Definitions of Independent Learning – Initial Overview

The concept of independent learning is not new, but is it one on which there is a surprising lack of consensus as to what it means (Broad, 2006). Independent learning is presented as something of value that is expected to take place at university (Northedge, 2005:19; Cottrell: 2003:11; Gow and Kember: 1990) yet recent reports highlight the fact that now undergraduates, 'struggle to cope with the independent and self directed style of learning expected by higher education tutors' (Wilde, *et al* 2006: 2). However for Knight, 'the implication is misleading. Independence is a goal, not a starting point' (1996: 35). To help students achieve this goal Race (1996) identifies a range of independent learning practices, both formal and informal that could take place specifically at university, but then concedes 'essentially most learning is, when we really think about it, independent learning'. It appears, therefore, that at a time when students in higher education are being criticised for failing to be 'independent' learners (Shepherd, 2006) there is a need to reflect upon the terms of reference and ask what is meant by the term 'independent learning' in the context of university study.

Academic discourse abounds with synonyms to describe 'independent learning': 'autonomous learning, independent study, self-directed learning, student initiated learning, project orientation, discovery and inquiry, teaching for thinking, learning to learn, self-instruction and life-long learning' (Kesten, 1987:9). Moreover, this proliferation of terms is made worse by the fact that many authors, 'use the same terms to mean different things, and sometimes they use different terms to mean the same thing, and the only way to tell the difference is to delve beneath the surface to what is actually meant in any particular situation' (Candy, 1987: 160). In short, 'confusion exists due to the number of terms and possible interpretation of those terms' (Broad, 2006: 120). The key problem with the term 'independent' is identified by Knight: 'Independent learning implies going it alone, unaided' (1996: 35) and as Biggs (2003) has noted all learning is relational involving learners relating to new information, concepts, process – and people within the social context of the educational environment. In practice, learning is necessarily *inter-dependent*.

The implications of what might otherwise seem to be a question simply of semantics are significant. Misconceptions about the practice of independent learning itself remain a barrier; by definition it is interpreted to be an isolated and solitary activity, in practice selfish

and self-centred and undertaken without support or the need of tutors (Allan *et al*, 1996). If a solution is to be found, a review of the literature identifies that clarification may lie not in the literature pertaining to current pedagogical approaches in higher education but in the literature of adult learning, not least because 'the ability to learn on one's own' is 'a basic human competence' (Knowles, 1975: 17) not confined to prescribed limits. Cannon (2001), for example argues that the principles of the andragogical model of adult education are more applicable to higher education practices that seek to promote independent learning and he is not alone in suggesting that the 'distinctiveness' of the higher education context may require different methodologies to be considered (Stierer and Antoniou, 2004).

In turning to the discourse of adult education to analyse independent learning there is the opportunity to draw upon a conceptual tradition in which the role of the educator has always been, 'to facilitate, self-directed, reflective and critical learning on the part of individual learners' (Jarvis *et al*, 2003: 90) and a great deal of research has been carried as to how this might be achieved in practice (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). In particular, the literature of adragogy has a proven record of contesting the term 'independent learning', favouring instead use of the terms 'self-directed' and autonomous learning (Knowles, 1975, 1984; Boud, 1988).

Autonomous Learning

A major consequence of the failure to define independent learning adequately within the context of higher education is that there has often been an inability to discriminate between independent study as a learning activity and as a capacity to be developed. As a result, the process by which a student becomes capable of self-directed study is left to 'serendipity' (Knight, 1996: 35). One strategy used to overcome this is to use the term 'autonomy' and define this as, 'the capacity or ability to take charge of one's learning' (Holec, 1979: 3). A brief review of the literature of adult education reveals that this perspective results in thought being given to the learning activities that develop the autonomous learner, most notably by Boud (1988) and Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) through to more current practitioners such as van der Veen (2006). However Boud does more than provide a checklist, for in identifying the common characteristic of all such approaches to learning, namely, requiring students to take 'some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction' (1988: 23), he identifies the key challenge of higher education and does much to overcome the problematic variation in terminology. But this is not all, he also observes that in all writings on how autonomy in learning is to be

achieved in practice, 'no absolute standard of autonomy is manifest....what is important is the *direction of change – towards student self reliance.*' (Boud,1988: 22).   As a possible 'enabling structure' (Knight, 1996: 35) to achieve independent learning in practice, the concept of a spectrum of autonomous activities has much to offer; nevertheless, contradictions remain as interdependence remains for many a non-negotiable feature of learning:

> 'Learner autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the processes and content of learning. We recognise it in a wide variety of behaviours as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. The various freedoms that autonomy implies are always conditional and constrained, never absolute. As social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence, our essential condition is one of inter-dependence; total detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism.
>
> (Little, 1990: 8)

Self-directed Learning

A perspective that acknowledges the need for interaction is that offered by Knowles (1975) who proposes the term, self-directed learning.   This is a fundamental concept in adult education and a theoretical tradition can be readily identified (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy 1991), for which Knowles gives the seminal definition:

> 'In its broadest meaning 'self-directed learning' describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes'   (1975: 18)

Although the term itself involves the synthesis of both 'self-direction' or self-directedness and 'learning' with the former including dimensions of self-management, self-monitoring and motivation (Garrison, 1997) it is the inter-relatedness of such learning activities which Knowles chooses to draw attention to.   He argues that self-directed learning should be

adopted as the preferred way to describe autonomous, independent learning because, 'the trouble with most of these labels is that they seem to imply learning in isolation, whereas self directed learning usually takes place in association with various kinds of helpers, such as teachers, tutors, mentors, resource people and peers' (Knowles, 1975: 18). For Knowles, self-directed learning involves autonomous activities but is clearly an inter-dependent process. Reflection on the nature of student learning in Higher Education will identify that such a definition may indeed encapsulate the intentions of those who describe university study as independent learning.

References:

Allan, B., Cook, M. and Lewis, R., (1996). *The independent learner: Developing independence in learning*. University of Humberside.

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university.* Buckingham, SHRE: Open University Press

Boud, D. (1988) Moving towards autonomy *in:* Boud, D. ed.*Developing student autonomy in learning*. 2nd edition. London: Kogan Page (1988).

Broad, J. (2006) Interpretations of independent learning in further education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 30 (2) May.

Brockett, R.G. and Hiemstra, R. (1991) A conceptual framework for understanding self-direction in adult learning *In:* Self-Direction in adult learning: perspectives on theory, research, and practice. London: Routledge. Available online at: http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/hiemstra_self_direction_.htm

Candy, P.C. (1991) Self-direction for lifelong learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Candy. P.C (1987) Evolution, revolution or devolution: increasing learner control in the instructional setting *in*: Boud.D. mad Griffin, S. eds. Appreciating adults learning: from the learners' perspective London: Kogan-Page pp159-178.

Cannon, R. (2001) Pedagogy: a point of view. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 6 (3) pp. 415-419.

Cottrell, S. (2003). *The study skills handbook*. 2nd edition London: Palgrave Macmillan:

Garrison, D.R, (1997). Self-Directed learning: Towards a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*. 28, (1) pp.18-33.

Gow, L and Kember, D. (1990) Does higher education promote independent learning? *Higher Education*. 19 (3) pp. 307-322.

Holec, H (1979) *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon: Oxford.

Jarvis, P. Holford, J and Griffin, C., (2003). *The theory and practice of learning.* 2nd edition. London: Kogan-Page

Kesten, C. (1987) Independent learning: a common essential learning: a study completed for the Saskatchewan Department of Education Core Curriculum Investigation Project, Saskatchewan

Department of Education: University of Regina. i*n*: Broad, J. Interpretations of independent learning in further education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 30 (2) May.

Knight. P. (1996) Independent Study, independent studies and 'core skills' in higher education. i*n*: Tait, J and Knight. P. eds. (1996). *The management of independent learning*. London: Kogan Page in association with SEDA.

Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-directed learning: a guide for learners and teachers.* Chicago: Follett Publishing Company.

Little, D. (1990). Autonomy in language learning: some theoretical and practical considerations *in:* Gathercole, I ed. *Learning foreign languages from authentic texts*. Dublin: Authentik, in association with CiLT, London.
 pp. 7-15.

Northedge, A. (2005) *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University.

Race, P. (1996) *Effective learning. A fresh look at independent learning*. University of Durham Available online at: http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/eff.learning/indep.html [last accessed July 2006]

Shepherd, J. (2006) Tutors in despair at illiterate freshers. *Times Higher Education Supplement*. 10th February, p.5.

Stierer, B and Antoniou, M. (2004) Are there distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education? *Teaching in Higher Education*. 9 (3) July. pp.275-285.

Van der Veen, R. (2006) Communication and creativity: methodological shifts in adult education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 25(3) May-June pp231-240.

Wilde, S., Wright, S., Hayward, G., Johnson, J and Skerrett, R.,(2006): *Nuffield review higher education in focus groups preliminary report*. Oxford University: Oxford. Available online at: http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/news44-2.pdf [last accessed 16th September 2006]

Michelle O'Doherty

LearnHigher: The University of Manchester

September, 2006.