

# When students become autonomous learners

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Who wouldn't like to see students exercise their will in learning something that *they* enjoy knowing more about? Surely that would be far more meaningful than having them listen to a teacher deliver lecture after lecture, while they make copious notes for later regurgitation?

Perhaps one of the outcomes of the last 18 months of (mostly) online learning is a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning in some students.

No? Do you disagree?

If you do, here is a paper that may help you steer your students towards greater autonomy.

Captured in three pithy phrases, "OWN IT, LEARN IT, SHARE IT", this paper provides a very organic framework for setting about the seemingly onerous task of getting students to take ownership of their learning.

The paper was published in 2016 and it brings together the research of more than four decades (the list of references runs into six pages!). What's more, it is freely downloadable! And if you are intimidated by the length of the paper, this column brings to you its essence.

## What is student-centred learning?

The authors begin by defining what is meant by *student-centred learning*. They emphasize three aspects:

1. Students are identified as **owners** of their learning and its process.
2. Learning autonomously, they do **require scaffolding** from the teacher.
3. They **share their learnings** through artefacts that they then produce.

If you are wondering what's so new in this, I don't blame you. After all, haven't many of us tried out project-based learning, problem-based learning, discovery learning, case study discussion, etc.? Indeed, the authors devote a section to describing precisely these (and other) forms of student-centred learning.

Well, if we already know this, then what is the value add from this research paper? Good question!

The most valuable part of this paper, in my view, is the way it spells out a *stepwise process for designing a framework to bring about student-centred learning*. A framework is of immense use especially when a teacher wishes to gauge the extent to which the students are actually learning on their own, or with minimal scaffolding.

How will a teacher assess *the extent of shift* from teacher-directed learning to student-centred learning? This paper provides a very easy-to-understand way of doing this. Before we get to that though, let's take a look at the nature of the proposed shift.

*A design framework for enhancing engagement in student-centred learning: own it, learn it, and share it* By Eunbae Lee and Michael J. Hannafin

Source: Educational Technology Research and Development, August 2016, Vol. 64, No. 4 (August 2016), pp. 707-734

Downloadable from: <http://edresearch.yolasite.com/resources/Lee16.pdf>

## Difference between Directed Instruction and Student-centred Learning

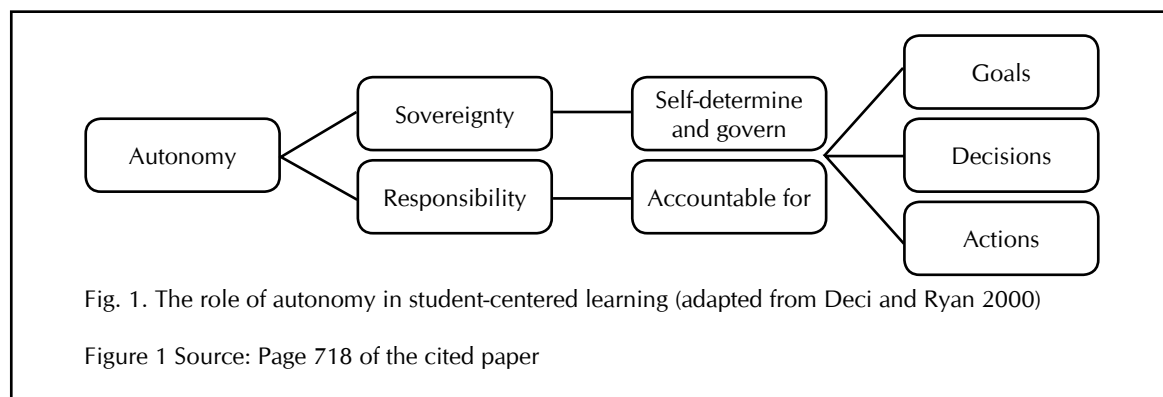
I liked the neat tabulation of essential differences between these two forms of learning.

Item	Directed instruction	Student-Centred Learning
Theoretical framework	Objectivism	Constructivism
Nature of learning	Students process specified content	Students construct knowledge by exploring and analyzing
Methods	Directed learning	Scaffolded learning
Content	Well-defined	Ill-defined
Learning goals	Defined by curriculum or teacher	Negotiated and endorsed by students
Student's role	Knowledge receiver	Knowledge generator and evaluator
Teacher's role	Knowledge transmitter	Facilitator, scaffolding provider
Locus of control	External	Internal

Source: Table 1 Page 710, <http://edresearch.yolasite.com/resources/Lee16.pdf>

The authors then go on to assert that directed instruction is all very well if there is some structure and predictability to what students will have to tackle later in their lives. But just this pandemic is one outstanding example of how life throws shocks, more often than not, and how there are no neatly packaged solutions to such surprises. It is therefore all the more necessary that students *learn to steer their own vehicles of learning*, with support, of course, from their teachers. Taking great care to draw a distinction between *autonomy* and *independence*, the authors lay great stress on the sort of scaffolding that needs to be provided by teachers if students are to move forward on the path of student-centred learning.

Again, they have a very explanatory graphic to describe what is meant by autonomy:



Autonomy does not imply that teachers offer students an infinite number of choices: indeed, the authors point out that too many choices can actually end up defeating the purpose altogether, as students may need a lot of assistance in meandering their way through such a wide array of choices! They highlight the fact that in student-centred learning, *students need to take responsibility* by being accountable for their goals, decisions and actions.

They then go on to describe what a *supportive environment* should look like for students: firstly, students should be provided with a compelling rationale for the assignments that they are expected to complete. Isn't this respectful of the learner? And far more likely to be completed, if the learner is convinced of the purpose, value and significance of the assignment? Of course, an obvious requirement is that students should enjoy freedom of expression so that they can make choices and state their needs without fear. Having taken decisions, *students should then be held accountable* for these. Teachers should scaffold the students' learning journey – until the student no longer needs such scaffolding. Such scaffolding can be done in multiple ways: by suggesting resources, explaining tough concepts, helping them make informed decisions, showing the students ways of arriving at the right resource, monitoring their progress, etc. Finally, the motivation of students can be enhanced

## Now bring it into the classroom!

1. What are you struggling to motivate your students to learn with enjoyment?
2. How can you help them see the value in learning this?
3. Can you get them to take this on as a student-centred learning project?
4. How will you scaffold their journey – without micro-managing it?
5. What are the concepts/jargon that you need to offer explicit help with?
6. Which of the concepts can you guide them to learn through suggestions of good resources?
7. Can you pair them or group them so as to facilitate peer learning?
8. How will you help them gain the skills of giving and receiving feedback?
9. What are some ways of their presenting their learning before an informed audience?
10. How can you use the same ten-point framework to monitor the progress of each student, along the road that leads to student-centred learning?

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by giving them an opportunity to present/share their learning through some artefacts, before a carefully chosen audience.

What then is the role of the teacher in student-centred learning? This is my favourite part in the paper, for it succinctly summarizes this in 10 steps:

1. Facilitate endorsement of external goals – e.g., make sense of the curriculum, WHY is this important to learn?
2. Provide opportunities to set specific goals – e.g., a student could be encouraged to set a timeline for mastering a particular concept.
3. Provide choices that matter – e.g., students could be offered a variety of ways to learn the same content: reading and researching, experimenting, watching a video, interviewing an expert.
4. Provide explicit directions on initiating engagement – it will not be at all uncommon to

find that most students are at sea, at first: how/ where do we begin? Here is where the teacher needs to provide appropriate scaffolding.

5. Support selection of tools and resources – especially with the availability of the Internet, there are often far too many references and websites that a student can get overwhelmed. A teacher's help in sifting the appropriate ones out of the mass will be very useful.
6. Prompt to support varying needs – pretty obvious, isn't it?
7. Integrate terminology used in the discipline – jargon is always difficult to grasp and this is where a teacher needs to step in.
8. Support students as they monitor progress – I loved the way it is the students who monitor their progress and the teachers only need to support them in this process!
9. Promote dialogue among students and audiences – as teachers, don't we all know the immense power that lies in peer learning and sharing before an audience?
10. Facilitate helpful peer review – students need to be led through the process of offering and receiving feedback, it cannot be left to them to do this effectively.

So there you have it – a neatly spelt out route to lead students towards greater autonomy in learning.

And if you now run through each of the 10 items above, can you clearly see how these are also ways of assessing students' progress on the road to student-centred learning? From checking in on the extent to which the learner is aligned with external goals, to examining the specific goals that each student has set him/herself, wouldn't this framework help a teacher in ascertaining (and even monitoring) the stage-wise progress of each student?

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher ([www.thinkingteacher.in](http://www.thinkingteacher.in)), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at [<neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>](mailto:neeraja@thinkingteacher.in).