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Training Students to be Autonomous Learners

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Training Students to be Autonomous Learners

Rimma Raisovna Sagitova, Kazan Federal University, Russia

Abstract: The role of students' self-education is being enhanced in Russian higher education as a result of the Bologna Process, which emphasizes independent cognitive activity among students. This process involves a paradigm shift in higher education from "teaching" (when the person is taught) to "learning" (when the person learns independently). We developed and tested a special course called "Learning to Learn," which included twenty-eight hours of lecture-presentations and practical classes, as well as eight hours of individual tutorials. To make the process more effective, we designed special guidelines on self-education activities. The course included the study of three modules: theoretical aspects of self-education; the design of students' individual educational routes and portfolio technology; and techniques for organizing students' self-education. "Learning to Learn" was successful, as most of the students expressed their willingness to participate in self-education, and they learned how to do it. This course was the first step in helping students organize their self-education, a valuable practice that will allow students to continue to learn over the course of their lifetimes.

Keywords: Autonomous Learner, Self-education Activity, Lifelong Learning

Introduction

The practice of self-education in Russian higher education has become widespread in recent years, with the country's adoption of a new educational paradigm aimed at the development of competent specialists with highly organized individual styles of self-education. The ideal result of this new system is a population of students that can take advantage of academic, social, and professional mobility and form competencies that will make them competitive in an increasingly globalized labor market. Though many factors necessitate this change from a "teaching" paradigm to a more self-directed "learning" paradigm, chief among them are the globalization and informatization of all areas of human activity; crises in the global economy; and the integration of political, economic, and educational spaces. Analysis of higher education reforms in European countries within the Bologna Process lead us to the conclusion that self-education not only plays an increasing role in personal development and professional success, but also functions as one of the leading approaches for training students as future professionals (Sagitova 2011, 34-35).

The success of a person in an information society depends on their ability to produce and acquire new knowledge, make choices, study, and self-educate over the course of a lifetime. The American scientist Alvin Toffler noted that people who have to live in a super-industrial society need to have abilities in three key areas: learning, communicating, and choosing. Therefore, in schools of the future students must learn not only the sum of knowledge, but also the ability to apply it. Students have to learn how to learn (Toffler 2002, 449).

One of the touchstones of self-education is the work of Alan Tough. He initially described this process as self-teaching. In such circumstances, learners assumed responsibility for planning and directing their course of study. As he developed his approach Tough tended to conceptualize it in terms of learning projects (Tough 1989, 256).

The American writer Charles Hayes holds the idea that people should take control of their own learning and adopt self-directed inquiry as a lifelong priority. He emphasizes that when people fail to take control of their education, they fail to take control of their lives (Hayes 1998, 365).

According to Merriam and Caffarella, self-directed learning is a form of study in which learners have the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Merriam and Caffarella 1991, 41).

Candy, in an influential review and exploration of self-direction, suggests that there are four main ways of interpreting the term: as a personal attribute (personal autonomy); as the willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education (self-management); as a mode of organizing instruction in formal settings (learner control); and as the individual, non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in a natural social setting (Candy 1991, 567).

Knowles, in turn, believes that self-education is 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 (Knowles 1975, 14).

Self-education is the process which includes diagnosing your own learning needs, setting personal goals, making decisions on resources and learning strategies, and assessing the value of the outcomes. It is a form of study in which a learner controls both the learning objectives and the means of learning. Finally, it is a continuous process and an important factor in lifelong learning.

Self-Education as a Key Principle of Lifelong Learning

Self-education becomes particularly important in the context of lifelong learning, where the planning, organization, management, and implementation of education depends on the individual, and the process of education develops into the process of self-education.

In the context of lifelong learning the system of open learning is widespread at European universities. This provides great opportunities for international integration in the areas of higher education, vocational education, and self-education. Open universities are a relatively new phenomenon that began with the establishment of the British Open University in 1969, the National University of Distance Education in Spain in 1972, Fern University in Germany in 1975, and Open University in the Netherlands in 1982. Their main contribution to the development of higher education is openness, which means providing a second chance to people who were unable to obtain a university education and a degree. Open universities have developed a pedagogical model of composing educational materials to support self-education activities. According to this model the student is in the center of the educational process, which reflects the motto of the British Open University: "Do not teach, but give the opportunity to learn."

Russian integration into the Bologna Process promotes the acknowledgment of Russian diplomas and helps Russian universities achieve equal status with universities worldwide. Russia's acceptance of the Bologna Process and the formation of a unified Higher Education Area has set new challenges for the modern higher school. Schools are now responsible for helping future specialists to prepare to solve specific professional tasks, to effectively realize professional activities, and to be responsible for professional results. The implementation of these tasks is impossible without the development of students' self-education in the contexts of globalization and the integration of education. A priority and key principle of European Higher Education Area formation is the academic mobility promotion, which is also impossible without the development of students' self-education. In the scientific literature a comparative analysis of forms, models, and experiences of social-pedagogical support of mobile University students in the international education integration context is widely presented (Tregubova 2009, 52-53). Today, the role of students' self-education is being enhanced in Russian higher education as a result of the Bologna Process, which emphasizes independent cognitive activity among students.

The Bologna Process involves a paradigm shift in higher education from "teaching" (when the person is taught) to "learning" (when the person learns independently). This process prescribes a three-cycle system of higher education by the formula "bachelor-master-doctorate." The descriptions of three cycles of education adopted at the European level define the basic vectors, according to which the requirements of the learning outcomes for each cycle of

programs should be formed. The Dublin Descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each Bologna cycle. Thus from 1st cycle (Bachelors) to 2nd cycle (Masters) to 3rd cycle (Doctorates) there are differences or “step changes” between the respective Dublin descriptors. The process emphasizes that in bachelor degree programs there has to be a balance between special knowledge and general skills, with the emphasis on autonomous study, which will allow students to develop learning skills that are necessary for optimal self-education. In magistracy programs students must have learning skills that allow them to study autonomously (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks 2005, 59-69).

Identified Problems

Self-education is an essential part of one’s personal development. Through mastering the process of self-education, students can develop into highly qualified specialists who are invaluable assets in today’s global labor market.

In 2010, 67 first-year students (six male, 61 female) at Russia’s Kazan Federal University took part in a survey. The students were all in the Pedagogical Education of Teacher Training program (Bachelor of Education) within the Institute of the International Relations, History and Oriental Studies. For the survey we examined the students’ approaches to self-education. We asked the first-year students the following questions: (a) what does self-education mean to you; (b) what sources of education do you use for your self-education; (c) how much time do you spend on self-education; (d) have you ever read any special literature about self-education; (e) can you organize your own self-education; and (f) what skills and abilities are necessary to be a good autonomous learner?

There were various answers to these questions. We found that most of the students (76%) considered self-education only as knowledge acquisition through self-study and did not perceive it as a process of conscious development. A smaller percentage of students (52%) had a negative experience with autonomous learning at school when it was used only to facilitate their teachers’ work. Most of the students noted that the Internet (87%) and interpersonal communication (75%) were their main sources of self-education; reading books (41%), using video and audio information (38%), visiting seminars and conferences (23%), taking excursions and trips to museums (15%), master classes (11%), and specially organized courses (11%) were other sources students cited.

In addition, we found that 36% of the students understood the importance of self-education, but only occasionally participated in self-education activities. Only 10% of the students were consistently engaged in self-education activities. Unfortunately, none of the students read special literature about self-education. Furthermore, 87% of the students reported that they needed a teacher’s help to organize their self-education activities, while only 13% said that they were able to organize their self-education themselves.

We also asked students which self-education skills and abilities are necessary to be a good, autonomous learner and which of them they would like to improve. Among the most important self-education skills students recognized were the ability to work with different sources of information (76%), to plan and carry out self-education (33%), to be able to use different self-education techniques (47%), the ability to build an individual educational route (21%), and to create an e-portfolio (46%) and language portfolio (43%). We took into account students’ interests and included them in the special course “Learning to Learn,” which we developed specifically for this study.

In summary, most of the first-year students in Kazan Federal University’s Pedagogical Education of Teacher Training Program came to the university with limited study skills and with an over-dependence on their teachers for their learning. They were not ready to organize their self-education, as they had neither the experience nor the appropriate skills for it.

“Learning to Learn” Course

Having analyzed the survey results, appropriate literature, and practical experiences, we developed and tested a successful, special course for the first-year students in Kazan Federal University’s Pedagogical Education of Teacher Training Program called “Learning to Learn.”

We built this practice-oriented course on a modular training program, as we are convinced that modular training is one of the most effective forms of competence-forming for future professionals, promoting personal and social development and making graduates more marketable in today’s global labor market (Sahieva 2010, 276). The main goals of the course were for students to master concepts about the nature and structure of self-education and to introduce students to the techniques of rational organization of academic work and working with educational information and information technology. The course included 28 hours of classroom teaching, consisting of lecture-presentations and practical classes, and eight hours of individual tutorials. To help students master the course material, we designed special guidelines on the organization of students’ self-education activities (Sagitova 2010, 72).

The main purpose of the “Learning to Learn” course was to help students form self-education skills and practices. The course focused on the following tasks: 1) to introduce students to well-proven methods of organizing self-education and theoretical research on the challenges of self-education; 2) to explain the role of self-education in human life and peculiarities of self-education activities at universities; 3) to instill in our students the essence, content, and structure of self-education; and 4) to equip students with different self-education techniques and work with different sources of information which will enable them to develop more independence and become more effective learners. During the course students had to learn to organize their self-education; identify and manage effective methods of self-education; build an individual educational route; and be able to create an e-portfolio and a language portfolio.

“Learning to Learn” included the study of three modules. In the first module we introduced students to the theoretical aspects of self-education development among university students: the development of self-education in native and foreign pedagogical science; the nature, content, and structure of self-education of university students; and peculiarities of competence-based approaches in the process of self-education. The second focused on designing students’ individual educational routes and portfolio technology, including e-portfolios and language portfolios. The third module introduced techniques for organizing students’ self-education; the rational organization of academic work; working with educational information and IT technologies; and organizing students’ self-education in foreign languages. Brainstorming, role-playing, business games, work in small groups, learning games, lecture-seminars, lecture-discussions, lecture-consultations, seminars, independent work, group work, and teamwork were used as basic forms and methods in practical classes during the duration of the course. We chose these methods and forms because they promote a high degree of student involvement in learning processes, self-motivation, and the formation of different types of self-education practices. They also help to increase students’ emotionality.

Results and Discussion

At the end of the course we interviewed our students to learn if there were any changes in their attitudes toward self-education and their abilities to organize their self-education. All 67 students took part in a survey. We created a questionnaire specifically for this study that was connected with various aspects of self-education, including students’ motivation to practice self-education, general knowledge about self-education, self-education skills, and self-assessment (Sagitova 2011, 133). We collected data through questionnaires, interviews, and observations during the course. The survey questions were presented as four-point response metrics, from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 =strongly agree.

The results of this study illustrate the benefits of the implementation of “Learning to Learn.” Most of the students we interviewed (85%) had strong motivations to practice self-education; they were extremely interested in it and understood its importance for their future professional development. At the same time, 15% of the students were not motivated to practice self-education; they were quite passive in their desire to solve the learning tasks independently. The results also reveal that most of the students (72%) had deep and profound knowledge about self-education. They learned to identify their own needs and choose the appropriate learning materials. A smaller percentage of students (27%) did not have full knowledge about the nature, structure, and features of self-education and were unable to identify their own needs and choose appropriate learning materials. The questionnaire results show that 87% of the students had appropriate self-education skills. They had the ability to work with different information sources and use modern methods and techniques of searching, collecting, and information processing. Twelve per-cent of the students remained indifferent to the development of their self-education skills. They were hindered by their inabilities to plan and define the goals and tasks of self-education and to work with information resources. The findings also show that most of the students (80%) possessed the most important skills for maintaining self-control and self-esteem and had the ability to monitor their progress and evaluate their learning. Moreover, they began to spend more time learning on their own and felt more positive about themselves. The remaining 20% of students needed help maintaining self-control and self-esteem.

The most important finding was that most of the students (85%) were confident that they would continue learning on their own after the end of the course. However, it is disappointing to note that a small segment of the class (2%) was indifferent to self-education or did not want to be involved in self-education activities despite our encouragement. These students gave different reasons for their feelings, including a lack of time and an unwillingness to participate in the activities.

Table 1.1: Summary of the Selected Findings in the Questionnaire Data

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
<i>Students' Self-Education Motivation</i>				
I have a positive attitude about self-education and self-improvement.	2%	13%	61%	24%
I understand the importance of self-education for my future professional development.	2%	10%	53%	35%
I have a desire to solve learning tasks independently.	3%	14%	57%	26%
	15%		85%	
<i>Students' General Knowledge About Self-Education</i>				
I have practical knowledge to organize my self-education.	3%	23%	62%	12%
I can identify my own needs.	3%	25%	64%	8%
I can choose the appropriate learning materials.	2%	26%	58%	14%
	27%		72%	
<i>Students' Self-Education Skills</i>				
I can work with different sources of information.	2%	10%	73%	15%
I can use different methods and techniques of searching, collecting, and information processing.	3%	9%	70%	18%
I can plan my self-education.	3%	10%	77%	10%
	12%		87%	
<i>Students' Self-Assessment</i>				
I have the ability to monitor my progress.	4%	18%	68%	10%
I have the ability to evaluate my own learning.	3%	15%	74%	8%
I have the ability to maintain high self-control and self-esteem.	4%	16%	74%	6%
	20%		80%	
<i>Learners' Continuation of Self-Education after the End of the Course</i>				
I will continue learning on my own after the end of the "Learning to Learn" course.	2%	13%	62%	23%

(Data Adapted from Sagitova 2011, 150-151).

Conclusion

In general, the special course “Learning to Learn” for first-year students in the Pedagogical Education of Teacher Training Program at Kazan Federal University was successful, as most of the students expressed their willingness to participate in self-education, and we received positive feedback. It is gratifying to emphasize that most of the students (85%) said they would continue learning on their own after the end of the course.

We have come to the conclusion that the “Learning to Learn” course and design of the self-education activities promoted the development of students’ self-education. The course was an important step to help students to organize their self-education processes and take their education beyond what they learn in the classroom.

I fully agree with Sarah Cotterall that learner autonomy is not just a goal for highly committed students completing optional courses, but should be seen as “an essential goal of all learning” (Cotterall 2000, 109).

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