Tales of Online Learner Autonomy: Highlights and Challenges in the Disruptive Age

Leoncio P. Olobia, Leyte Normal University, Philippines

Corresponding email address: leoncio.olobia@lnu.edu.ph

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Leoncio P. Olobia, College of Arts and Sciences, Leyte Normal University, Philippines

Abstract

When the new normal learning mode capitalized on technologically mediated communication, it created a high learner-content interaction while honing critical thinking and collaborative skills to achieve optimal learning. The disruption brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic instilled a sense of independence and flexibility in learning. The aim of this autoethnography is to consider the accounts of the author's independent learning throughout the pandemic in an online course. The author's comments, insights, and observations, which formed dense descriptions of the lived realities and were interpreted and analyzed through an autoethnographic lens, constituted a significant portion of the data. The findings show that students who engage in online learner autonomy assume complete accountability and exercise control over the learning process, thereby strengthening their capacity for independent and cooperative learning. Students face difficulties when they are overly flexible and independent, which leads to uncritical assessment of the material covered. The problem can be solved by applying critical thinking.

Keywords: disruptive learning; mantra of flexibility; online learning.

Prologue

When the pandemic swept the entire world, I was immersed in online learning, embracing a self-paced, self-directed learning (SDL) process, an educational method in which learners plan, implement, and assess their learning, align with those of 21st-century education (Dahal & Bhat, 2024). Most countries around the world shifted the teaching and learning process virtually as the pandemic caused all the educational institutions across the globe to shut down to follow social distancing (Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020 as cited in Alsayed & Althaqafi, 2022). It has led to an expansion in the demand for online teaching and learning across the globe (Das, 2023. In that sense, the Internet has had a profound impact on higher education by enabling the phenomenal growth of online learning (Swan, 2019).

When the global pandemic of 2019 occurred, I was stationed in Japan. I moved away from my family and friends in the Philippines so that I could work as an international pianist in a five-star hotel. Two years after completing my master's degree, in 2018, I continued my doctoral

studies in an open university. I chose to study online because it allowed me to continue working and earning a living at the same time.

Due to the widespread reports of Covid-19 infections and fatalities, there was a time of increased alertness. The hotel where I worked for 5 years was suddenly abandoned, leaving just two security guards and me to watch over a three-story building because of the unexpected lockdowns. Both the streets and the once-heavily packed parking lot, which had expensive automobiles lined up, were deserted.

In my online class, I remember that one of my professors created a group chat for all students to join in order to be with each other to find comfort in a time of despair and uncertainty. I was hesitant at first because I did not know anyone in my class, but, as I read the comment thread in the student portal, I slowly joined the conversation.

This autoethnographic report centers on the issue of learner autonomy, giving rise to flexibility in a period of disruption brought upon by Covid-19. The narratives weave together as thick descriptions of my personal reality, exhuming cycles of emotions of my online learning journey.

Autoethnography as a reflective storytelling process, places emphasis on individual narratives, drawn heavily from past experiences and how they relate to the culture and society. Its importance to self-directed learning centers on autoethnographic narratives to weave through personal anecdotes and realities that shape a student's knowledge and skills acquisition. Using the perspective of the self to illuminate personal issues, I manage to create a learning balance amidst a world of vulnerability and uncertainty.

Learner Autonomy

As an online student in an open university, I had a great deal of freedom, hence, autonomy, in the many things that I did with my studies. Considering that I worked, I had to take breaks from my scholastic tasks. For instance, I learned to make adjustments in doing paper assignments, allowing me to set priorities as I deemed necessary. This flexibility made me responsible as well. Indulging in self-directed planning also meant that I took responsibility even if I chose not to do my assignments. In fact, if online learner autonomy were to be extended, I could also develop apathy towards my learning responsibilities.

In online learning, there is an increasing emphasis on student-centered learning and on them taking a proactive role in the construction of knowledge (Goulao & Menedez, 2015). One of the characteristics that promotes learner autonomy is 'relatedness' (Sanspert, 2009 as cited in Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2021). Moreover, autonomy is social in nature and is the interaction of "the in-group 'we' with the autobiographical 'I'" and is relational (Little & Thorne, 2017 as cited in Lai, 2019) In that sense, the online classroom is self-directed, where students decide when and how often they access their course material (LaTour & Noel, 2021). Thus, online learners are expected to employ SDL skills to succeed (Zhu et al., 2023).

Corollary to the explanations, face-to-face sessions also embrace autonomy, but the immediacy of interactions between the students and the teacher gives a sense of 'urgency' in eliciting responses to questions asked in class. In online learning, students may choose to adopt a transactional distance approach in communication because of the degree of separation between the teacher and the students. Having said that, online learner autonomy can be asynchronously pursued more indulgently. I personally embraced a psychologically distanced approach to my online education so that I had more time to dwell with learning independence even in a disruptive state.

In another light, disrupted classes do not necessarily mean disrupted learning when self-access learning is facilitated, appropriate training is given, and students' motivation and autonomy are enhanced (Ghazali, 2020). To explain further, my online journey capacitated me a sense of free will to be self-indulgent, instilling a sense of balance in the face of uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. I learned to create a learning flow such that vulnerability turned out to be a more profound learning opportunity with more focus towards my studies.

Methods

I conducted this research using an autoethnographic lens within a one-year period of my doctoral studies while I was away from home. As a self-reflexive process of inquiry, I placed heavy emphasis on my reflections drawn heavily from fragments of my memory as an online student. I termed it "fragments" mainly because some memory of my experience escaped me through the passage of time. The narratives are recollections of re-activated memory that could not be completed as one story, hence, the term fragments. Alongside memory retrieval, data triangulation was done through observations, interactions with my classmates, literature

readings, perceptions, and conversations with some of my teachers. In a sense, the narratives were presented in a conversational and thought-provoking manner to stir imagination.

Because of the immense spontaneity of my storytelling, I did not divide the data in distinct phases since I did not want to put them in a box for me to fill with stories. Instead, I let my thoughts and emotions sweep through, creating a natural flow, citing paradoxical truths, addressing tensions and disagreements coupled with affirmations as one dramatic tale.

In another light, reflexivity in this autoethnography accounted for my individual reflections and perspectives as the privileged voice. Thus, truth as an articulation of my sincerity and honesty in telling the story could be understood according to the reader's ability to relate to the story or in the nearness of experience to a reader's own experience. For instance, the value of narration constituted the reader's perception of validity to such truth based on their personal investigation.

In explaining reliability, this autoethnography dwelt upon my credibility in reporting personal accounts, constituting credibility as the truth perceived to vary depending on mood and willingness to indulge in the creative process of recollection. From the point of view of the reader, reliability could perhaps center on the relevance of the story according to the reader's perceptions.

In general, my autoethnography was not so much about forcing the idea of how truthful or fictional the story could be based on standard criteria of what is true or not. The methodology's validity was my rendering of what was the truth at my disposal. To me, it was not something that science focused on. The meanings expressed in the narrative were important to the author and the readers were invited to indulge, empathize, and sympathize with dimensions of reality believed to be multiple and heavily subjective.

Finally, due to the inherent subjectivity of this autoethnography, placing myself at the center of inquiry was the core of this narrative saga. Ethical boundaries constituted my willingness to share the deep connections surrounding learner autonomy with relational ethics employed such that my stories were not supposed to affect other stories within my milieu.

Tales of Online Learner Autonomy

In my case, online learning during the pandemic meant that I did all the learning activities independently with minimum supervision from the teacher. Indeed, the roles of teachers in

online learning as a whole are reduced (Huang, 2018). In fact, I could still do my daily routines such as opening my laptop in my favorite coffee shop, swamping with assignments while enjoying a conversation with some friends.

My sense of independence was providing me ease and comfort for many reasons. First, I was able to decide for myself what to prioritize in the subjects I took. Even if the curriculum content was highly structured with fixed lessons arranged in a chronological order by the teacher, it really did not matter if I followed it or not, the reason being that in the student portal, the teacher would post reflective guide questions that required us to relate the topic at the practical level, so there was really no need to have expert theoretical understanding of most of the questions. In fact, I was engaging a lot with my classmates because we came from different backgrounds and our viewpoints were diverse. Online teachers facilitate by supporting and engaging students in their interactions with the course content (Borup et al., 2019).

Students are able to be autonomous learners as they are able to prepare themselves emotionally, control their online learning process, and a big percentage of students are able to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses during learning (Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2021). This was a turning point of my experience, such emotional inequity which I struggled with on quite a few occasions. With my classmates immersed in their own struggles, I felt I was one with them because I, too, struggled immensely. My emotional problems were greatly impacted by the uncertainties that the pandemic brought on, to begin with. In addition, I was finding it difficult to concentrate on my studies due to the large number of assignments I had to do. The fact that I was simultaneously working a full-time job made this more challenging. But being independent and self-indulgent made me feel responsible.

In one subject that I enrolled, we were tasked to submit a critique paper of an entire book that had vast amounts of information to digest. What was staggering to me was that all of them were equally important for discussion. The challenge came when I wanted to consult my teacher on the intricacies of writing a critical paper that would warrant a favorable grade. Unlike in face-to-face class, I would normally ask the teacher and an immediate answer would be given. However, I found it too immediate and spontaneous that I sometimes developed a sense of discomfort with the teacher. The communication of feedback creates a potentially face-threatening interaction in which the student's self-esteem may be diminished and/or the instructor-student relationship may be strained (Witt & Grip, 2011). Indeed, it was more

liberating in online learning because I was basically communicating with content only without anyone having to tell me. It made sense to write my compositions in a self-directed and self-regulated manner.

Foutaidou et al. (2017) state that student autonomy is a significant requirement for distance learning courses, necessary to a greater extent as a student skill in distance learning environments in relation to traditional learning contexts. Being fully immersed in virtual learning, I developed the art of flexibility and independence in navigating through the learning process. It was an art because I developed the skill of adjusting to various situations although it happened slowly at first. Somehow, as I learned to adjust, I realized that a helpful technique was giving me a good push to continue with my studies. For instance, I would take a complete mapping of the whole learning tasks and resources because the teacher presented everything in the learning portal from the beginning up to the very end. To me, learner autonomy was really about freedom to start when and where that best fit my capacity, connecting ideas as one logical flow, and enhancing online communication through various activities.

The Mantra of Full Responsibility

My first experience with online learning before the pandemic was not disruptive but rather as an alternative to face-to-face learning. During the pandemic crisis, online learning and teaching have become the new normal activity (Perguna et al., 2021).

The course curriculum that was adopted by the students showed how the online lectures were structured, going in a certain order. In accordance with Wedemeyer's Independent Study Theory, which states that a student's independence is the fundamental component of distance education, the majority of the teaching and learning processes involved writing in a technologically mediated platform with a geographically separated teacher and student (Ananga & Biney, 2017). I used learning control as a means of achieving flexibility to complete different learning activities. This gave me the freedom to learn anywhere, at any time, and to choose whether to study ahead of time or not. Accepting complete accountability, however, also meant accepting full responsibility for my deeds. One such responsibility I dealt with was adjusting to the structure of the lessons presented as final. Learner autonomy gave me a sense of control and management by way of identifying areas of the lessons that ignited my interest. This proved to be effective since I received a favorable response from the teacher. In a way, I was in the same

zone of thinking that Wedemeyer believed that the goals of education should include an emphasis on student-centered learning (Diehl, 2013). For instance, learning control manifested in my ability to decide for myself what my best options were given the state of uncertainty I felt. My concentration was disrupted many times, but I managed to give a sense of learning accommodation by studying small packets of knowledge so that I would not be overwhelmed. In effect, learning control ushered a great deal of freedom of thought and action, allowing ideas to flow naturally in my head without any reservation whatsoever. Finally, this resulted in transformative learning after embracing resilience in my pursuits.

From a critical standpoint, though, I wondered if flexible learning was truly transformative. Was learning optimality, for instance, synonymous with independent learning, or was I just harboring false consciousness? Sometimes, I was preoccupied with my independence, which caused me to be inefficient and ultimately irresponsible so that my learning was no longer transformative. For example, being engrossed in self-regulated learning made me too complacent and uncritical of my pace and thinking process because literally there was minimum interference from the teacher. This highly constructivist approach made me more biased with personal meanings and interpretations, disengaging myself from the rest of my classmates' thoughts.

However, as a result of my high degree of independence and the teacher's minimal presence, I was able to interact with the subject through self-guided readings, improving content absorption and critical evaluation of the ideas presented before me. Subsequently, the process of creating meanings as a means of conveying genuine experience turned out to be my guiding principle, allowing me to read the many journal articles with such immersion that I quickly had a sense of familiarity with the educational material. I was actually responding to pages upon pages, summarizing key ideas, and expanding on pre-given concepts—all of which were within my cognitive purview. Regarding this, I found that learning at a distance was generally beneficial to my educational process.

Facing the Enemy

One of the pitfalls of achieving learner autonomy in online learning I experienced was the lack of motivation sometimes, a daunting issue confronted by anyone considering the absence of "real people" one is interacting with in computer-mediated communication. Nevertheless, the maintenance of student motivation poses a significant challenge within the context of this digital

environment (Jain & Roy, 2024). Moreover, "nearness" to a distance programme is a temporary assemblage of people, circumstances, and technologies (Ross et al., 2013). In my case, a feeling of nearness would be achieved with imagined people, and my virtual classmates around, giving rise to conversational learning. However, it was quite the opposite. I was not literally "near" with my classmates because considering that we had no interaction before joining the virtual class. But then again, even if we were not connected in any way with each other before, we managed to create an atmosphere of kindness and professionalism in the virtual world. Thus, the enemy of strangeness was replaced with spontaneous discussion, strengthening my learner autonomy even more. Truthfully, the concepts of autonomy and self-regulation do not suggest a state of independence on the part of the learner, but rather reflect the idea of collaborative control, in which teachers help learners build competencies and capacity through strategy training and task management (White, 2003 as cited in Andrade, 2014). In fact, I interacted a lot with my virtual classmates especially when we were given collaborative tasks that were facilitated by the teacher. Indeed, the essential tendency of cooperative and collaborative learning is learner-centered which ascribes them to foster autonomous learning (Chowdhury, 2021).

Epilogue

Learner autonomy as a celebration of my personal freedom to choose what and how to learn was realized when it extended beyond the virtual classroom. Capacitating myself to control and to hold accountability for my decisions in life mirrored a sense of determination, as reflected in my SDL approach. In other words, the freedom to choose applicable ways of learning was coupled with a sense openness, which included searching for autonomous learning materials that best fit my learning needs. Indeed, autonomous learning materials play a vital role in developing students' autonomy (Xie, 2020). Naturally, I was attached to reading resources I found on the Internet because of its immense popularity.

Next, the freedom to learn also meant the freedom not to learn. In an age of disruption, my priority was straightforward, to survive the Covid-19 malady, hence, it contributed also to my lackluster attitude towards learning. This was also aggravated by the 'academic freeze' that the school announced as the crisis deepened. With the teacher become geographically and psychologically distant even more, SDL was the best option to purge on.

A very obvious reason for promoting learner autonomy is that the teacher may not always be available to guide or instruct, and learners should possess the ability to function in the context of the real world (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2013). The freedom to learn was also the freedom to probe complex issues surrounding my own learning in relation to society. In my context, the real world was the natural occurrence of events that led me to become more self-directed and self-induced.

Towards this end, honing autonomous learning skills equates with technological affordance, providing the much-needed avenue for cognitive development of the learners. In today's proliferation of digital tools, for instance, the capacity of individuals to navigate the Internet, for instance, instigates that resource-based learning is the mantra of digital education. When a student ventures, there are countless possibilities at one's disposal, meaning the student can control the learning process. Its implication to teaching avers that pedagogical practices encouraging self-reflection and peer feedback seem to be effective in encouraging learner independence (Yeung, 2016). However, I argue that technology is a mere tool, a medium to get the message. It should not be confused with learning in the strictest sense simply because too much addiction to technology can take away learning focus.

In deepening the discussion on learner autonomy, exploring the relationship between autonomous and collaborative learning characteristics of online education can be a good study in the future in as much as both influence each other. Take, for instance, an online class where students engage in collaborative discussions and group activities conducted during break-out sessions; these scenarios create interdependence as a result of their independence. Lastly, expounding on the effects of learner autonomy on learning performance will be a good contribution to the body of knowledge in the sense that learning outcome provides direct and indirect impact to learner autonomy is a good indication of the latter's effectiveness. With students creating a personal space in their capacity to optimize learning, learner autonomy illuminates a positive sense of community building with peer learners interacting in virtual platforms, transforming society through forming solutions to societal problems.

Finally, as an expression of personal redemption and survival from the difficulties of virtual learning during the pandemic, this autoethnography stretched the mantra of learning flexibility, drawn heavily from my personal insights and reflections of my experiences as an online student, embracing a self-directed and collaborative direction. In my next paper on learner

autonomy, I will be discussing the nuanced roles of an online teacher using reception analysis. As someone practicing the art of teaching, my experiences are brought into light because teaching makes sense when learning occurs.

Notes on the Contributor

Dr. Leoncio P. Olobia is a regular contributor to SiSAL Journal. He has published four autoethnographic studies based on the theme of second language communication. Dr. Olobia serves as the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Arts in Communication at the Leyte Normal University where he teaches Communication Theory. Disaster Risk and Humanitarian Communication, Communication Planning, and Knowledge Management.

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