self-actualization throughout their lives, that is the “working out of one’s own fundamental personality, the fulfilment of its potentialities, the use of its capacities, the tendency to be the most that one is capable of being” (Loc 908). Another strong proponent of humanism, Rogers (1961) found that human beings have a natural propensity to learn, and he encouraged placing the learner at the centre of the education process, going so far as to suggest the elimination of grades, credits, examinations, and even teachers. Emerging from the tenets of humanism have been other learner-centred pedagogies that support and promote learner agency such as self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-directed (andragogy), self-regulated, and self-determined (heutagogy) learning. This paper provides an overview of learner agency and the “self” pedagogies, as well as describes practical approaches for applying them in online and distance learning (ODL).

Learner Agency

Learner agency is closely related to Maslow and Rogers’ views of humanism and learner agency. Bandura (2001) describes learner agency as follows:

“To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions. Agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence is exercised, rather than residing as a discrete entity in a particular place.” (p.2).

According to Bandura (2001), human agency is characterized by: intentionality (activity that will be performed in the future), forethought (considering what could happen as a

consequence of an action), self-reactiveness (beliefs and self-efficacy that guide the action and what and how it will be performed), and self-reflectiveness (examining and reflecting upon the consequences and meaning of actions). Bandura (2001) underscored the importance of learner agency, stating that

“people are not just onlooking hosts of internal mechanisms orchestrated by environmental events. They are agents of experience rather than simply undergoers of experience...The human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive.” (p.4)

The “Self-Pedagogies”

Self-Efficacy

The first “self” pedagogy to be described here is self-efficacy. While efficacy is the ability to achieve a specific outcome or outcomes, self-efficacy is one’s belief in or perception of his/her ability to achieve that outcome (Bandura, 1977). How a learner perceives individual self-efficacy depends upon the learner’s view of his/her abilities, which can be based upon factors such as “personal accomplishments and failures, seeing others who are seen as similar to oneself succeed or fail at various tasks, and verbal persuasion” (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2009; p.338). In addition, perceived self-efficacy does not always equate to actual self-efficacy, meaning that learners can perceive themselves as having high efficacy, but, in reality, have a low efficacy and vice versa (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura (2001) believed that a learner’s perception of his/her self-efficacy influenced learning behaviour and the learner’s intention to learn and that this learner perception created an environment of intrinsic reinforcement, where those “with high perceived self-efficacy try more, accomplish more, and persist longer at a task than those with low perceived self-efficacy” (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2009; p.338). At the same time, those with a low perceived self-efficacy are less intentional or confident in their learning behaviour (Bandura, 1977). In this way, a learner’s perception of his/her self-efficacy can influence and even restrict learning, by determining the level of effort learners will expend and their persistence when confronted with adversity (Bandura, 1977).

According to Bandura (1977), the development of self-efficacy is based on four sources:

- Performance accomplishments, or the experience of mastering a task or activity through both successes and failure.
- Vicarious experience, or observing others achieve in adverse conditions and with positive results.
- Verbal persuasion, or receiving positive input regarding one’s ability to perform.
- Emotional arousal, or experiences performing successfully in highly stressful situations that emit an emotional response.

Bandura (1977) further argues that for learner perception of and change in self-efficacy to be sustainable, learners must be capable of mastering activities in a self-directed way; this self-

direction exposes learners to potential threats, helps improve coping skills in challenging situations, and can result in positive experiences of success.

Self-Determination

The next “self” pedagogy to be described here is Deci and Ryan’s theory of self-determination (Deci et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2002). In their theory, Deci and Ryan (2002) describe individuals as having a desire for ongoing self-development both autonomously (through self-regulation) and in relationship to others (within social contexts). The theory identifies three central needs – “competence, relatedness, and autonomy” – that encompass the human desire for self-development and is based in four mini-theories: cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, causality orientations theory, and basic needs theory (p.6). Table 1 provides a summary of each of these mini-theories.

Table 1: Overview of Deci and Ryan’s (2002) mini-theories within self-determination theory.

Mini-Theory	Description
Cognitive evaluation theory (CET)	Considers the role of intrinsic motivation within the social context, where two forms of cognitive processing influence one’s intrinsic motivation: (a) perceived locus of causality, where the perception that change results from external influences (less intrinsic motivation) or from more internally and individual loci (more intrinsic motivation); and (b) perceived competence, or the sense that individuals feel more competent as a result of an action such as positive feedback. When motivated by reward, an individual’s intrinsic motivation is decreased, whereas factors such as learner autonomy and self-regulation, social context (contact and relatedness), empathy, and positive feedback support growth of intrinsic motivation, but only when individuals have a personal sense of achieved competency (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Wagner & French, 2010).
Organismic integration theory (OIT)	Considers various types of motivation – amotivation, extrinsic, and intrinsic – and their potential for influencing integration and internalization of regulation (or regulated behaviour). Deci and Ryan (2002; Deci et al., 1994) refer to this internalization process as a continuum, moving from amotivation to extrinsic motivation and finally to intrinsic motivation. Learner regulation moves similarly along the continuum, from non-regulation to external regulation and then intrinsic regulation, while behaviour shifts from non-self-determined to fully self-determined. Along the continuum, individuals progress from a state of inaction (or lack of desire to act) to acting as a result of external forces (or regulation) that exercise punishment or reward when learners act. The end of the continuum has individuals identifying with, integrating, and then internalizing regulation of their actions with their value and belief systems and entering into a state where they regulate their actions intrinsically (Deci & Ryan, 2002).
Causality orientations theory (COT)	Focus is on the internalization of motivational factors from an extrinsic motivational perspective and in regard to the influence of social contexts. Deci and Ryan (2002) identify three types of causality orientations: autonomy, controlled, and impersonal. Within autonomy orientation conditions, the individual regulates his or her reaction to extrinsic motivational factors based on his/her inner values and beliefs, i.e., self-regulation. Within controlled orientation conditions, individuals orient themselves to factors that influence expected behaviour patterns (e.g., how they are expected to behave), i.e., external regulation.

Basic Needs Theory	Considers the role of goals in achieving personal well-being. These goals can be either (a) intrinsic, directly satisfying basic needs such as personal growth and development, or (b) extrinsic, peripherally satisfying basic needs established by external forces, needs such as wealth reputation. Citing research from Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996), Deci and Ryan (2002) find that intrinsic goals contribute more positively to personal well-being than extrinsic goals, which can have negative effects such as depression and stress, and by placing greater priority on extrinsic goals over intrinsic goals, individuals can suffer from inferior well-being. Reeve (2002) and Deci et al. (1994) argue that the more autonomous a student is allowed to be, the more engaged she or he is in the learning process.
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Self-Directed Learning

Another “self” pedagogy highly relevant within the tradition of ODL is that of self-directed learning, or andragogy. The concept of andragogy was made popular by Malcolm Knowles (1975) and stems from the belief that teaching and learning approaches for adults should be fundamentally different from those for children. His ideas are based on the view that the more mature a learner becomes, the more self-directed the learner will be in his or her own learning. Knowles (1975) defined andragogy as:

“...a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.” (p.18)

As a holistic, learner-centred model, andragogy is comprised of the following six principles:

1. *Learner’s need to know:* Adult learners want to decide what will be learned, and when and how it will be learned.
2. *Self-concept of the learner:* Adult learners want to plan and direct their learning.
3. *Prior experience of the learner:* Adult learners have a wide range of past experiences to draw from in understanding and applying what they learn.
4. *Readiness to learn:* Adult learners want to understand the relevance of what they are learning to them and to their environment.
5. *Orientation to learning:* Adult learners prefer a problem-centred approach to learning.
6. *Motivation to learn:* Adult learners are internally, rather than externally, motivated to learn (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2011; p.3)

Knowles (1975) advocated choice, flexibility, and autonomy for adult learners and encouraged various kinds of learner support (tutoring, advising, counselling) that was meant to personalize and individualize an otherwise uniform system of education. Andragogy is similar to self-determination, as it “assumes that learners are motivated by internal incentives, such as the need for esteem (especially self-esteem), the desire to achieve, the urge to grow, the satisfaction of accomplishment, the need to know something specific, and curiosity” (Knowles, 1975; p.21). Knowles’ theory (1975) also embraces the value of lifelong learning,

defining education as a lifelong process, necessary not only for the individual but society as a whole.

Andragogy is practically synonymous with learner-managed learning, which Long (1990) describes as learning where “the learner takes responsibility for decisions as to what is being learned and the means by which learning is to take place” (p.37). Boud and Higgs (1993) expand further upon Long’s ideas about learner-managed learning, describing it as a situation where the learner does not learn in isolation and where “learning can take many different forms within which a number of phases and a variety of learner behaviours occur” (p.159). Lifelong learning is also a central tenet of learner-managed learning (Boud & Higgs, 1993).

Self-Regulated Learning

Self-regulated learning is another of the “self” pedagogies. In self-regulated learning, “students are self-regulated to the degree that they are meta-cognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process...students monitor the effectiveness of their learning methods or strategies and respond to this feedback” (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001; p.5). The focus of self-regulated learning is primarily on the ability of students to monitor their learning effectiveness and to then adapt their learning approach and process accordingly, depending on the learning context, thereby enhancing their learning skills. Bandura (2001) reported that much learner behaviour is self-regulated, primarily learned through observation and comparing behaviour established performance guidelines or standards: “If one’s behavior meets or exceeds one’s performance standards, it is evaluated positively; if it falls short of one’s standards, it is evaluated negatively. Likewise, one’s perceived self-efficacy develops from one’s direct and vicarious experiences with success and failure.” (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2009; p.354). According to Zimmerman and Schunk (2001), theorists identify the following general assumptions about self-regulated learning:

“SRL theories assume that students (a) can personally improve their ability to learn through selective use of metacognitive and motivational strategies; (b) can proactively select, structure, and even create advantageous learning environments; and (c) can play a significant role in choosing the form and amount of instruction they need.” (p.5)

Zimmermann and Schunk (2001) also argue that a definition of self-regulated learning is characterized by and dependent upon: (a) the researcher’s theoretical perspective (operant, phenomenological, information processing, social cognitive, volitional, Vygotskian, constructivist); (b) the feedback loop used by the learner to assess effectiveness of his/her learning approach; and (c) a description of the approach used by the learner and why it was chosen. Common characteristics or issues present within self-regulated learning include: student motivation to self-regulate (motivation); process the occurs as students become self-regulated (self-aware); process(es) students use to achieve learning outcomes (key processes); ways in which environment influences the self-regulated learning approach (social and

physical environment); and ways in which learners become capable of self-regulating their learning (acquiring capacity).

Self-Determined Learning (Heutagogy)

Learner agency is at the centre of heutagogy and underlies and permeates each aspect of the theory. As heutagogy places the student at the centre of the learning experience, the theory is closely aligned with a humanistic educational approach where the learner is the agent of his/her learning. Within heutagogy, students are encouraged to take responsibility for the learning design and pathway, while instructors are meant to facilitate learning and to encourage learner action and experience in a supportive, non-threatening environment (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). Basic principles of heutagogy include: learner agency and autonomy, self-reflection and metacognition (double-loop learning), self-efficacy and capability, and non-linear teaching and learning (Blaschke, 2012; 2016a).

Heutagogy (self-determined learning) is often used interchangeably with andragogy (self-directed learning) and might best be understood as an extension of andragogy. Luckin et al (2010) and Garnett (2013) propose a pedagogy-andragogy-heutagogy (PAH) continuum, where they describe pedagogy as child-leading, andragogy as adult-leading, and heutagogy as self-leading and state that the value in a selected approach is in understanding a subject (pedagogy), understanding the learning process (andragogy), or understanding both within context (heutagogy). Blaschke (2012) builds on the idea of a PAH continuum further in describing the learner as moving from a more structured, less autonomous educational environment to an environment of higher autonomy with little or no structure. Key differences of the three approaches are briefly presented in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2: Heutagogy as a continuum of pedagogy and andragogy (Blaschke, 2016b)*

Pedagogy (Teacher-directed)	Andragogy (Self-directed)	Heutagogy (Self-determined)
Some single-loop learning	Stronger emphasis on single-loop learning	Single and double-loop learning
Knowledge transfer and acquisition	Competency development	Capability development
Linear design of courses/curriculum and instructor-directed teaching approach	Linear design of courses/curriculum with learner-directed learning approach (e.g., organizing his/her learning)	Non-linear design and learner-determined learning approach
Instructor-directed Getting students to learn (content)	Instructor-learner directed Getting students to learn (content)	Learner-determined Getting students to understand how they learn (process)

* See also Blaschke (2012), as well as Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Abdurrahman (2013) Table 1: Three approaches in learning for an expanded description (p.23).

Self-determined learning and self-determination are also often used interchangeably within the literature, although the two theories are not the same. Heutagogy includes important aspects of Deci & Ryan’s theory of self-determination, such as learner autonomy, intrinsic and

goal-setting motivation, self-regulation, and self-efficacy; however, heutagogy incorporates other principles – such as self-reflection and meta-cognition, double-loop learning, learner competency and capability, and non-linear learning and teaching – that are not included in Deci and Ryan’s theory (Blaschke, 2012; Blaschke & Hase, 2015).

Like self-regulated learning, heutagogy incorporates elements of self-actualization, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and observation, self-assessment, self-instruction, and self-evaluation. However, self-determined learning is different from self-regulated learning, in that (a) instructors do not direct student learning and what will be learned; and (b) modelling and reinforcement (e.g., of instructor, other learners) is not a core characteristic of self-determined learning (Blaschke, 2016b; Zimmermann & Schunk, 2001). If placed within the PAH continuum in Table 1 above, self-regulated learning would most likely fall between andragogy and heutagogy – more self-actualized and self-defined than self-directed learning but not as fully autonomous as self-determined learning (A comprehensive literature review that compares self-directed, self-regulated, and self-determined learning is lacking in the current literature and is an area of potential future research.).

The “Self”-Pedagogies in Practice

As educators, how can we apply the “self”-pedagogies in practice in order to support and promote learner agency? Here are a few ideas:

- Self-efficacy: incorporate learner-directed questions and problem-solving activities, allow for room for failure, scaffold the learning process, provide positive and formative feedback, and ensure there are opportunities for the learner to experience success.
- Self-determination: design a learning environment that supports learner autonomy, allow learners to define learning activities and outcomes, and practice empathy through positive, formative, and timely feedback.
- Self-directed learning: work with learners in identifying and formulating learning goals (e.g., through the use of learning contracts), engender problem- and project-based learning that draws from the learner’s experience, and give the learner choice, autonomy, and flexibility in making decisions about his/her learning.
- Self-regulated learning: encourage learners to monitor their learning path, process, and achievements (e.g., by keeping a learning log) and incorporate the use of learning journals for reflection on the learning environment and learning process.
- Self-determined learning: in addition to applying the design approaches described above, allow learners to define learning goals and outcomes and to assess own learning (e.g., learning contracts), promote ongoing reflection on what is learned and how it is learned (e.g., learning journals), and include learning activities that support learner exploration, content creation, collaboration and networking with others, and sharing of results/findings (e.g., use of e-portfolios, social media, and personal learning environments).

Conclusion

As education shifts toward more learner-centeredness in the classroom, educators can draw from long established “self” pedagogies such as self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-directed (andragogy), self-regulated, and self-determined (heutagogy) learning in order to create a toolkit of teaching and learning approaches that support and promote learner agency. This paper has attempted to convey a basic understanding of the concepts of learner agency and the “self” pedagogies, while also identifying practical ways of applying the concepts.

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