

Preface

Over the past few decades, autonomous learning has emerged as one response to the emerging challenges and changes in the educational field. The use of reading circles (RCs) as a mode of autonomous learning in the Omani context of higher education institutions (HEIs) indicates learners' positive perceptions and attitudes of learner autonomy and their readiness to adopt autonomous learning practices. Building on findings from these RCs, the present book proposes Collaborative Learner Autonomy (CLA) as a novice interpretation (theory) of learner autonomy and advocates it for use in the Omani context and potentially for similar educational contexts within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The CLA results from the exploration of learner autonomy in the Omani context from a number of perspectives. It argues against the claim that autonomy is typically a product of Western educational environments only as, for example, suggested in Sonaiya's (2002) study on African educational contexts. It then proposes a group-oriented and gradual approach to enhance the development of learner autonomy and to incorporate autonomous learning practices in formal and informal teaching platforms, creating learning opportunities conducive to autonomy in collaboration.

The CLA builds on a firm belief in teachers' responsibility for the development of their learners' learning awareness and "conscious perception and take-up of a learning opportunity" Crabbe (2007: 119). It advocates a shared responsibility and a common goal different stakeholders need to embrace so that learners become "actively engaged in identifying and managing the learning opportunities" (Ibid). Teachers, HEIs, parents and learners themselves, share the responsibility to ensure that "learners are better equipped, and therefore more likely, to manage learning opportunities outside the classroom" (Ibid).

The CLA puts much emphasis on the constructive role that the teachers play in developing autonomy in their learners. In fact, it suggests the term *Responsible Reliance* to describe Omani's perception of teachers' presence and claims that the training and orientation of learners have to be formalised and made systematic

through integrated orientation programmes, such as the Autonomous Learning Orientation Programme (ALOP) applied in some HEIs.

The CLA perceives autonomy as a social construct that includes the ability to operate effectively in collaboration as a cooperating member in a group with the capacity and willingness to act autonomously and in collaboration with others as a social and responsible person. The willingness and motivation Omani learners have to develop autonomy in collaboration can be detected in their readiness, interdependence and particular perception of autonomy as a collective endeavour. As learning involves both dependent and interdependent learning strategies, the CLA perceives Omani students as individual learners who responsibly accept the teachers' presence and role without depending on teacher-led learning experiences.

Drawing on observations in the Omani context explored in our research, it could be concluded that the interdependent self is the predominant conceptualisation and model of the self and that Omani learners' reliance on the teacher and their need for assistance, support and guidance should not be viewed as a rejection of and resistance to autonomy.

The book draws on research findings and conclusions to refute misconceptions about learner autonomy in the MENA region context initially nurtured by wrong assumptions and stereotypes on learners in these educational contexts, being unfairly placed within the traditional and rote-learning frame. It is important to reject ill-founded cultural stereotypes and generalisations that can harm the rapport between teachers and their students and ultimately hinder the development of learner autonomy.

Our research concludes that while students, teachers and educational stakeholders believe in the merits of autonomous learning and the need to develop it, they admit that there are constraints that hinder the development of learner autonomy. They also admit the relative failure of the teachers and HEIs in the Omani context to provide what Crabbe (2003) terms "learning opportunities" (Crabbe 2007: 118). They can, as much as the learner, fail to recognise the need for autonomous learning in a rapidly changing society.

The book finally recommends a new learner autonomy continuum the *Individual-Competitive-Collaborative-Autonomous Learning* Continuum (ICCAC), grading the progress of the learner to autonomous learning practices and suggests that it is a shared responsibility that students, teachers, HEIs, families and the society should assume in a spirit of partnership.

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