How self-access centre staff conceptualise learner autonomy: An analysis of survey data

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Abstract

This research paper tests the continued relevance of the commonly-used term learner autonomy in a self-access learning centre (SALC) workgroup. Staff who had contact with students were surveyed. One research question asked how far staff had a shared understanding of learner autonomy. Data from open-ended questions were coded into a list of functionings (Sen, 1985), and competence as a learner, creativity and self-sufficiency, future-orientation, agency, strong self-image, control of affect, social skill, and freedom to be a student were found to be perceived products of learner autonomy. Research question two asked who benefited from the SALC promoting learner autonomy, and findings imply alumni and local businesses were largely excluded. This research demonstrates that reassessing widely-used terms is a beneficial exercise for any workplace.

Introduction

Context-specific terminology is used repeatedly in workplaces, and meanings can become fuzzy or jargonised, or go through some other kind of semantic shift. Therefore, it is important to periodically check that colleagues have a mutual understanding of what workplace expressions mean, and that the terminology remains relevant. Fostering autonomy in language learners has been central to the aims and vision of the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) since it first opened in 2001. However, SALC staff's perceptions and beliefs about learner autonomy have been under-researched. Furthermore, little is known about who benefits from KUIS students becoming autonomous learners, other than the students themselves.

At the time the research took place, the institutional definition of learner autonomy was given as:

> Autonomy is a capacity to take charge of one's own learning. An autonomous learner can make informed choices which requires a level of awareness and control of learning processes which is achieved through reflection. (SALC, 2016)

The purpose of this research was to discover how SALC staff conceptualised learner autonomy, and analyse how the championing of learner autonomy benefited KUIS students and other stakeholders. In order to shed fresh light onto the concept of learner autonomy, theories from outside the field of language education, linguistics, and self-access were considered. In particular, Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA), which originated in economics but has been used in educational sociology, was adopted because it is an effective framework to investigate "what each person is able to and be" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18; 20), so learner autonomy as it is observed can be analysed and evaluated.

Research questions on two themes were created:

RQ1.　Do SALC staff have a shared understanding of learner autonomy?

     a. How far do current practices encourage learner autonomy to develop?

     b. How do staff believe learner autonomy manifests itself in students who use the SALC?

RQ2. Do all stakeholders benefit from learner autonomy being promoted in the SALC?

     a. Who benefits from learner autonomy being promoted?

     b. What changes are needed to involve all stakeholders?

Employees in the SALC department were surveyed on the two themes and their responses were analysed. Firstly, their opinions on how learner autonomy appears in students were coded to create a list of *functionings* achieved by autonomous learners. Secondly, a combination of Likert scale data and open-ended questions were deductively analysed to gauge whether any stakeholders were under-represented by the policy.

The key findings from this research are that existing SALC services supported students in achieving many of the elements that make up learner autonomy as it is perceived. However, care needs to be taken to make sure learner autonomy is made accessible to all students. Stakeholders benefited from the SALC promoting learner autonomy, but engagement with the local community, alumni and businesses is limited and should be addressed.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy: A Fuzzy Term

The concept of learner autonomy in self-access initially focusing on individual learners. Since then, the definition has evolved, becoming an increasingly social phenomenon (Benson, 2011). In recent times, the focus of learner autonomy in self-access has shifted towards basic psychological needs (Shelton-Strong, 2020). Mynard's (2019) description of changes in self-access gives a clear overview of shifts in thinking about autonomy (see Table 1). The concept is fluid and always developing and adopting

ideas from different sources. It is apposite for SALCs to regularly rethink their conceptualisation of autonomy.

Table 1

Evolution of Self-Access Learning Centres (Mynard, 2019)

Decade	Phase	Features
1970s	Personalised learning	Individual weaknesses, work alone, grammatical accuracy.
1980s	Communicative learning	Learner autonomy, communicative tasks, audio and video materials.
1990s	Project-based learning	Group oriented, authentic texts, computer-based drills and quizzes.
2000s	Computer-assisted learning	Technology-based communication, tailored websites for learners.
2010s	Social and mobile learning	Personal devices, social learning, affect.
Next	Understanding psychological needs	Conditions that help people to thrive.

One issue with the word autonomy is its ambiguity. Its meaning for psychologists is very different to how it is understood by linguists. Furthermore, autonomy and agency are similar terms used differently depending on the field of study (Lantolf, 2013). For example, linguists often see agency as an aspect of autonomy, while sociologists view autonomy as a feature of agency. It has been argued that autonomy and agency "are incommensurable terms" (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p. 184), but the similarities are useful to explore links in SALC practices to work on agency in other fields, such as by proponents of CA (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Goal-setting and taking charge of one's

learning are features of both agency and autonomy, for example.

Learner autonomy can be interpreted in different ways in self-access, in linguistics, and in other social sciences. Therefore, even in a small-scale single-site research project such as this one, differing opinions on the nature of autonomy might be expected.

Capabilities Approach

CA originates in economics, and focuses on human rather than financial development. There is a crossover with learner development and autonomy where the focus is on encouraging learners to thrive.

> The purpose of human development is to improve human lives by expanding the range of things a person can be and do. [...] Development is about removing the obstacles to what a person can do in life. (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 303)

A CA focus means it is possible to conceptualise conditions for development beyond a psychological dimension, so is relevant for learner autonomy, which might be reconceptualised to include freedom as a factor. The goal of human development is giving people freedom, which is vital to live a full life (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 311).

CA requires a consideration of two dimensions, functionings and capabilities. Functionings are "the things the people in the community want to achieve" (Alkire, 2005, p. 118), and capabilities concerns having the right or ability to do them. Proponents consider functionings, rather than capabilities to be the true measure (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 25). Creating a list of functionings is therefore an effective way to utilise CA in research. There is a precedent for using CA in educational research. Flores-Crespo (2007) created a list of functionings achieved by graduates from a rural university in Mexico, and Walker (2006) developed a list of functionings for female students in post-Apartheid South Africa. While these are different settings to a SALC in Japan, the "intrinsic value of freedom does, Sen argues, pertain across classes and cultures" (Alkire, 2005, p. 121).

Functionings that might be expected in a learner autonomy list that have appeared in previous research include *self-confidence and self-reliance*, *life planning*, and *able to develop further abilities* (Flores-Crespo, 2007), and *aspiration*, *knowledge* and *autonomy*— defined as planning and reflection (Walker, 2006).

Method

A questionnaire was utilised to gather the opinions of the SALC staff who had contact with the student body. A thirteen-question questionnaire was designed (see Appendix), which covered themes including the benefits and drawbacks of students developing learner autonomy at KUIS and in Japan, how learner autonomy manifests itself in students, how far students can be expected to develop learner autonomy, and the skills and experiences provided in the SALC. There were a total of four Likert scale questions and nine open-ended questions. With such a small sample size, the Likert questions were intended to be indicative and cross check the responses to the open-ended questions rather than being for statistical analysis. The questionnaire was written in English, which is the working language of the SALC. After ethical permission was granted, the questionnaire was shared using Qualtrics software with the nine learning advisors and four assistant managers whose daily duties involved contact with students. Nine usable responses were collected.

In order to discover whether SALC staff had a shared understanding of learner autonomy, responses to question 11 and 12 were used to consider the first subquestion of RQ1, on current practices. Replies to open-ended questions 8, 9 and 10 were coded and a list of functionings of autonomous learners was created in order to answer the second subquestion of RQ1, how SALC staff perceive that learner autonomy manifests itself in students.

A deductive analysis of responses to open-ended questions 2, 5, 6, 7 and 13 was

conducted to test the responses against the SALC's vision and mission statement and to inform RQ2, the focus of which is whether all stakeholders benefit from learner autonomy being promoted in the SALC.

Delivering the questions through an online survey ensured that questions were standardised, and that SALC policies were available to the respondents. Although using a questionnaire can limit the richness of open-ended responses, the questions matched the language of university policy so that the questions were conducted consistently and in the same order for all participants. Additionally questionnaires allow flexibility for respondents, who can decide where, how and when to respond, and respond in multiple sittings if thinking time is required.

Findings

RQ1: Do SALC Staff Have a Shared Understanding of Learner Autonomy?
How Far do Current Practices Encourage Learner Autonomy to Develop?

Responses disclosed beliefs that the SALC supports students' autonomy through its advising service, courses, classes, and other opportunities for reflective practice. Students are supported in making plans, using resources, strategies, and stress and anxiety management, developing social skills, metacognitive skills, and motivation. Through the SALC, students are able to find mentors, peers, and supporters to aid their development.

The barriers to the development of autonomy that were suggested include that learner autonomy is not a focus of the curriculum and is not compulsory. Additionally students are not always made aware of what learner autonomy is:

Many of them are totally new to the idea of autonomy, so they need to understand what it is and change their attitude to study at first setout. (Respondent 8, Q11).

Developing learner autonomy is often something that students have not expressly come across before entering KUIS, and people's autonomy "grows" at different rates.

Other issues respondents raised with the promotion of learner autonomy are that not everyone is willing to try it, and not everyone is adaptable to it. In addition, one respondent questioned the suitability of having an "army of self-learners" in the corridors of the university.

How do SALC Staff Believe Learner Autonomy Manifests Itself in Students?

Eight functionings achieved by students perceived to be displaying learner autonomy were extracted from the responses to questions 8, 9 and 10. They are competence as a learner, creativity and self-sufficiency, future-orientation, agency, strong self-image, control of affect, social skill, and freedom to be a university student (see Table 2). This suggests that for KUIS staff, learner autonomy is multi-dimensional. However, it is noteworthy that responses were not wholly congruent: there were only four phrases coded as relating to strong self-image and five relating to social skill and future-orientation from nine respondents.

Table 2

A List of Functionings Achieved by University Students Who Have Learner Autonomy

Functioning	Examples extracted from survey data
(i) Competence as a learner	Have control over study (4) [a]; Enjoy learning process (2); Believe process is more important than result (2); See out-of-class learning as necessary; Do not struggle with classes; Have language skill.
(ii) Creativity and self-sufficiency	Not reliant on others (4); Embrace ambiguity (2); Do not wait for instructions; Curious; Creative; Resourceful; Imaginative.
(iii) Future-orientation	Have clear goals (2); Have a vision for the future (2); Think about the future.

Functioning	Examples extracted from survey data
(iv) Agency	Try new things (2); Take action (2); Explore possibilities; Able to make decisions.
(v) Strong self-image	Do not care what others think (2); Free from others; Have understanding of self.
(vi) Control of affect	Able to manage stress (2); Self-confident (2); Motivated; Not afraid to use English.
(vii) Social skill	Like to talk with people; Conscious of others; Have good social skills; Visit teachers' offices.
(viii) Freedom to be a university student	Utilise services available; Not absent; Volunteer; Study abroad; Well rested; Eat healthily; Do not keep overdue materials.

Note. This table shows the opinions of university self-access centre staff on learner autonomy in language majors. Information is taken from descriptions of students displaying learner autonomy, students not displaying learner autonomy, and descriptions of the differences.

[a] The numbers in parentheses show how many respondents described this trait when it was described multiple times (N=9).

RQ2: Do All Stakeholders Benefit from the SALC Promoting Learner Autonomy?

Results connected to RQ2 are presented under two subheadings: data from questions 1, 2, 4, 5 and 13 are associated with autonomy in and around the university, and questions 3, 6, and 7 are analysed to investigate the ways SALC staff believe fostering learner autonomy impacts Japan and the wider world.

Learner Autonomy In and Around the University: Community and Collaboration

Respondents were unanimous in their stated belief that promoting learner autonomy

through community is appropriate, suggesting that learner autonomy is viewed as having a social rather than individualistic quality.

> If by building 'community' we mean engaging learners in active learning based on the premise that learners with common goals collaborate and learn from and with each other through sharing individual and collective experiences and developing the capacity for skilled questioning and insight, then there is no contradiction between autonomy and promoting community because both the individual and community can maintain and exercise their respective agencies if we define community in this way. (Respondent 1, Q2)

Being part of a community can provide the dialogue needed to facilitate the reflection that leads to being self-aware and autonomous.

However, of the groups listed in questions 4 and 5, the community local to the university was perceived to benefit least from learner autonomy being fostered in students who use the SALC. Data on how far different groups were perceived to benefit from the SALC's focus on learner autonomy are shown in Table 3. These results suggest that SALC staff, KUIS lecturers and students benefit to the greatest degree, and students' families, employers and the university board of directors to a lesser degree.

Table 3

Who Benefits from Learner Autonomy Being Fostered in Students and Promoted in the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS)?

Rank[a]	People	Mean[b] (Q5)	Mean[b] (Q4)
1=	SALC staff, advisors.	4.89	4.78
1=	Lecturers, teachers.	4.89	4.78
3	Current students.	4.89	4.44

Rank[a]	People	Mean[b] (Q5)	Mean[b] (Q4)
4	Prospective students.	4.44	4.11
5	Parents, family of students.	4.22	3.78
6	Wider society (Japan).	4.22	3.67
7	Present or future employers.	4.22	3.44
8	KUIS board of directors.	4.11	3.56
9	The local area (Chiba).	3.44	2.78

Note. This table shows the results of a five-point Likert scale on how far different stakeholders benefit from students developing learner autonomy (Q5) and learner autonomy being promoted in the SALC (Q4). 1 corresponds to 'not at all', and 5 to 'a great deal'.

[a] The data are ranked high to low by mean for Q5, then by mean for Q4.

[b] N=9.

For question 13, three research participants suggested a greater need to connect current students with alumni in order to learn how autonomy is applied in the workplace. In addition three respondents suggested that experienced workers should visit the SALC or students should visit local workplaces. Building greater ties with alumni and local businesses could be a way to connect the SALC's mission and the local area.

Learner Autonomy in Wider Society: Japan's Needs in a Changing World

The majority of respondents stated a strong belief that learner autonomy was an appropriate concept for Japan (M=4.33). Respondent 4 stated that autonomous learners "become agile workers" which "will help guide Japan and the rest of the world".

However, there was some disagreement in the appropriacy of autonomous behaviour in Japanese society, as these two extracts demonstrate:

> I used to hear that Japanese society dislike those who stand out in a group (even because of their hard work), but I am not sure it is true these days. (Respondent 6, Q7)

> In Japanese society, autonomy is not always a skill that people think is important, especially in traditional Japanese business settings. Being cooperative is more useful than being autonomous. (Respondent 3, Q7)

Respondent 6 suggests that being an autonomous learner can make someone stand out, which may be viewed negatively by Japanese society. Respondent 3's answer indicates that there is a conflict between learner autonomy and being cooperative; this suggests displaying learner autonomy might mean acting unhelpfully in a team setting.

Discussion

Previous Studies, Problems, SALC Services and RQ1: Do SALC Staff Have a Shared Understanding of Learner Autonomy?

Eight functionings of students displaying learner autonomy behaviour were extracted from the data (see Table 2). Previous research in education that utilised CA theory and presented data in lists of functionings offer additional categories that may enrichen the notion of learner autonomy developed in this paper. Although SALC staff focused on the ability to learn, having a *concept of knowledge*, incorporating motivation and an interest in learning, could also be factors in developing learner autonomy (Walker, 2006). Furthemore, if learner autonomy is important after students graduate, then *employability* and *economic wellbeing* could be pertinent functionings (Flores-Crespo, 2007, p. 51). However, creativity is an element of the list of functionings generated in this study that does not appear elsewhere. Creative thought shows the potential to solve problems and make connections that will be useful beyond graduation.

There are some problematic sections of the list of functionings achieved by university students who have learner autonomy. Firstly, parts of functioning viii, freedom to be a university student, include utilising services, volunteering, and studying abroad. To do these things requires a combination of time and money. Many students need to spend a lot of time doing things such as working part-time jobs. Pressure to maximise time spent doing educational and extracurricular activities has been shown to create "guilt in students who 'fail' to do so" (Allen et al., 2013, p. 438). Creating guilt or a sense of failure in students, or judging them on how they use their free time, is not likely to lead to autonomy or the students thriving in the university environment.

Secondly, functioning vii, social skill seems incongruous with attempts to develop an autonomy-supportive environment. This functioning is only drawn from four descriptors in the data so is not widespread, but it suggests a tendency to promote a particular model of "autonomous learner", which may be easier for some to accomplish than others. This is a potentially dangerous situation and further discussion within the workgroup to reconsider it is recommended.

Even though there are problems with the list of functionings and there may not be an overall consensus, SALC staff's collective perceptions of how learner autonomy appears in students are synthesised in the list of functionings (see Table 2). The first six of these (competence as a learner, creativity and self-sufficiency, future orientation, agency, strong self-image, and control of affect) are addressed and fostered in the classes and module courses offered to all KUIS students by the SALC. Additionally, these are areas students are encouraged to dialogue with learning advisors about in advising sessions that are open to all members of the university. While educators cannot control the social issues connected to functioning viii, freedom to be a university student, services are offered (although as Alkire, 2005, p. 121, suggests, offering a service does not always lead to freedom): support is given to study abroad applicants, and advisors

are available to talk to students about other personal issues. Therefore, it can be determined that the SALC team does an effective job of offering opportunities to develop learner autonomy in the vast majority of the ways staff define it.

Institutionalised Patterns, Parents and RQ2: Do All Stakeholders Benefit from the SALC Promoting Learner Autonomy?

The most important group of stakeholders to consider is the students because it is ultimately them who are encouraged to develop learner autonomy. Three respondents mentioned lack of willingness as a reason that not all students develop learner autonomy (Q11): students may be unwilling to break with conformity. It is possible that what is observed as unwillingness is in fact a mask for other unfreedoms that are preventing students from reaching their full potential. Time and money have been mentioned as possible obstacles, but this unwillingness may be a manifestation of misrecognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Misrecognition occurs when people, in this case, university students, do not act in the manner expected by the institution. Certain behaviours are given more value, and 'institutionalised patterns of cultural value prevent one from participating as a peer in social life' (Burke, 2012, p.182; 179). There is a danger that in pushing autonomy, the SALC both alienates a cross-section of the student body that are, for whatever reason, expressing unwillingness to participate, and pushes other students to adopt the behaviour preferred by the institution.

Institutional expectations should not be that every student will have gained autonomy by graduation day. As the list of functionings developed in this paper suggests, there is a complexity to developing autonomy, and it is not a linear, predictable, or constant process (Kato & Mynard, 2016). Usually a period of 'passivity' precedes 'awakening' (Freire 1970/1996, p. 46). It is not uncommon to resist and reject change

en route to developing autonomy or agency. While learner autonomy may be transformational and beneficial to some learners, others should not be pressured towards that approach.

Another way to understand unwillingness to try learner autonomy can be understood by responses to question 7, which highlighted some potential conflicts between developing learner autonomy and thriving in Japanese society, namely that those with autonomy may stand out or be perceived to be uncooperative. It may be that some students view the concept of learner autonomy to be too radical and resist it because "they prefer the conformity with their state of unfreedom" (Freire, 1970/1996, p. 30). It may be that the SALC needs to communicate better beyond students and staff about the potential benefits of learner autonomy.

In addition to the wider community discussed in the Results section, parents and family of students were one group that were perceived to benefit less than others in responses to questions 4 and 5 (see Table 3). While it is important to avoid parental involvement in their role as fee-payers or customers of the university, parental engagement in education can be a part of positive social change (Smyth, 2011, p. 130-131). More might be done to increase parents' understanding of the SALC's vision and ethos, and strategies should be considered that would give parents a role in accomplishing the mission statement.

Conclusion

The starting point of this research paper was to examine the relevance and shared meaning of a piece of terminology used on a daily basis in a workplace. Through a questionnaire, SALC staff were asked to conceptualise learner autonomy. Emerging from this came the discovery that there is a need for the SALC to engage more with the local community, alumni, and to involve other stakeholders such as parents more in order that learner autonomy is both realised in students and understood in society.

A list of functionings achieved by students who achieve learner autonomy was created. There was one particularly problematic area that suggested a personality type for autonomous learners, making it something some may struggle to achieve. However, for the most part, the elements of autonomy described were found to match things fostered by the SALC's curriculum and available in its services. This suggests a united approach and general harmony in the workgroup's views.

A need to have an awareness of student's economic and social issues emerged in the list of functionings. As learner autonomy in self-access takes a turn towards promoting psychological needs (Mynard, 2019), it is important that self-access practitioners continue to gather inspiration from diverse places rather than merely relying on psychology for ideas.

To sum up, reinterpreting and questioning terminology that is regularly used in a workplace is a fruitful activity that can benefit practitioners working in all fields.

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Appendix

Content of Online Questionnaire Given to Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) Staff

The aim of this questionnaire is to learn more about what happens when the SALC vision and mission statement are successfully implemented, and the impact this has. For your information, the vision and mission statement, and working definition of autonomy are below (SALC, 2016):

SALC Vision

The vision is a long-term view and a work in progress and incorporates the following elements:

1. To establish the SALC as a centre of excellence
2. To promote 'autonomy through community'
3. To make the SALC a dynamic learning hub
4. To provide KUIS graduates with skills and experiences which maximise future learning opportunities and employability

SALC Mission Statement

The SALC aims to foster learner autonomy by providing learners with opportunities to reflect and take charge of their language learning, and to develop skills for individualising the learning experience and making informed choices.

KUIS's Definition of Autonomy

Autonomy is a capacity to take charge of one's own learning. An autonomous learner can make informed choices which requires a level of awareness and control of learning processes which is achieved through reflection.

Part of the SALC Mission Statement is to 'develop skills for individualising the learning experience', and the definition of autonomy used includes 'taking charge of one's own learning'.

Part of the SALC Vision is 'to promote autonomy through community'.

[Q1.] How far do you agree with the following statement:

Strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly agree

There is a contradiction between promoting autonomy (individualising) and promoting community.

[Q2.] What are the reasons for your answer above?

[Q3.] How far do you agree with these statements:

Strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly agree

Developing autonomy helps students achieve more highly in the classes they take at KUIS.

Developing autonomy helps KUIS students achieve more highly in the exams they are required to pass in order to graduate.

KUIS graduates are likely to prosper in Japanese society as a result of developing autonomy.

Learner autonomy is an appropriate concept for Japan.

[Q4.] How far do the following people benefit from learner autonomy **being promoted** by the SALC?

Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   A great deal

KUIS board of directors.

Present or future employers.

Lecturers, teachers.

SALC staff, advisors.

Parents, family of students.

Current students.

Prospective students.

The local area (Chiba).

Wider society (Japan).

Other (please state).

[Q5.] How far do the following people and groups benefit from KUIS students **developing** autonomy?

Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   A great deal

KUIS board of directors.

Present or future employers.

Lecturers, teachers.

SALC staff, advisors.

Parents, family of students.

Current students.

Prospective students.

The local area (Chiba).

Wider society (Japan).

Other (please state).

[Q6.] In what ways do the people and groups mentioned above benefit from KUIS students developing autonomy?

[Q7.] Are there any drawbacks to KUIS students developing autonomy? What are the drawbacks, and how do they affect the people and groups mentioned above?

Consider the behaviour shown by students you have worked with at KUIS, who you consider to be very autonomous and not at all autonomous.

Then complete the two sentences below about what you consider to be typical of students you meet at KUIS.

[Q8.] A student who displays learner autonomy tends to…

[Q9.] A student who does not demonstrate learner autonomy tends to…

Now compare your two sentences.

[Q10.] Are there any capabilities the first learner has that the second does not? Please describe them.

[Q11.] Please comment as fully as you can on the following statement.

Every student who enters KUIS can realistically expect to have taken charge of their own learning by the time they graduate.

Part of the SALC vision is 'to provide KUIS graduates with skills and experiences which maximise future learning opportunities and employability'.

[Q12.] What skills and experiences are currently provided in the SALC which maximise students' future learning opportunities and employability?

[Q13.] What other skills and experiences could be provided in the SALC to maximise students' futures?