

Exploring autonomous learning strategies within contemporary dance technique class at the South China Normal University

Yan Liu

South China Normal University

email: liuyan_1226@126.com

Abstract

The aim of this research is to further understand the effectiveness and possible benefits of introducing autonomous learning strategies at the South China Normal University (SCNU). Two autonomous learning strategies were introduced to the students at SCNU: 1) A participatory and a dynamic teaching and learning environment, one in which the students are encouraged to engage verbally with each other and the teacher at designated times within the class; 2) The inclusion of the learner journal, with the aim of expanding student learning through the development of reflective and critical thinking skills. The idea behind this research is to try to bring Western teaching philosophy into a specific Chinese university's educational context, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the students' experience of autonomous learning strategies. Autonomous learning has been emphasized by educators and theorists since the early 1970s, and the role of autonomous learning in higher education also plays an increasingly important role in the educational reforms currently taking place around the globe. To encourage students to depend less on the teacher and to take more responsibility for their own learning, the researcher advocates that dance teachers shift away from teacher-centered processes and move toward student-centered learning strategies. This attempt challenges the traditional teaching strategies in the Chinese dance educational system. It is hoped that this study will provide new knowledge about autonomous learning strategies in dance education areas in mainland Chinese universities, as well as inform the future use of these strategies within SCNU.

Keywords: autonomous learning strategies, student-centered learning, Chinese dance educational system, South China Normal University

This research was conducted at SCNU within contemporary dance technique classes during a 5-week period. During this period, the students were introduced to two autonomous learning strategies within their curriculum-designated contemporary dance class. The research methodology selected for this investigation will assist in gaining a deeper understanding of the students' experience of those strategies.

This paper will detail the researcher's process and findings in the case study conducted at SCNU. Firstly, it introduces the researcher's background information, as well as previous research on mainland China student learning. Secondly, it provides a framework that indicates the importance of autonomous learning in higher education, and that university-level students should be able to cultivate independent thinking (i.e., to become more independent and autonomous learners). The following section will list the cultural context challenges and the implications of this research. This research does seem to indicate that autonomous learning strategies will help the students at SCNU to reflect and think more about their role in the learning process. Moreover, the findings suggest that there are specific considerations that have come out

of this research, as well as questions regarding the advancement of autonomous learning strategies within SCNU.

Researcher's background information

The researcher is a contemporary dance teacher and has been teaching at SCNU since 2007. It has been her experience that after two years of study in the four-year degree, the students' passivity increases, and they seem to lose their passion for learning. There is a lot of effort and attention from the teachers to encourage the students to be more active in their learning. However, passivity still exists and is considered a major challenge for the dance faculty at the South China Normal University. So, what teaching strategy can assist with this issue? If these students become teachers after they graduate, and their learning attitude remains passive, how do they influence their own students in the future?

As a Master's student at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, the researcher experienced a student-centered learning environment during both the undergraduate and post-graduate years, and encouraged herself to take responsibility for her own study. It has provided a different view to the students' teaching and learning environment, shifting from a primarily teacher-centered role to a student-centered role. She was encouraged to be a reflective and independent learner, became active in a new learning environment, as well as developed an increased interest in learning.

When she reflected on past experiences, it seems that mainland China students prefer to depend on the teacher and what they teach them, with little focus on their role in the learning process. This phenomenon appears to have an influence on the development of dance. Because the learning and teaching turns into a loop of passive acceptance in the learning style, it seems to be time to let students find their own role as learners, taking responsibility of their own learning and not always depending on what the teacher tells them to do. Thus, the question the researcher is seeking is, are there more effective teaching strategies that will encourage more active roles by the students in their learning?

Previous research on mainland China student learning

Research suggests that students from mainland China have little desire to discover learning on their own. They are passive and rely on rote-learning (Kember, 2004, p. 39). "They wish to be spoon fed and in turn they are spoon fed. Lecturers are under pressure to feed the student with a certain amount of academic and community needs information and the simplest way to do it is to adopt the old and traditional approaches to teaching" (Course Planning Committee, 1989, p. 13, as cited in Kember, 2004, p. 39). It seems that if there is the belief and understanding that self-discovery leads to a deeper and more long-lasting learning, then this issue of spoon-feeding students' needs to be addressed within the teaching and learning strategy. Heather Fry, Steve Ketteridge, and Stephanie Marshall (2003) also mentioned that "educational research has long recognized that learning is less effective the more learners depend on the teacher and the less they take responsibility for their own learning. Rather ... autonomous learning makes learning more productive and develops independence" (p. 35).

Since traditional learning is based on the teacher's instruction and students rely on this taught content, it is hard for students to play an active role in the learning process. Autonomous learning

is encouraging students to depend less on the teacher and to take more responsibility for their own learning. According to Phil Benson (2001), “Autonomy implies not only that learners attempt to take control of their own learning from time to time, but that they possess the capacity to do so systematically” (p. 75). Autonomous learning seems to help students rid themselves of teacher dependence.

The importance of autonomous learning

Autonomous learning has been emphasized by educators and theorists since the early 1970s. The role of autonomous learning in higher education also plays an increasingly important role in the educational reforms currently taking place around the globe. According to Della Fazey and John Fazey (2001), “The capacity to think, learn and behave autonomously is often claimed as an outcome for students in higher education” (Crome, et al., 2009, p. 111).

In *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*, Fry, et al. (2003) state that the autonomy (of student learning) that “commonly refers to students taking more responsibility for and control of themselves and their learning, including being less spoon-fed. [It] may also include elements of students taking more responsibility for determining and directing the content of their learning” (p. 433). As Fry, et al. stated, “If the learner is to take increasing responsibility for progress and the teacher aims to facilitate, not control ... then autonomous learning becomes crucial” (p. 331). Here, they explain the relationship between teachers and students in the learning process. The teacher’s role becomes slightly changed; teaching and learning should not always be controlled by the teacher, but should guide and help students to learn by themselves. That might lead to a more effective and deeper understanding of learning.

Keith Crome, Ruth Farrar, and Patrick O’Connor (2009) defined autonomous learning as, “A habit of mind, expressed through a range of activities and skills, acquired and developed through practice ... From this perspective, autonomous learning becomes the habitual exercise of skills, developed and perfected through continuous practice, which comes to be second nature” (p. 121). Once students own this kind of thinking, they will have the ability to learn by themselves; this ability will become second nature, not to mention a good habit. Students will become more motivated to think and work independently. Moreover, they will know what they need and will engender their independent thoughts, as well; more focus will be on one’s own learning.

This investigation argues for the importance of autonomous learning being increasingly promoted, especially for the 21st century learners who need to have this ability to reach the standard of the changing world. We all hope that students can take more responsibility in their own learning for the sake of making teaching and learning more effective.

Shift teaching strategy from teacher-centered to student-centered

To encourage students to depend less on the teacher and to take more responsibility for their own learning, the researcher advocates that dance teachers shift away from teacher-centered processes and move towards student-centered learning strategies. Dr. P. Côté-Laurence and M. Kimmerle (2003) pointed out that the teaching of technique relies more on traditional teaching methods, like the transmission of information through verbal instructions and demonstration from an expert, such as a dance teacher, to a novice, such as a dance student. Côté-Laurence (2006) also

argued that tradition has promoted teacher-centered pedagogy, while innovation opts for student-centered learning (p. 8). Information technology has certainly contributed to the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning by increasing student interaction and promoting critical thinking outside of the classroom (Côté-Laurence, Chen, & Keppell, 2005, as cited in Côté-Laurence, 2006, p. 8). Shifting from teacher-centered teaching and learning strategy to student-centered may be the most proper way to change the situation and achieve a deeper approach to learning. It is hoped that the student-centered teaching and learning strategy, as well as spoon-feeding in dance education, will alter the phenomenon of students' passivity.

Methodology

A case study methodology has been used for this research with certain students at SCNU, focusing on the observation and analysis of the two selected teaching strategies. The researcher has decided to observe the effect of two different teaching strategies within a contemporary dance technique class at SCNU. Participants have been selected, and those involved in this research are Grade Three students in the Dance Department at SCNU. They range in age from 16-22. The general learning attitudes of Grade Three students are passive because they are learning in a teacher-centered way; when they reach Grade Three, the learning motivation seems to diminish. In this situation, the students show passivity and appear to have little interest in learning. Nevertheless, as Grade Three students, they are supposed to become more mature and understanding, learning in a better way before they graduate and become teachers. Moreover, they need to cultivate themselves to become active learners, which can be seen as a necessary capability of a teacher.

Data collection and analysis

In this case study, there were five instruments to generate data: the teacher's observation, a Student Progress Questionnaire, a group discussion, interviews, and learner journals. Each class was recorded via a video recorder. The researcher observed the class and reviewed the video after each class. Field notes were taken each day. This section of the paper will detail the teacher's observation and the learner's journal.

Most participants appeared curious and highly motivated at the beginning of the research period. Their attentiveness to what was, for the most part, a new learning experience and environment appeared to lead them to be more spontaneous in their conversation in the classroom. In addition, it seems that some of the students now understand the idea behind this research. There is evidence, which was shown in the learner journal, that the students have begun to think and reflect on their own learning, and it seems that this is connected with what they learn in the classroom. However, some students who possessed highly technical skills felt confused and didn't understand why the class and the learning was conducted in this way. It seems to be an obstacle for them to think and reflect like this. Therefore, for these students, it appears difficult for them to shift from dependence on a teacher-centered learning environment to a student-centered learning environment.

Through the teacher's observation, the researcher has become aware of a noticeable shift in the students' passion after the first four classes. It appears that this new way of learning has possibly made them confused, as they no longer have a familiar context within which to learn. It is quite evident that they have lost their passion for learning when thrust into a student-centered learning

environment. It appears that the students feel the teacher has lost the authority to take control of the class, and so therefore the class has become undisciplined. The other reason for the decrease in the participants' learning passion is that they felt the requirements of physical movement were less rigorous in the student-centered learning environment; it was too different from what they were used to in their normal class.

From the other aspect of the students' regular class performance, they appear to feel comfortable, not stressed, and enjoyed the process. They like to share learning experiences, thinking while learning. The researcher observed that some students were progressing well and showed confidence when they learned new steps. They didn't feel nervous or shy when they were asked to demonstrate in front of the whole class. It appears to have become more natural for them to move around in the space, and they don't care so much about who should stand in the front of the class. One student commented, "I feel I focus more on my own learning. I don't need to care very much [about] how other students [look at] me. And the place of where I stand ... doesn't matter. The most important thing for me is to learn and to improve [myself]."

In the reflective learner journal, students recorded the learning process, reflecting on class experience. They wrote about their feelings, questions, and experiences. Some reflective journals do show that students possess many positive experiences in their thinking and reflection on their learning.

According to several students:

Students will not become rigid and stiff when [the] teacher chooses the way of cultivating students to think more. The students will find the question [and] ask questions, willing to solve the problems, so learn[ing] how to learn should be more important than what to learn. (Student A)

[It's] not only for learning technique, or improving [one's] physical skills, but it is an exploration process of learn[ing] how to teach, knowing how to overcome fears in [one's] mind, as well as develop my self-confidence. (Student B)

Through communication, I have a clear idea of how to be a teacher who should choose to be open and know how to dig out students' own potential, rather than to require students [to] do the same as the machine produced. (Student C)

The teacher's responsibility is not to teach students, but should guide students to know why. Then we can develop a sense of autonomous learning, and will try to find the answers by ourselves. (Student E)

I begin to think independently. In this learning environment, it makes me focus on myself, encourage [me] to believe myself. It is the first time that I feel I am the master in learning. I began to find myself little by little. [I] understand ... contemporary dance [better] ... it is not just a kind of dance ... it let me ... discover a learning strategy that is ... scientific, effective, continuous and suitable for me. (Student F)

Cultural context challenge

The researcher is aware that this new learning strategy may conflict with previous teaching strategies, and so special consideration for teachers who use these learning strategies in the mainland requires further investigation to find the right balance between the traditional learning strategy and the autonomous learning strategy. It is not possible to change the whole dance educational system, which is currently focused on a teacher-centered approach in SCNU. There needs to be further research to solve the conflict with previous teaching strategies for the sake of helping students improve their ability to learn at SCNU.

The influence of culture when applying new learning strategies is an important one to consider, and would certainly require further research to fully understand. The philosophy of Confucius deeply influences the relationship between student and teacher, and teacher and student on the mainland. The teacher's role plays a very important part in the students' learning: the teacher is the center in education, and should take more responsibility in nurturing their students. The students' role is emphasized less in the learning process; they just need to prepare well, waiting for the teacher to instruct. This decreases the students' learning motivation and they lose their own role, therefore choosing to depend on the teacher.

The other reason is that students are encouraged to be collective and work together, not to be independent or individual. Ho and Crookall (1995, p. 237) have argued that, "Being autonomous often requires that students work independently of the teacher and this may entail shared decision making, as well as presenting opinions that differ from those of the teacher. It is, thus, easy to see why Chinese students would not find autonomy very comfortable" (Cited in Benson, 2001, pp. 55-56). Because of the traditional teacher-centered teaching and learning strategy, Chinese students are accustomed to being dependent on teachers and they seem to focus their attention only on the teachers' teaching, and not on themselves and their own learning. For cultivated, independent learners, it is not easy and takes time to fully understand autonomous learning strategies. If we believe that teaching and learning can be interactive, and with both sides working together, teaching and learning will become more effective and less one-sided.

Implication of this research

This research does seem to indicate that autonomous learning strategies will help the students at SCNU to reflect and think more about their role in learning. We understand the students' personal experiences in the interview. Through discussion and writing reflective learner journals, they better understand. They begin to think independently, asking questions and thinking further about how to be a teacher, as well as trying to understand that learning is not just what a teacher teaches them.

It also seems that these strategies can enable them to discover their own need for learning, finding their own role as a learner and driving them to become active learners. They realize that learning should go beyond the classroom; it is a continuous process. In their journal, they write and realize that better articulation and confidence is so important for a teacher. Some of them begin to think and encourage themselves to become confident in the next step of learning. These are all the positive indications of the research of this case study, which may inform the future.

Conclusion

This research is the first attempt in applying autonomous learning at the South China Normal University; it is just the beginning. I think that most of us working in higher education need to do more research in this area, understanding better autonomous learning strategies and enhancing these strategies in higher education.

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Yan Liu is a dance teacher in the Department of Dance, Music School of South China Normal University. Yan has more than 10 years of professional Chinese classic dance learning experience in Guangzhou. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Dance from The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (2009), and won the 2011 Dean of Dance prize. Yan's research revolves around improving dance teaching and learning, with a particular focus on the Chinese university educational system. She also tries to mix Western dance education philosophy into Chinese educational contexts to find ways to enhance dance teaching and learning in Chinese higher education.

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