

A MODEL OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING APPLIED TO THE ONLINE CONTEXT

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This case study forms a foundation for understanding the drivers for successful online learning within a constructivist paradigm. It investigates whether Chinese international students completing a degree had achieved a level of independence necessary to succeed in this context. It found that these students had not achieved the independence necessary to succeed in the online constructivist context at the level they had reached on this particular course. Future research should investigate international and domestic students at different levels within a variety of courses to see if these findings are unique to this particular course and level only. It should also investigate the mediating impact of a tutor on student independence.

INTRODUCTION

Grow (1991) developed the staged Self-Directed Learning model by adapting the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model (1996) to the educational context. This article develops and applies both models to the online learning context.

There are many definitions of online learning in the literature (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Gaylen, 2011). The definition adopted here is by Ally (2004), who defines online learning as “the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire

knowledge, to construct personal meaning and to grow from the learning experience” (p. 2). This definition is consistent with constructivist learning theory, where the learner is the centre of the learning and constructs knowledge, rather than being given knowledge through instruction (Anderson, 2004).

It is possible to apply different pedagogical theories to the online context. Garcia proposes that one theory is not necessarily superior to another, and that there are times that reading specified texts and rote learning are appropriate (Garcia & Garcia, 2003, cited in Attwell, n.d., p. 6). This article investigates one particular paradigm, constructivism, and the associated collaborative and independent study

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modes, which are predominant in the online learning context (Antonacci & Modress, 2008; Australian National Training Authority, 2002; Bach, Haynes, & Lewis Smith, 2007; Berge, 2008; Caplan, 2004; Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001; Johnson, 2005; Murphy & Cifuentes, 2001; Rosenberg, 2006; Wagner, 2005). The paper investigates whether a particular group of students exhibit the behaviors and attitudes necessary to succeed within a constructivist paradigm in the online learning context. These are Chinese international students completing a bachelor of applied business studies degree in a New Zealand institution.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND ONLINE LEARNING

Anderson (2004) proposed that a model of online learning should allow for independent and community-centred learning, should be learning centred, provide a wide variety of authentic assessment opportunities, and be grounded in existing knowledge contexts. Anderson's model is grounded in constructivism and if it is applied to the online context, both students and teachers must assume roles that differ than those assumed in traditional educational paradigms. For example, the teacher should change from being an expert lecturer and having total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the student as a fellow learner (Collins & Berge, 1996). Berge (2008) proposed that, as emerging technologies allow students easier access to each other and to information, the role of a tutor becomes less of an expert and an information source and more of a facilitator, coach, and mentor. Also, learners experience the information directly, having the opportunity to contextualize and individualize the information, as the learner's unique background and resultant readiness is emphasized. Learning outcomes endeavour to be practical and relevant to real problems or situations (Fahy, 2004). In this context, learners should change from being

passive receptacles of knowledge to constructors of their own knowledge. They should become collaborative problem solvers rather than rote learners and should search for answers to their own questions. They also need to learn how to learn, both individually and collaboratively (Collins & Berge, 1996). It is proposed here that *all* these roles are encapsulated in one construct: independent learning.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING DEFINITION

Grow (1991) defines self-directed learning as the degree of choice that learners have. Cotterall (1995) defines autonomy as the extent to which learners set goals, choose materials and tasks, plan practice opportunities, and monitor and evaluate progress. Saskatchewan Education (1988) proposes that independent learners have the ability for enquiry and critical evaluation, know their strengths and weaknesses, know how they best learn, are able to work towards their goals, and can seek help if it is needed. It is proposed here that self-directed learning, autonomous learning, and independent learning are analogous constructs and the term, independent learning, is adopted here.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING SITUATIONAL MODEL

Grow (1991) adapted the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model to the educational context. Both models form the basis for this case study. Hersey and Blanchard (1996) argue that subordinates are at four different levels of "readiness" in an organization with respect to their willingness and ability to perform work tasks. Willingness means having the confidence, commitment, and motivation to accomplish a task. Ability means having the knowledge, experience, and skills in relation to a task. They argue that a leader should practise different combinations and levels of task and relationship behavior according to subordinate readiness. Task behavior is the extent to which

the leader directs how, when, where and what is to be done. Relationship behavior is the extent to which the leader engages in two-way communication, listening, facilitating behaviors and giving socioemotional support (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996).

Grow's educational model characterizes four progressive stages of independent learning: dependent, interested, involved, and self-directed. He proposes that independence can be taught, then generalized to other contexts (Grow, 1991). In effect, students can "learn how to learn."

Hersey and Blanchard (1996) proposed that the leader should adopt high task, low supportive behavior for Stage 1 subordinates who are not able to do the task or to contribute to decisions. It is proposed here, that in the educational context, the tutor should be directive, providing information lectures, giving learners few choices and allowing little input from them. Tasks should be clearly specified at this stage. Stage 2 subordinates are willing and/or confident but still unable, so a high level of *both* task and relationship behavior is necessary. They are making an effort, so the leader should provide support and give the rationale for decisions, which are made by the leader. In the educational context, students are willing but still lacking ability, so tasks should be clearly specified, but the tutor should be more supportive, explaining to learners why they need to master a particular topic for example. Stage 3 subordinates are able but unconfident and/or unmotivated. They know how to do the job, so the level of task direction given by the leader should be low, but supportive behavior

and two-way communication should be high to motivate and/or assure them. Subordinates should be given input into decisions and risk taking supported (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). In the educational context, Stage 3 learners do have ability, but need encouragement and to share decision making with their tutor/facilitator for assurance and/or motivation. At Stage 4, subordinates are able and willing and/or confident. They do not need task direction and supportive behavior should be low. The leader should delegate and encourage risk-taking (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). In the educational context, these are independent learners. At Stage 4, the tutor/facilitator's role is to provide "clear expectations, critical discourse and diagnosis of misconceptions" (Bach et al., 2007, p. 77).

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE ONLINE CONSTRUCTIVIST CONTEXT

Applying constructivism in the online context necessitates an inquiry-based approach, with learners taking control and making decisions with the support of a tutor who is a "guide on the side, rather than a sage on the stage" (Bach et al., 2007, p. 77). Successful online learners should be open minded, motivated, willing to communicate, able to apply their experiences, and accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process (Illinois Online Network, 2010). It is argued here that these are all characteristics of independent learners who are at independence Stage 4 and

TABLE 1
Independent Learning Model

1. Dependent:	Learners are unable/unwilling and/or insecure. Decisions are made by the teacher.
2. Interested:	Learners are unable but willing and/or confident. Decisions are made by the teacher with explanation and support given to learners.
3. Involved:	Learners are able but unwilling and/or insecure. Decisions are shared.
4. Self-directed:	Learners are able/willing and/or confident. Decisions are made by learners.

Source: Adapted from Grow (1991) and Hersey and Blanchard (1996).

are able, willing, and motivated. It is also argued here that Stage 3 learners can succeed in an online constructivist paradigm. Although unmotivated and/or unconfident, Stage 3 learners could succeed with support from their tutor because they do have ability.

In short, to successfully perform in this context, learners need to practise higher levels of decision making on a continuum of the degree of learner choice, versus teacher direction. Some examples of typical learner decisions are selecting assignment topics, deciding which readings and research data are relevant, deciding when and how often to study. Independent online learners should also have mastered metacognitive strategies and have learned how to learn. For example, they should be able to make notes, manage time, work independently and productively in a student team, and monitor and evaluate their own progress. They should have the ability to enquire and critically evaluate and ultimately be able to form (decide on) their own opinions.

Although there is debate in the literature about the efficacy of learning style models and of the argument that teaching and learning styles should be congruent (Curry, 1990; Smith, 2001), this congruency theory is developed here to argue that online tutors should adjust teaching styles to learner independence stage (style). To succeed in an online constructivist environment, learners should be at independence Stage 3 or 4 and tutor facilitation should enable these students by decreasing task and relationship behavior to the point of autonomy for “mature,” Stage 4 independent learners (Hersey, Angelini, & Carakushansky, 1982). However, acting as a “guide on the side” does not mean that learners can be left on their own. It is a common misconception that the only impediment to independent learning is the teacher; take the teacher away and students will manage their own learning (Wenden, 1995).

Online learners should feel the presence of the facilitator. For example, a facilitator may be required to assist learners who are not ready for autonomy and need to be taught self-

directed learning skills first (Wenden, 1995). In addition, one of the roles of successful online facilitation in a constructivist paradigm is “social,” entailing promoting human associations, developing productive groups (Berge, 1995), and motivating participants. Feenberg (2010) notes that many participants will have extrinsic motivations, such as job requirements or grades, and proposes that a facilitator needs to build their intrinsic motivations. This is particularly important for independence Stage 3 students who are able but unconfident and/or unmotivated and need low task direction and high supportive behavior. Facilitators should encourage learners to participate. For example, recognizing contributions stimulates the desire to contribute again (Feenberg, 2010.). They should also encourage learners to develop their own thinking and make autonomous decisions. Candy (1991) suggests independence means possessing autonomy in one’s thoughts and actions and, to enable this, facilitators should create an environment that encourages and promotes interaction. Examples of how to encourage interactions are having student moderators lead discussion groups (Rourke & Anderson, 2002) or by the teacher role modeling the initial discussions (Ambrose, 2001). However, if facilitators continue to impart their own understandings and experiences, this may actually impede this process (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000).

Pratt (2002, cited in Brown, 2003) presents five teaching perspectives. At entry level the “transmission/expert” approach is appropriate, as students need to learn basic theories and concepts. As learners become more independent they should be critiquing and applying their knowledge, so the “developmental,” “apprenticeship,” and “social reform” approaches are appropriate. All these three are grounded in constructivism and congruent with Anderson’s (2004) model of online learning. The developmental approach promotes deep learning, complex reasoning, and problem solving; the apprenticeship approach entails authentic assessment opportunities in real settings (Anderson, 2004); and the social

reform approach promotes grounding in existing knowledge contexts and relating ideas explicitly to learners' lives (Anderson, 2004).

Tutors can only "guide on the side" and "facilitate" if the online activities are designed to encourage interaction, rather than instructor-led discussions. Course design is another key component in a constructivist online context. According to Collison et al. (2000), many online courses are merely "content dumps" with a discussion forum added. Van der Craats, McGovern, and Pannan (2002) identify five levels of online learning materials. They state that the level should best match the subject context and be based on identified student need, interpreted here as "independence stage." For example, a Level 2 online platform provides well-structured access to subject content, which is similar to a directive tutor giving information lectures in a face-to-face context, with little or no interaction, whereas a Level 5 platform provides scope for greater independence, providing a choice of learning activities and discussion forums.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING CULTURAL CONTEXT

Evidence is inconclusive with respect to Asian international students' willingness and ability to become independent. Ho and Crookall (1995) state autonomy requires shared decision making and, possibly, students and teachers presenting differing opinions. Chinese students may feel uncomfortable about this because they wish to maintain their teacher's mien-tzu (face). However, if they are given the opportunity to set goals and assess the extent to which they have achieved by their own standards, students may accept autonomy.

The aim of good teaching, whether face to face or online, is to develop a deep approach to learning (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001; Illinois Online Network, 2010). This is integral to the constructivist paradigm, whereby learning should be practical and relevant, as opposed to surface rote learning with the aim of passing

assessments only. Cheng (1998) proposes that Asian Pacific American students learn through listening, observing, reading, imitating, responding to teachers' questions, and taking recall tests. Chan's (1999) evidence contradicts this, suggesting that Chinese students are not passive, uncritical rote learners. Chan found that Asian students engage in deep learning through metacognitive strategies such as monitoring and learning from mistakes and they are critical thinkers, but do not openly express themselves like Australian students. It is proposed here that a difficulty in openly expressing opinions will also generalize to a collaborative online learning paradigm. However, Asian students may be able to independently evaluate and monitor their own progress through reflective journals or by writing their own marking guides, for example.

For theoretical clarity, independence stages and teaching strategies are divided into discrete stages. However, they should be viewed as falling on a continuum. Strategies can be introduced at one level and reinforced at another. Examples are found in Table 2.

METHODOLOGY

This case study applies the results of a previous classroom-based case-study to the online learning context. The previous study measured the independence stage of one cohort of 27 Chinese international students completing the bachelor of applied business studies degree in a classroom (Warring, 2010). It is suggested here that learners need to be at Stage 3 or 4 of the independent learning model to successfully complete an online learning course within the constructivist paradigm. The aim of this study is to establish if this cohort of Chinese international students were at independence Stage 3 or 4 at the midpoint of their degree course and therefore potentially able to succeed in the constructivist online context. The bachelor of applied business studies degree typically takes 3 years to complete and entails papers at Levels 5, 6, and 7 on the New Zealand Qualifica-

TABLE 2
Independence Model

Stages ¹	Beliefs: Who Is Responsible for Learning			Decisions ²	Strategy ²	Example
	Ability/Willingness ²	Student	Shared			
Self-directed	Able/willing and/or confident.	Student	Shared	Made by students.	Low guidance and supportive behavior.	- Work based problems.¹ - Online discussion groups led by student moderators³.
Involved learner	- Able/unwilling and/or insecure. - Not willing to use the ability and/or is insecure or apprehensive about doing it alone.	Shared	Shared	Teacher and student made, or student made with encouragement from teacher.	Low guidance/high support.	Higher risk choices, e.g. choice of learning activities.⁴
Interested learner	- Unable/willing and/or confident. - Motivated and making an effort, or confident as long as teacher provides guidance.			Teacher made with explanation of rationale for decisions.	High guidance/high support.	- Low risk choices, e.g. select assignment topic from a list. - Provide self-directed learning skills⁵ e.g. tutor models online discussions⁶. - Explain why students need to gain skills.¹
Dependent learner	- Unable/unwilling and/or Insecure. - Lacks commitment/motivation and/or lacks confidence.	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher made.	High guidance/low support.	- Information lectures.¹ (Internet as receptacle for course notes).⁴ - Practice with immediate feedback¹ (self-marking quizzes).⁴ - Specific and concrete assignment topics.

Source: Table adapted from Warring (2010).

Note: ¹Grow (1991). ²Hersey and Blanchard (1996). ³Rourke and Anderson (2002). ⁴van der Craats et al. (2002). ⁵Wenden (1995). ⁶Ambrose (2001).

TABLE 3
Independence Stages

<i>Stages</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
Low ability	✓	✓		
High ability			✓	✓
Low motivation	✓		✓	
High motivation		✓		✓
Low confidence	✓		✓	
High confidence		✓		✓
Teacher responsible	✓			
Student responsible				✓

tions Authority learning levels framework. Students' independence at the beginning of Level 6 (typically the beginning of year two) is analyzed here.

In the previous study, independence was conceptualized and measured with four independence constructs. A series of individual questions were combined to create average scores for each composite construct—ability, confidence, motivation, and beliefs—as to who is responsible for learning—the teacher or the student (Table 3). Although the previous study was administered in a classroom context, it is argued here that the variables defining the construct of independence are generic and can be applied to the online context.

FINDINGS

In the previous study Warring (2010) found that composite independence was marginally above/below neutral/average at the beginning of Level 6. Students did not believe that either they or teachers have sole responsibility for learning.

Students were independent for the following: they found learning satisfying, studied topics in depth, learned from mistakes, came to class with questions in mind, were confident to express independent opinions, and believed they were responsible for asking questions. They were not independent with respect to giving suggestions and ability/confidence for

revision, believing this is the teacher's responsibility.

These students had below-average ability to express independent opinions, independently decide if they need extra tuition, and to apply theories to practical examples. They had below-average ability *and* confidence to independently manage student groups, select relevant textbook readings, and conduct relevant research to complete an assignment. They believed the teacher has greater responsibility for selecting textbook readings and relevant research and for applying theories by giving examples.

DISCUSSION

In the previous study, it was found that overall independence was marginally above/below neutral/average (Warring 2010). However, for the individual variables, students found learning satisfying, studied topics in depth, and were able to learn from their mistakes, supporting Chan's (1999) finding that Chinese students are not passive, uncritical rote learners and that they engage in metacognitive strategies.

For many individual variables, scores were below average/neutral, indicating that the students were Stage 1 learners who were unable/unwilling and/or insecure and believed the teacher is responsible for their learning. The students did not independently revise, were not

confident to do this, and believed that this is the teacher's responsibility. Their lack of confidence, ability, and beliefs suggested they could be classified as Stage 1 learners for revision. Evidence indicated that the students were also at Stage 1 for answering a case study, working in student groups, choosing relevant readings, and conducting research. The students did not independently answer a case study, believing that this is the teacher's responsibility, and confidence to do this was neutral. Ability and confidence for working independently in student groups was below average/neutral. They also had below average/neutral ability and confidence to independently choose relevant readings and to conduct research, believing the teacher has greater responsibility for this.

For some variables, students' motivation, confidence, and belief that they are responsible, but lack of ability, indicated they are at independence Stage 2. Findings showed that students came to class with questions in mind, were confident to express their own opinion, and believed that they are responsible for asking questions. However, students did not give suggestions and had below average ability to express their own opinions in class and/or assignments. Stage 2 learners are unable but willing and/or confident. It is noted that students' low ability to give suggestions and express opinions may have been beyond their control. Tutors must also change their teaching style to facilitate student independence. To facilitate expression of opinions, tutors should practice a high relationship strategy (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996) and allow shared authority for learning (Candy, 1991). Students cannot act independently if a tutor is directive and "the expert" (Berge, 2008). They cannot be the centre of learning and construct their own knowledge (Anderson, 2004) if a tutor does not create some task ambiguity, engage in two way communication, share decision making (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996), and let students make choices (Cotterall, 1995).

In summary, these students had many characteristics of independent learners. They were

motivated as they found learning satisfying, studied topics in depth and came to class with questions in mind, and were confident to express their own opinions. However, for many variables, the indication is that they are Stage 1 or 2 learners as they lacked confidence and ability and believed that the teacher is responsible for their learning. Findings suggest that these students were Stage 1 or 2 learners for revision, answering a case study, choosing readings, conducting research, working independently in student groups, giving suggestions, and expressing opinions. They also believed that the teacher should help them revise, answer a case study, select relevant readings, and conduct research. It is proposed these students were not at Stage 3 or 4 of the independence model and did not have the ability, confidence, and attitudes that will allow them to succeed if learning online within a constructivist paradigm.

CONCLUSION

This particular cohort of Chinese international students was not at a stage of independence to succeed within a constructivist paradigm in the online learning context at this particular level in this particular course.

Future research should investigate other cohorts of both international and domestic students and a variety of courses and levels within courses, to see if these findings are unique to this particular cohort at this particular level on this particular course only.

Future research should also investigate the mediating impact of a tutor on students' stage of independence. It is acknowledged that the tutor has a significant role to play in creating the conditions for students to perform in a constructivist online paradigm.

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