

VALIDATING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

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Abstract

Engaging students in their own learning has become a focal discussion point in higher education around the world. Justification for studies regarding learner autonomy abound and range from “a love to learn for self-development”, “developing capacity to accept responsibility for own learning”, and that it is “a human right”. Adopting a conceptual stance, this paper provides a critical overview of learner autonomy from an education policy perspective as it has been largely absent from such analyses. This is a significant gap given that education policy gives direction to what signifies autonomous teaching and of particular interest here, on how to transform learning by validating learner autonomy. This paper examines views already in the public domain and how education policy perspectives can guide teachers how to foster learner autonomy during their teaching practice. Having applied both conceptual analysis as well as critical policy analysis, this paper contributes to alternative perspectives regarding learner autonomy. The study reveals that these perspectives: *independent action*, *authority* and *accountability* validate the significance of learner autonomy and paves the way towards transformative self-regulated learning.

Keywords: *conceptual analysis, critical policy analysis, education policy perspectives, learner autonomy, transformative self-regulated learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of learner autonomy has been identified as a desirable outcome in Higher Education (HE) spaces (Garrigan, 1997 and Henri, Morrell & Scott, 2017). The *White Paper on Education and Training* (WP1) articulates the overarching goal of all education policy as “*those processes that must put learners first, build their knowledge and recognise and respond to their needs*” (Republic of South Africa, 1995). Teachers’ responses to terminologies such as these, might contribute towards learners developing an ability to take charge of their own learning (Dworkin, 2015). If learners are able to achieve this kind of ability, they are positioned to develop an awareness of their learning, set their own learning goals, planning and control learning processes (Pintrich, 2000 and Mynard & Stevenson, 2017). Significantly, this policy directive foregrounds the importance of learner autonomy from a policy perspective initially during the establishment of the new political dispensation in South Africa and in contemporary literature and signifies an endorsement of a move towards the transformational role HE should present to develop pre-service teachers’ autonomy in

tertiary education.

Despite the development of learner autonomy being a key aim of HE, there seems to be confusion in terms of what the discourse may signify (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018 and Holmes, 2018). One of many reasons might be attributed to the divergent elucidations and understandings of what learner autonomy may comprise. Our intention with this paper was to review the discourses on learner autonomy in HE as little academic evidence exist which explains learner autonomy from an education policy perspective. Therefore, our aim was to find answers to questions regarding learner autonomy which we might not have thought to think, about what has been subdued, repressed and unheard of in terms of higher education policies in South Africa. In doing so, we believe that we will be in a position to share education policy perspectives which may guide pre-service teachers how to foster learner autonomy. This research may serve as a critical component in guiding scholars, educationists and researchers with insights about how transformative self-directed learning result from HE policy perspectives about learner autonomy. Learner autonomy may be considered a basis for human dignity as well as a basic moral respect (Hill, 1991) and this provides reason why the discourses of learner autonomy remain a contentious issue in HE policy.

2. METHODOLOGY

Critical theory will be applied as a way to systematically engage with the research problem and to guide us how to think about the discourse in higher education policy. Taking a pointer from Habermas: “*Critical theory offers a way to... acquire and use knowledge*” (Habermas, 1984). In the context of this research, the application of critical theory is two-folded because it may assist us to: (a) contribute to new knowledge about education policy perspective regarding learner autonomy; and (b) propose how the knowledge about learner autonomy gained can be utilised to foster the notion of transformative self-directed learner. To obtain new knowledge about learner autonomy, both a conceptual analysis as well as a critical policy analysis will be conducted.

Conceptual analysis, in the context of this research is significant, because it has the potential of showing multiple use and meanings (Burbules & Warnick, 2003) of the concept of learner autonomy. Thus: “*when a concept is analysed, the researcher tries to absorb or get inside the viewpoint it represents as a whole and then develop a deep understanding of how its parts relate to the whole*” (Neuman, 1997 and Van Wyk, 2008). Furthermore, critical policy analysis will be utilised to analyse how learner autonomy is validated in South African higher education policies. Critical policy analysis, in the context of this research, refers to a form of education policy studies where the focus is on exposing what policy does (Diem *et al.*, 2014), particularly in terms of perspectives regarding learner autonomy. As academics we approach policy analysis as ‘insiders’ who are offered an exclusive opportunity to use our knowledge and experience to gain deeper insight into the interpretation of the discourse under study and become activity builders and creators of new learning environments (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taskoh, 2014 and Alonazi, 2017).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature takes the form of “joining the conversation” about the discourse of learner autonomy. Imagine for a moment one joins a conversation about a topic you supposedly know little about. One listens to get the drift of what is said (the conversational equivalent of a literature review), then joining the conversation with a contribution that signals interest in the topic (Lingard, 2015). In this section, our intention is to first join the conversation about learner autonomy by “listening” what has been said about the discourse over a period of time. Because of the compendium of information already published as well as the scope of this research, it will be impossible to select all information regarding learner autonomy. Thus, a cursory glance of the discourse of learner autonomy follows. This is acceptable, because, Aslam Fataar for instance provided a synopsis of seven papers in a researched article called *Decolonising Education in South Africa: Perspectives and Debates* (Fataar, 2018). Consequently, this literature overview will be presented in terms of a timeline indicated as 1980s-1990s; 2000s-2010s as well as 2011 and beyond on the discourse under study.

3.1. Learner autonomy: 1980s – 1990s

Learner autonomy manifests itself in different ways depending on the context in which it is being exercised. Since the 1970s, there has been a particular surge in research globally in the field of learner autonomy (Lamb, 2017). As such, this section attempts to trace development regarding this discourse, capturing tendencies of past and recent research in preparation of a conceptual analysis of what it may designate. In a report published by the Council of Europe 1979, Henri Holec seems to have been the first person who elaborated on the discourse of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy was delineated in terms of learner self-direction and control of the learning process (Holec, 1981). In interpreting this definition, the approach to

learner autonomy focused on individual learners' ability with respect to the language learning process. Important though is that learner autonomy should be interpreted as a capability and not an inborn ability. Significantly, autonomous learners use an ability to take a leading position in terms of the learning process, generation of ideas as well as making themselves available for learning opportunities (Kohonen, 1992). Learner autonomy may be regarded as a *focus on learner reflection* as well as *learners taking responsibility for their own learning processes* (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; 1988; Little, 1991 and Dam, 1995).

3.2 Learner autonomy: 2000s – 2010s

The concept of learner autonomy has been used extensively in contemporary language education (Jimenez Raya, 2009 and Little, 2009). If learners take responsibility for their own learning, they might become more capable to govern and regulate their own thoughts, feelings and actions freely (Nunan, 2000a). Self-regulation, as indicated here, implies that learners obtain the power and the right to learn for themselves. Thus, if the level of autonomy is increased, self-determination as well as self-development are also enhanced (Chan, 2001 and Smith, 2008) and individual learner differences should be considered in their capacity to process, store and retrieve information and in terms of intelligence, age as well as their approaches to learning (Fotos & Browne, 2004). To facilitate stronger development in terms of learner autonomy, there should be a major shift in education. There should be a move away from a teacher-centred classroom towards a learner-centred system where the learner is in control of the lesson content as well as the learning process.

3.3 Learner autonomy: 2011 and beyond

For learners to be understood in terms of autonomy, they should be allowed to work on their own pace, choose their own place as well as circumstances to conduct their learning (Reinders & White, 2011; 2016). In so doing, learners are afforded opportunities to engage with the real world and engage in meaningful interaction. For instance, language learners may use online chat tools such as discussion forums and chat environments which may present with sociable, collaborative and authentic learning opportunities (Chan & Chan, 2011 and Cheng, Paré, Collimore & Joordens, 2011). Huang & Benson (2013) and Murray (2014), regard learner autonomy as social in nature in the sense that learners are obtaining power to make choices as well as decisions and acting on them. Consequently, learners' autonomous development is not a matter of learning in isolation, but a matter of interdependence and collaboration. In the paper context, the following physiognomies of learner autonomy has been extracted and will be utilised to conduct a conceptual analysis of what the discourse may denote: *self-direction and control of the learning process* (1980s-1990s), *self-regulation and the right to learn for themselves* (2000s-2010s) and *power to make choices as well as decisions and acting on them* (2011 and beyond).

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We share Van Wyk's (2008) contention that an analysis of key concepts associated with discourse under study is crucial for research. Moreover, the concepts of *self-direction*; *self-regulation* and *care of the self* will be analysed. An analysis of the afore-mentioned concepts is our way of joining the conversation about learner autonomy, similarly, it will contribute towards our understanding of the discourse. The concept, self-direction, has been used for over 150 years. With the publication of *Craik's Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties* in 1865, the concept was taken seriously and ever-since, various explanations have been attached to the term. Merisalo (2009) asserts that self-direction is achieved when the self is internally voiced. This means that individuals are assertive insofar they are able to diagnose their own needs, identify the resources they would like to use, making choices in terms appropriate strategies they want to implement for learning and have the ability to evaluate outcomes achieved. Since the latter denotes a state of freedom, independence and perhaps self-sufficiency, the view of Gibbs (1979) seem to be more suitable to be used: "*An independent agent, one who is in command of himself, the author of his own works, deeds and way of life, not subject to the authority or other persons or things*" (Gibbs, 1979).

This view personalises individuals' exercise of control over all decisions regarding themselves whilst in relationship with others. Consequently, individuals get access to and choose from a variety of existing resources as a means to act independently. This kind of control over own practices is the highest degree of the learning process and hinges on the freedom that such control confers (Little, 1995). Control in this sense suggests that learners act independently and free without the fear of any outside authority, reflecting uninhibited freedom to contribute to the life they may choose to live. We contend that learners' ability to be self-directed is underscored by their capacity to be the authors of their own work and it is supported by the notion that: "*individuals have to grant themselves permission to direct their own lives by their own means or with the help of others so as to transform themselves*" (Foucault, 1988). Certainly, if transformation is valued

as a consciousness for self-direction, learner autonomy becomes relational. Thus, although autonomy can be associated with independence and freedom of choice, individuals are never fully independent (De Klerk, 2014). Individuals can, however, be assisted to find ways to facilitate meaning self-definition within a context of interdependency.

Conversely, if freedom from control would mean a move towards transformative self-direction, education should embody the space for such reconstruction, empowerment and emancipation. A requisite of this space is that learners should use the opportunities provided to exercise their ability to self-regulate and assume a critical stance towards developing autonomy. In terms of self-regulation, French philosopher, Michel Foucault, asserts that self-regulation may be regarded as the way in which individuals matched their own desires, hopes and lifestyles with existing government objectives (Castro-Gómez, 2010). This means that, amidst policy objectives, individuals perform a kind of regulation of the self by the self. It refers to the notion that individuals have the ability to regulate their own attention, their own reactions and act on their interpretation of things (Perlman & Pelphrey, 2010 and Siegel, 2012).

If HE spaces provide the support for learners to achieve the above, we predict that they would become the biographers of their own learning and experiences. This suggests that they create meaning to their own lives and those of others without diminishing the position of the individual self (De Klerk, 2014). New realities about their own learning may surface, thus strengthening their insights whilst they are positioned to take care of themselves. Such practice would broaden learners' scope of autonomy and provide them with a greater sense of self-mastery (Foucault, 1983). We posit that, although learners are subjected to the policy regulations of education policy, they are enabled to move beyond the policy rules to control their own learning, engaging them in a process named autonomisation. This action empowers them to navigate their own course of autonomous action (Lamb, 1998), taking. In this way, they take the liberty to learn how to express themselves in a free and frank way. This further implies that learners make a personal commitment to understand the educational realities they find themselves in and in doing so, they might be able to take care of the self. Foucault explains *care of the self* as being an essential component of individual freedom and remarks that one should: "*take proper care of yourself, know what you are capable of, know things you should and should not fear, know what you can reasonably hope for...*" (Foucault, 1997).

Foucault's remark (1997) may be interpreted as a recommendation to learners as to how to maintain a stable sense of the self. This means that learners should be guided how to cultivate self-interest, promote self-reliance and become an entrepreneur of the self. Having said this, learners would then learner how to empower themselves through the acquisition of skills, abilities and knowledge in an attempt to act as autonomous beings (Čeplak, 2012). What one, however, needs to be mindful of is that the self always stands in relation to existing rules of conduct. The task is to: "*test oneself and monitor oneself amidst a series of clearly defined rules*" (Foucault, 1984). If one is able to do this, one becomes aware that one cannot care for oneself without knowledge. In the words of Foucault: "*the care of the self is of course knowledge of the self...but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct which are at the same time truths and regulations*" (Foucault, 1984). Our recommendation would be that the self should be cognizant about the rules in which one operates, but that one should also know how to act autonomously amidst the rules (education policy regulations) that order how things should be dealt with. Our view is that the extracts already represent particular conceptual meanings of learner autonomy. This means that we showed how learners can act autonomously, but it still does not validate learner autonomy in higher education. Therefore, we acknowledge that the validation of learner autonomy in HE in South Africa can become visible by means of analyzing HE policy documents of this country.

Table 1: Categorisation of extracts into autonomy positions

	Extracted quotes	autonomy position
1	"be the authors of their own work"	<i>authority</i>
2	"take charge of their own course of autonomous action"	<i>independent action</i>
3	"to act autonomously amidst the rules"	<i>accountability</i>

The indicated subject positions will be probed by means of an analysis South African higher education policies to obtain knowledge how learner autonomy may emerge in these policies. The policies under scrutiny will be: *Higher Education Act 101 (1997)* and *Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education (1997)*. Noteworthy, this analysis is a first of its kind and might contribute towards validating learner autonomy in higher education in South Africa.

5. VALIDATING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: POLICY PERSPECTIVES

The Higher Education Act 101 was promulgated in 1997. The main focus of this act is to regulate HE in South Africa and governs all legislation related to the establishment and operation of a council on higher education. It also caters for the funding and operation of public higher education institutions (Republic of South Africa, 1997a). The vision for HE in South Africa has been articulated as the establishment of a single system that would meet the learning needs of all citizens of this country. *Education White Paper 3* (henceforth: *WP3*) outline the framework for the changes required to meet the afore-indicated goal (Republic of South Africa, 1997b).

Since these policies are playing a fundamental role in terms of the regulation of HE in South Africa, an analysis of some of the texts in the mentioned policies will be analysed. The scope of this paper provides limited options to analyse all the texts. Henceforth, analyses follow to explore how learner autonomy is articulated in the mentioned HE policies. *WP3* stipulates: “*The principle of institutional autonomy refers to a high degree of self-regulation and administrative independence with respect to student research, establishment of academic regulations and the internal management of resources generated from private and public sources. Such autonomy is a condition of effective self-government*” (Republic of South Africa, 1997b). To effectively govern the self, learners in HE should act upon themselves in order to change their thoughts, conduct and way of being. Such process is fundamental because it leads to independent action and transformation of the self in attempt to obtain more wisdom about the self (Foucault, 1988). In such independent position of independent action, learner autonomy is foregrounded. Thus, whilst learners act upon themselves (through effective self-government), learner autonomy emerges as individual freedom with the free choice of goals and relations that can be regarded as critical constituents of individual well-being (Benson, 2008). The latter version brings validation to the existence of learner autonomy in higher education. Whilst higher education policy in South Africa contributes to transformation of the self (through self-government), it simultaneously gives learners free choice to regulate their own learning in terms of their independence (Republic of South Africa, 1997b). It signifies that learners gain a stance, a voice from which to speak and authority from which to act. In the words of Foucault (1996): “*In thinking rationally a person thinks on their own, autonomously. This person, the autos, is the source of law, the nomos*”.

The following stipulation in HE policy awaits decoding, that is: “*the council, after consultation with the students’ representative council, must provide for a suitable structure to advise on the policy for student support services*” (Republic of South Africa, 1997a). Although the representatives of learners at HE level is determined by the institutional statute and institutional rules, they obtain some kind of autonomy. We call it some kind of autonomy because wherever and whenever there is autonomy, there is also dependence (Schmenk, 2006). In this instance, the representative council takes over accountability for the autonomy of others. In a further reading of Schmenk (2006), this is called reactive autonomy. Thus, although learners enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, they do so within a given set of rules and regulations. It seems that learner autonomy does not necessarily create its own directions, but once the direction has been initiated, learners are enabled to recognize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goals. The latter brings validation to the existence of reactive learner autonomy in South African education policy. Reactive autonomy as indicated here encourages learners to rely on processes and procedures to take accountability for their own learning (Oxford, 2016 & 2017). This also means that learners constantly have to transform their way of doing things so as to take ownership of their own learning, meaning that they should move from being teacher-dependent to being independent transformed goal-oriented learners (Du Toit-Brits, 2018). Validating learner autonomy from a South African education policy perspective was by no means an easy task. It took lots of reading and re-reading to deepen the conversation regarding the discourse under study. Our analysis, however, indicates that learner autonomy is indeed endorsed in the two policies that have been analysed. Significantly about the analyses is that learners should transform their way of doing things in an attempt to take authority, independent action and accountability so that they can enjoy the freedom to regulate their own learning.

6. TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

Transformative learning suggests the use of critical self-reflection to question assumptions and to facilitate new ways of thinking and acting (Santalucia & Johnson, 2010). Self-regulated learning on the other hand can be seen as an active process of meaning-making through critical reflection on learning expectations which can lead to open minds that embrace transformation (Mezirow, 2000). We coined the two concepts and articulate transformative self-regulated learning in the following way: *a critical self-reflection to facilitate new ways of thinking and acting through meaning-making with the aim to embrace a transformed autonomous*

self.

The question now arises: How does an individual perform self-reflection? We found the answer in Foucault who asserts that self-reflection may be done in three ways: *knowing oneself, caring for the self and the relation between care for the self and care for the political life*. Extremely important here, is for learners to occupy themselves with themselves. This means that learners should conduct regular introspection regarding their academic progress, their individual limits and cultivate an understanding of what their knowledge is for (Foucault, 1988). Learners should be concerned about their teaching abilities, their place in the school system and how they will be able to contribute towards meaning regarding their own lives. To illustrate how learners can engage in self-reflection in an attempt to facilitate new ways of thinking and acting through meaning-making with the aim to embrace a transformed autonomous self, we adopted Nunan's (2000b) table of Autonomy: Levels of Implementation.

Table 2: Transformed autonomous self: meaning-making through self-reflection

Self-reflection activity	Meaning-making process	Transformed autonomous self
Introspection	Learners continuously reflect on their academic progress, their individual limits and cultivate an understanding of what their knowledge is for	Learners grant themselves permission to direct their own lives by their own means or with the help of others so as to transform themselves
Involvement	Learners select their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer	Learners promote self-interest, self-reliance and become an entrepreneur of the self
Transcendence	Learners intertwine experience-based and classroom knowledge	Learners make choices regarding strategies they want to implement for learning

In the same vein as Kumaravadivelu (2006), transformative self-directed learner as indicated above (as deduced from learner autonomy in South African education policy) suggests that learners *become the authors of their own stories – to understand themselves and what they want to achieve; constantly reflect on their developing identities by keeping book of their engagement with the social world; join support groups to seek self-awareness and self-improvements; and explore unlimited opportunities in and outside the classroom and share their experiences with other who might play a direct or indirect role in shaping their own educational agenda*. The path towards transformative self-directed learning, however, does not imply that the teachers become redundant. Of importance are those teachers' roles in maintaining a learning environment in order to enhance learner autonomy in the process of transformative self-directed learning is critical (Thanasoulas, 2000). This implies that if learners who are properly trained (by teachers) in autonomy will be able to transfer the ability to control the learning process so as to be able to perform successfully in real-life situations outside the classroom. Transformative self-regulated learning does not free teachers from their responsibilities, rather it brings change in their roles from authority figures to facilitators, counselors and prompters. Thus, learners take advantage of the opportunities afforded to them and act by engaging themselves to enhance their own ways of learning.

7. CONCLUSION

First of its kind, this research has validated the existence of learner autonomy in South African higher education policies. An analysis of these policies revealed that *independent action, authority* and accountability indeed contribute to alternative meaning regarding learner autonomy. For instance, South African HE policies endorsed the notion that learners are afforded opportunities to take charge of their own course of autonomous action. It also enables learners to act autonomous amidst the regularities evident in these policies. Learner autonomy (as per the higher education policies) further contributes to transformative self-directed learning. In this instance, learners gain opportunities to facilitate new ways of thinking with the aim to foster a transformed autonomous self. Critical though are those teachers playing a critical role in assisting learners in terms of autonomy as well as transformative self-directed learning. The role of the teacher in this regard will be explored more thoroughly in the *viva*.

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