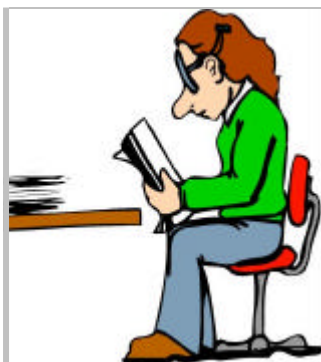


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From the Editor:

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*This edition of 'Learning Matters at Lingnan' touches on a very timely and important topic for both staff and students of this University. Following the adoption of the 90-credit curriculum in September 2004, the consequence is reduced in-class time and the opportunity for learners to assume greater self-responsibility for learning. This paper presents what autonomous learning is and isn't for a better understanding when review is needed for both the curriculum and the teaching and learning process.*



## Autonomous Learning and the 90-credit Curriculum

From the next academic year onwards, all undergraduate programmes of this University will adopt a 90-credit curriculum, resulting in a curtailing of some 6-12 credit hours in various programmes. Against this background, the opportunity for us is to foster the learner's capacity for independent thinking and responsibility for learning, to promote a system which gives greater emphasis to self-study and to develop strategies and teaching styles which promote learner autonomy. But autonomous learning must not be simply or even primarily a cheap alternative to face-to-face teaching. It is in fact a goal, and also a learning process, for it is difficult to imagine how students might achieve the goal of greater autonomy without actually having engaged in taking responsibility for the organisation and conduct of their learning.

### *What is Autonomous Learning?*

The term autonomy comes from the Greek *autonomia*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'right of self-government; personal freedom; freedom of the will; a self-governing community'. Autonomy refers, therefore, to the management of one's own affairs as opposed to a situation of dependence in which one is subjected to decisions and control by some outside body. Very often, autonomous learning is seen as synonymous with 'self-instruction', 'independent learning', 'resource-based learning' and 'self-directed learning'. While different interpretations of the terms 'learner autonomy' and 'self-direction' may emphasise variously an ability or a mode of learning, almost all will agree that fundamental to these concepts is an attitude which positively disposes learners to assuming control of their learning.

### *Challenge to Teachers*

Reducing the credit load (but not the student workload) while not compromising the academic rigour of our undergraduate programmes should be the uppermost concern of any curricular review and re-organisation of course content for a 90-credit curriculum. The review therefore entails a shift of the control over learning from the teacher to the learner. Our own challenge as teachers, in giving students support to cope with their learning, is to relinquish much of our control, yet at the same time provide enough

guidance to smooth their way into autonomous learning, and into developing purposefulness and creativity in doing so.

It is therefore important that teachers understand the concept of student autonomy and to consider how their own practice might adapt to the need for increasing learner autonomy. At this juncture, it might be useful to conceptualise what autonomous learning is and isn't.

***Autonomous learning in higher education is:***

- a goal that needs to pervade the whole curricular system and not simply be an occasional part of it;
- to do with ensuring greater quality of learning by putting the control over learning in the place where learning is occurring: the learner's mind;
- where the learners are actively involved in decisions about their learning, including what is learned, when, where and how it is learned, how it is assessed and by whom;
- active rather than passive;
- where the learners are enabled to take responsibility for the process of their learning and can learn without the constant presence or intervention of a teacher;
- where the teacher provides facilitative rather than didactic teaching interventions;
- where the teacher provides or facilitates access to the necessary resources for the achievement of learning outcomes.

***Autonomous learning isn't:***

- leaving students to fend for themselves;
- sitting students in front of computers and hoping they will learn;
- unsupervised learning and something that is only for bright students;
- simply removing structured teaching, it may require a greater, but different, degree of structure;
- extra readings, assignments or projects, without feedback and assessment to check students' accountability for their own learning;
- something that students can be expected to develop unaided.

For most students the building of the necessary confidence and learning skills that lead to achieving autonomous learning is likely to occur gradually over the period of their undergraduate studies. Teachers can however play a very significant part in making adjustments to their teaching practice which will contribute purposefully to facilitating this development.

Maureen Tam  
Director  
Teaching & Learning Centre

This issue and the back issues of 'Learning Matters at Lingnan' can be retrieved from the following URL – <http://www.ln.edu.hk/tlc/level2/td.htm>.