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Facilitating the emancipation of the learner

Learner independency focuses on the learner's ability to take responsibility for and to manage his/her learning processes. But this conceptualisation lacks an important component, namely the consideration of the learner's movement towards becoming an emancipated learner, demonstrating a high degree of agency with a thorough meta-cognitive grasp of the quality of his/her actions. This article presents a theoretical basis for the process of learner emancipation and describes a model for conceptualising such processes. The model operationalises learning in terms of learner actions. Learner action is considered a function of theorising and practice, and four classes of learner action are distinguished, namely the actions of a consultant, a theorist, a practitioner and an entrepreneur. Examples from existing courses in Psychology illustrate how the core tenets of the model can be operationalised in practice.

Die bemiddeling van die emansipering van die leerder

Leerderonafhanklikheid fokus op die leerder se vermoë om verantwoordelikheid te aanvaar vir die selfbestuur van sy/haar leerprosesse. Maar 'n belangrike komponent is afwesig in hierdie begrip, te wete die oorweging van die verandering van die leerder in 'n geëmansipeerde leerder, 'n leerder met 'n hoë mate van agentskap en 'n deeglike metakognitiewe begrip van die kwaliteit van sy/haar aksies. Hierdie artikel bied 'n teoretiese begronding van leerderemansipasie en beskryf 'n konseptuele model van sodanige prosesse. Die model operasionaliseer leer in terme van leerderaksies. Leerderaksie word oorweeg as 'n funksie van teoretisering en praktisering en vier klasse van leerderaksie word onderskei, te wete die aksies van 'n konsultant, 'n teoretikus, 'n praktiseerder en 'n entrepreneur. Voorbeelde uit bestaande Sielkundekursusse word gebruik om toe te lig hoe die kernaspekte van die model in die praktyk geoperasionaliseer kan word.

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There are many sources on learner independence but hardly any refer to learner emancipation or liberation. These terms have socio-political connotations, which may be the reason for the silence on these aspects of learning. Yet the absence of this kind of terminology from the major discourses in education and education policies (Leathwood 2006: 611) restricts the conceptualisation of learning and cognition. The independency of learners is viewed in terms of their ability to take responsibility for and to manage their learning activities. Although learner independence is associated with self-development it does not address the learner's mastering of subject material. In current conceptualisations of learner independence, processes of mastering are considered a matter of cognition and not treated as a psychological element in personal development. Emancipated learners are learners who can manage their own learning processes independently but who can also command their subject material from a personal stand. As such emancipation is a process of academic professionalisation. Emancipating learning is a process whereby learners become liberated from subject material — moving from being "ruled" by the material to being masters of the material. Emancipated learners are learners who have progressed beyond being knowledgeable. They are individuals who can work with, and in terms of, the subject matter. Although this kind of academic professionalisation is an expected outcome of learning, the processes whereby it occurs are not addressed in the current literature on learner independence.

This article presents a theoretical basis for the process of learner emancipation and describes a model for conceptualising such processes. Practical examples from two courses in Psychology illustrate how the emancipation of the learner can be facilitated by means of proper course design and assessment procedures.

1. The nature of learner emancipation

The notion of learner emancipation forces one to consider the paradoxical nature of learning. Learning is paradoxical because it is a mastering through enslavement. In mastering a field of study the learner is subjected to its terminology, theories and methodologies.

A discipline is mastered through becoming disciplined. It is a process of learning that requires formal instruction. The learner needs a teacher, a guide into the field of study. The enslavement is complete when the learner finally emerges with a master's degree, declared competent in the ways and means of the discipline.

Emancipation is supposed to follow at doctoral level. But even in this instance some guidance is expected. The promoter is a supervisor and the promotion is subjected to the rules of the discipline. The doctoral contribution adds to an existing body of knowledge, recognised within and acknowledged by the discipline in question — hardly the contribution of an emancipated learner, or an emancipating contribution.

It is not surprising that the truly emancipated learner is an academic dropout, that an emancipating contribution comes from a clerk in a patent office, looking at the watch in a bell tower outside his window, realising that should he move away from the clock at the speed of light the clock would appear to have stopped — an Einstein realising from this observation that all observations depend on the observer's frame of reference. The fundamental rules are not the rules of the frames of reference (disciplines), but the rules of converting from one frame of reference into another.

One may view Einstein as a singularly exceptional example of an emancipated learner, but since Einstein an entire generation grew up with an understanding of the untenability of global frames of reference, of grand schemes of ultimate truth, of the philosopher's death of the grand narrative. Most contemporary learners entering the education system are younger than the microcomputer. The citizens of the information age find the industrial era's processes of conformation too static and inflexible to accommodate their need for customised just-in-time learning, for learning systems that allow learners to progress at individual pace, and for learning activities that become increasingly authentic and embedded in real-world practice (Van Deventer 2009: 177). They display what Frand (2000: 17) refers to as "the mindset of the information age". In this mindset:

• computers are not experienced as technology but form an integral part of what the world is all about;

- the internet (interactive communication) and not television (passive viewing) is the primary source of information;
- the ability to deal with complex and often ambiguous information is more important than simply knowing many facts or having an accumulation of knowledge;
- problems are solved in a trial-and-error manner rather than careful deduction from preset principles;
- multitasking is a way of life — different information sources are accessed simultaneously;
- text and data are not simply captured in a linear manner — word and data processing allows interactive construction and capturing of ideas;
- there is a need to be permanently connected to others;
- there is a need for fast, efficient and immediate communication — no tolerance for delays, and
- there is a need to create through consumption — for example, the creation of new texts by electronically assembling bits and pieces harvested from existing texts (Van Deventer 2009: 178).

The information age requires teachers focused on developing the learner's cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities in collaborative learning environments (Dimitracopoulou 2005: 116). The truly emancipated learner is a self-aware individual with a thorough meta-cognitive understanding of his/her actions.

But one cannot escape the paradox of learning. When Einstein worked as a patent clerk he was already well educated in physics. His thinking "outside the box" was not in ignorance of the box. Einstein's emancipation nestled in his ability to bring to bear on the discipline an observation made outside the discipline, and an observation that forced a transformation of the discipline. In doing so he demonstrated an agency that surpassed that of an enslaved master, but only to be enslaved again, now by the newly transformed discipline. Thus the master of the discipline never escapes enslavement. However, Einstein's observation had a more fundamental consequence that went beyond the transformation of a particular discipline. In formulating the relativity of different frames of reference Einstein established the observer as an agency that exceeds any specific frame of reference. The enslaved master is an entity that can always disrupt the discipline.

Learner emancipation does not mean to escape the paradox of learning. The linearity of the process must be addressed. The emancipated learner is not a learner first enslaved and then set free to play the master of the discipline but rather a disruptive influence within the discipline, an agency that is neither slave nor master, an agency that keeps the discipline from becoming complete and self-sufficient by disturbing, interrupting and dislocating the discipline. It is an agency that appears in the interplay between enslavement and mastering. However, one should not deny a certain development of emancipation. Enslavement is a process towards becoming enslaved, as mastering is a process towards becoming the master. But these two processes of becoming are complementary, constituting a double process in which any linearity of enslavement and mastering is cancelled out. Any level of emancipation is a function of equal amounts of enslavement and mastering. Emancipation shows itself in the agency of the learner. In other words, the emancipated learner is a learner showing a high degree of agency in the form of a potential to disturb, interrupt and dislocate existing frames of reference.

2. Modelling learner emancipation

The modelling of learner emancipation requires an examination of the notion of discipline. For the purposes of the model constructed below, the discipline is viewed as a formal representation of a domain of observation. The model is rooted in Derrida's work on difference, writing, and the position of the subject (Derrida 1976, 1978 & 1991: 96-119) and Lacan's theory of the mirror stage (Lacan 1977: 1-7). Without submitting to a detailed analysis of the works of these authors two notes are in order. First, the representation (and thus the discipline) should not be viewed as secondary to a more fundamental domain of observation (events in the world). In other words, the represented (the domain of observation) should not be considered more real and therefore more fundamental than its representation (the discipline). An observation is a movement from the discipline towards the world, and a representation is a movement from the world towards the discipline. Observation and representation are symmetrical operations. Secondly, the subject shows itself in the interval between

observation and representation. It does not appear as such. It shows itself as the potential to disrupt the symmetry between observation and representation. It defies description. Its only observational quality is a quantity, namely the power of its disruption. Thus the subject shows itself as a variable agency, in the present model captured as the learner's level of emancipation.

The model is operationalised and depicted in Figure 1. For the sake of relevance and clarity the represented (the domain of observation) is indicated as "reality", and the representation (the discipline) as "theory". The space covered by the diagram is the domain of action. Thus any point plotted within the diagram represents an action. An action is the observable effect of agency and thus an indication of learner emancipation. Actions are located (plotted) in terms of theory and reality. These dimensions of actions are extended (reality and theory are depicted as lines) to allow the differentiation of actions in terms of degree of disruptive potential — that is degree of agency or learner emancipation. In the model the power differentials are depicted as the application versus the construction of theory and in the case of the reality dimension as observation of reality versus acting upon reality. It is important to note that the difference between each dimension's poles is one of quantity and not of quality. Dividing a dimension (for example, the theory dimension) into two halves does not mean that the construction of theory requires an agency that is qualitatively different from the agency required for the application of theory. The differential is the degree of agency (or disruption) that is displayed. In the current model the dimensions dissect each other. These divisions of the dimensions indicate the point at which the degree of disruption (the amount of agency) switches from perturbing the system from within to disrupting the system from the outside. Thus at some stage the emancipation of the learner is a matter of crossing borders, the border of a particular theory and/or the border of a given reality. In Figure 1 the theory and reality dimensions of action have been arranged such that learner emancipation is shown to increase along the diagonal running from low-right to high-left (indicated by the broken line). The diagonal of increasing emancipation slices the domain of actions into levels of emancipation (cf

Figure 2). All actions on a particular line, say line b, are at the same level of emancipation, and all actions at a following level, for example line c, show a higher level of emancipation, whereas all actions on preceding levels, say line a, indicate lower levels of emancipation. Thus learner emancipation is conceptualised and modelled in terms of progressing from consultant to entrepreneur through theorising and practising the discipline in question.
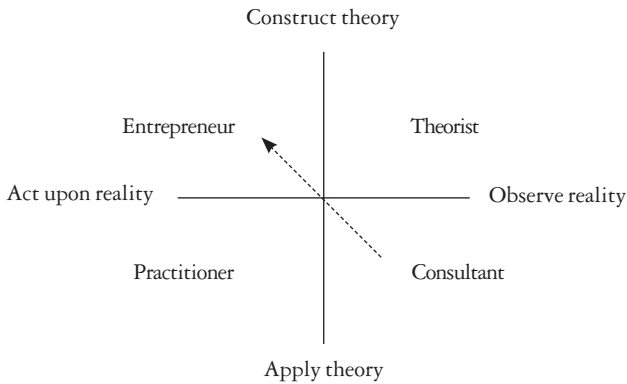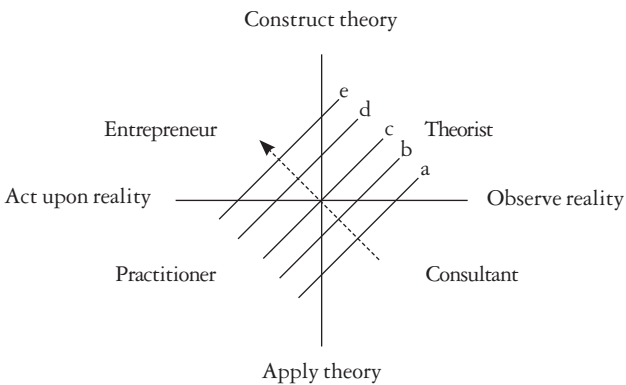
Figure 1: A model of learner emancipation

Construct theory

Entrepreneur   Theorist

Act upon reality ——————————— Observe reality

Practitioner   Consultant

Apply theory

Figure 2: Degrees of emancipation

Construct theory

e
d
Entrepreneur   c   Theorist
b
a

Act upon reality ——————————— Observe reality

Practitioner   Consultant

Apply theory

The divisions of the theory and reality dimensions allow one to assign arbitrary labels to classes of actions. Four action classes are indicated in the current model, namely the actions of a consultant, a theorist, a practitioner and an entrepreneur. The model does not restrict one to the dissections indicated in Figure 1. Any number of divisions is allowed, provided that the categories created by such divisions constitute a hierarchical structure. For example, the observation of reality can be conceptualised in terms of the identification of something, the differentiation of two or more identified things, the assessment of these differentiations, and so on. The divisions of the theory and reality dimensions constitute a grid of action classes. For instance, combining the indicated conceptualisation of the observation of reality with a conceptualisation of the application of theory (for example, use of terminology, use of constructs, use of theory) would give nine action classes, offering a refined description of the actions of a consultant.

3. Facilitating the emancipation of the learner

The notion of action is central in the present model of learner emancipation. The facilitation of learner emancipation rests in the learner's ability to manage and monitor his/her learning actions. The focus on the learner's management and monitoring of learning action requires a significant shift in teaching approach. Van Deventer (2009: 176-81) describes this shift as a movement from the facilitation of learning to the choreography of learning. In this movement the role of the teacher changes from facilitator of learning to designer of learning processes. The shift requires a different understanding of the notion of learning. Learning is not the assimilation of information transmitted from one system to another, for example from a learning facilitation system to a learner system. Learning is the learner system's structural change in reaction to the perturbation of the system. Learning requires self-reflection in interaction with others, what Murray (2006: 215) refers to as reflections-in-action.

Two fundamental aspects of action are important in the choreography of learning. The learner has to be immersed in a learning environment that encourages him/her to manage the production of

learning actions and to monitor the quality of the produced actions. In other words, in the choreography of emancipation the learner is positioned as manager of the production of his/her learning products, and as assessor of the quality of the produced products.

The following sections convey practical examples of how learner emancipation can be encouraged in terms of the learner's management and monitoring of learning actions.

3.1 The active learner

The majority of undergraduate courses in Psychology are wrapped around prescribed texts (class notes and/or books). Students receive lectures or use guides to guide them through the material. The idea is for students to absorb the subject material and to become proficient in retelling the neatly packaged "story" of psychology.

As a result of increased uneasiness regarding the mismatch between the traditional approach to teaching and the challenges presented by the information age, a first-year course in Psychology was remodelled and choreographed to enable students to cope with the demands of the information age. These challenges include the ability to identify information needs, to find and select appropriate sources of information and to judge the relevance, usefulness and quality of the obtained information. In addition, information must be gathered, selected and used on a just-in-time rather than a just-in-case basis. These challenges require a change in mindset. The remodelled course forces learners to be more active in the management of their learning processes. Instead of receiving information in a ready packaged format with the understanding that it will prove to be useful at some stage in the future, students are confronted with the fact that information has to be searched and structured for particular purposes and that the learner is an active agent in this process.

To facilitate learner emancipation the course has been structured in terms of three components, namely practical tasks with specified outcome products, reading tasks with specified learning outcomes, and prescribed subject content (resource material) that determines the level and scope of the actions required in the learning process. Learners

are required to engage the course by means of the set of practical tasks, for example to prepare a PowerPoint presentation on a specific topic, or to conduct a simplified, mini research study. Because these tasks require subject knowledge learners are expected to search the prescribed content for relevant information. A guide is provided to help them digest the prescribed content and to achieve the specified learning outcomes. Having achieved the learning outcomes, learners are considered to have sufficient subject knowledge to enable them to complete the practical task.

The practical tasks form a fundamental component of the course and as such they are not selected on the grounds of novelty or for their exotic value. They represent typical activities in the field of study and have been designed around the action classes identified in the model of learner emancipation. All of the subject material is engaged through these practical activities, positioning the learner as an active agent in the learning process. Information must be searched and selected from the prescribed resource material, and must be assessed for relevance and usefulness in light of the needs of the practical task. Thus the subject material is engaged in a just-in-time (rather than a just-in-case), fully contextualised and purposeful manner. The tasks that these first-level learners are expected to do are at a low level of practical and theoretical complexity, but they are designed around the four action classes indicated in Figure 1. In other words, in completing the practical tasks the learner is required to progress from consultant to entrepreneur through various actions of theorising and practice in the prescribed field of study.

3.2 The assessing learner

Cognitive skills play a major role in learning but must be supplemented by meta-cognitive skills in the development of learner emancipation. Meta-cognition is an awareness of and the ability to monitor one's own cognitive processes. In other words, cognitive skills are needed for the production of learning actions but meta-cognitive skills are required for monitoring the quality of the produced actions. The following paragraphs describe two ways in which learner monitoring of action quality has been realised in the learning environment.

The first example is taken from the first-year Psychology course indicated above. Due to the large number of students in this course they are assessed by means of multiple-choice questions. These questions are embedded in an extensive scenario which must conform to a specific structure. As such, all scenarios are required to involve an authority figure, one or more professionals and one or more peers. This structure is sufficient to enable scenarios incorporating the action classes required by the learner emancipation model indicated in Figure 1. In the case of the first-year course in question the scenario would typically involve a head psychologist, one or more professional psychologists and one or more student psychologists. The scenario sketches events and describes the interactions between the role players. A typical question involves the head psychologist's action concerning a specific issue, or outcome product or opinion offered by the professional or student psychologists. These are based on the practical tasks the students were required to complete during the course. In a multiple-choice question set-up more than one action is provided and the learner is expected to select the best action or combination of actions. In other words, the learner is positioned as the authority figure selecting the correct course of action. It is important to note that the actions (to be selected or rejected by the learner) are actions of theorising and practice. In other words, these actions are not on the level of pure subject content. They involve the application and formulation of theory in observing and acting in reality. In selecting the best course of action the learner is required to compare, assess and select the best action.

The second example is taken from an Honours course in psychological research methodology. In this case the focus is on peer assessment. Two outcome products of the course are peer assessed, namely a research proposal (for a study of the learner's own choice), and a research article (reporting on the actual study and its results). Students are provided with a set of performance criteria, and are required to prepare and submit (as assignment 1) a research proposal in accordance with these criteria. Each student then receives the research proposals of five peers. But one of these proposals is a bogus one used as an assessment benchmark. The student is required to assess these proposals as well as his/her own proposal using a rating scale based on the original performance criteria. These assessments are submitted as assignment 2. A computer program is used to

calculate an assessor status for each student. Such status is based on three assessment components, namely the quality of the student's assessment of the bogus research proposal, the quality of the student's assessment of the research proposals submitted by his/her peers, and the quality of the student's assessment of his/her own proposal. Assessor status is used to weight the marks offered by the student. The assessment process provides two assessments for each student, namely the assessment of his/her research proposal (the outcome of assignment 1) and an assessment of his/her ability to assess research proposals (the outcome of assignment 2). The process is repeated for peer assessment of the research article.

The actions required in the case of the second example are more complex with regard to theorising and practice than the actions of the first example but similar notions are implemented in both cases. Learner emancipation is encouraged through the requirement of action and the monitoring of the quality of action.

4.   Conclusion

Learner independency focuses on the learner's ability to take responsibility for and to manage learning processes. But current notions of learner independency are based on a linear approach to the paradox of learning, namely that enslaved mastering is resolved when mastering follows a period of enslavement. As such current conceptualisations of learner independency lack an important component, namely the consideration of the learner's movement towards becoming an emancipated learner, a learner demonstrating a high degree of agency with a thorough meta-cognitive grasp of the quality of his/her actions. The emancipated learner threatens to disrupt traditional educational practice and requires new methods, new attitudes and new distributions of power (Rheingold 2009: vii). In becoming emancipated the learner moves from consultant to entrepreneur through theorising and practising his/her discipline. The emancipation of the learner requires self-reflection in interaction with others. It requires reflections-in-action (Murray 2006: 215), the tacit theories that guide the activities of practising professionals as they progress from consultants to entrepreneurs through theorising and practising their fields of expertise.

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