

ONLINE LEARNER COMMUNITIES FOR FOSTERING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Wenli Wu and Qing Ma

Introduction

With the prevalence of the 5G wireless standard and other forms of mobile technology in the 21st century, autonomous learning beyond the classroom has generated heated discussions. However, it is probable that learners who have access to technology will use it to support their informal learning efforts (Colugh et al., 2009). Many people will agree that 2020 was a year that will be impossible to forget due to COVID-19, which has directly affected millions of lives in terms of health and has reshaped almost every facet of human life (including education). For example, Tam and El-Azar (2020) claim the pandemic has reshaped education because most universities and schools around the world have been forced to adopt online teaching modes to prevent the spread of virus while continuing to deliver their programmes and courses; students have been required to stay at home and interact online with their tutors and peers, either synchronically or asynchronously. In this new era, people are also being urged to update their learning skills and become lifelong learners to keep up with transformations like these (Laal & Salamati, 2012). In other words, learning has become a part of life—a true lifestyle. Thus, learners seek to use whatever techniques, resources, and tools are most suitable for their learning needs and personal preferences beyond the classroom (Colugh et al., 2009). For example, learners can choose to explore the colossal library of the World Wide Web on their own. In contrast, they can also make good use of social networking platforms to learn collaboratively in online learning environments using smartphones or iPads.

According to Ke and Hoadley (2009), the concept of autonomous learning has been successfully integrated into the notion of online learning communities (OLCs), which has become a growing feature in the landscape of educational technology. Whether by accident or intent, learners can enter informal social network sites and engage in language learning, entertainment, and socializing (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). In these settings, they can participate and interact with others as a group and provide/receive feedback. The research of Wu et al. (2017) demonstrated that students become autonomous learners after engaging in OLCs because of “more time engagement in the instruction, lively interaction, and constructive feedback” (p. 151).

In this chapter, we will discuss how OLCs can promote autonomous learning, especially in informal settings after classroom learning takes place. First, some key concepts are reviewed, such as learner autonomy, self-directed learning (SDL), a community of practice, and an OLC. We then discuss the implications of using OLCs for facilitating autonomous learning in informal settings, followed by suggestions for future directions of autonomous learning beyond the classroom. Finally, we provide three reflective questions and three annotated Recommended readings tips for individuals wishing to learn more about this topic.

Key concepts

Autonomous learning

Autonomy was initially addressed in the foreign language (FL) teaching field with the emergence of the communicative approach in the 1970s (Paiva & Braga, 2008). Since then, it has been regarded as an important notion in language learning. Littlewood (1996) proposes that willingness and ability are two important components of autonomous behaviour. In addition, Littlewood (1996) states that an autonomous individual should be a learner, person, and communicator simultaneously. Paiva (2006) claims that autonomy is a socio-cognitive system because it involves an individual's mental states and processes allied with social dimensions. Similarly, Lai (2017) states the multidimensionality of autonomy "is reflected in the duality of meaning, in the nature of autonomy, in the sociality of autonomy and in the teachability of autonomy" (p. 6). Although learner autonomy suffers from not having a clear definition (Thanasoulas 2000), it is agreed that an autonomous learner has the ability to take charge of their learning effectively (Little, 1991). To clarify this term further, Benson (2001) suggests learner autonomy is "a multidimensional capacity" (p. 47). Recently, Huang and Benson (2013) have suggested that autonomous learners should (a) have the desire to take an active role in their learning, (b) have the ability to learn, and (c) have the freedom to learn. The *desire* dimension means autonomous learners are motivated to work towards a goal, take purposeful actions towards that goal, and persist with their attempts. The *ability* dimension refers to autonomous learners possessing the strategies or skills to learn a target language while also being able to plan or organize their learning, take actions to promote the planned actions, and ultimately evaluate their learning process. Finally, the *freedom* dimension refers to the context and chances for adopting an active role in autonomous learning (Huang & Benson, 2013). In this chapter, we subscribe to Huang and Benson's (2013) definition of learner autonomy and their assertion that autonomous learning contains these three dimensions.

Autonomous learning and self-directed learning

According to a definition of learner autonomy by Huang and Benson (2013), in a sense, autonomous learners can also be perceived as self-directed learners. Moreover, self-directed learning (SDL) is a method of coping with constant changes in a new world (Knowles, 1975). If individuals can recognize their self-directing capacities, they enable themselves with the impetus for self-regulatory patterns of research, which then can serve them as the primary agents of their own change (Bandura, 1977). The study of SDL was initiated by Malcom Knowles in the 1970s. He defined SDL as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate

learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). Song and Hill (2007) developed a model with the specific aim of understanding SDL in online environments, which was a new perspective for understanding how learning contexts influence SDL in the current era of technology. Further, it emphasizes that the dynamic interactions between the following three components are key to understanding SDL: the learning context, personal attributes, and the learning process.

Learning in the 21st century manifests itself in a variety of contexts, such as face-to-face classroom instruction, web-based courses, computer-based instruction, and a blend of the physical classroom and online environment. As discussed above, autonomous learning overlaps with self-directed learning in many aspects, so they are often used interchangeably by some researchers (e.g., Lai, 2017). For example, the processes of autonomous learning are manifested by certain key features innate to self-directed learning, such as defining tasks, setting goals and planning, implementing strategies, monitoring and reflecting on a task, and self or context. Another similarity lies in that autonomous learners should have the ability to take control of their learning in terms of desire and ability (Huang & Benson, 2013); self-directed learners should also have control over all learning decisions. Finally, both autonomous learning and self-directed learning can take place either in a teacher-guided classroom or beyond it (Guglielmino, 2008).

In contrasting self-directed learning with autonomous learning, the major difference is in the origins of the concepts. Self-directed learning is a concept that originated with adult education in the 1970s (Saks & Leijen, 2014), whereas autonomous learning is a concept that was originally found in the political science and philosophical literature (Lai, 2017). With regard to the popularity of the two concepts, achieving learning autonomy is an important goal for many language courses in the world, and references to learner autonomy can be found in many published textbooks (e.g., Thornton, 2013), while self-directed learning is a step on the path to being a fully autonomous learner (Dickinson, 1987). In other words, self-directed learning is an important feature for becoming an autonomous learner (He et al., 2011).

Autonomous learning and self-regulated learning

Autonomous learning is defined as a learner’s ability to take control of their own learning. Accordingly, Palfreyman and Benson (2019) state that a combination of autonomy, learning strategies (e.g., Wenden, 1991), and learner beliefs (e.g., Cotterall, 1995) can help in understanding the cognitive aspects involved in autonomous learning. Self-regulation has been studied extensively in the field of educational psychology and is suggested by Nakata (2014) as a key element that can help autonomous learners to conduct effective strategy training. Moreover, self-regulation can be defined as “self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). To conceptualize self-regulated learning, Zimmerman (2011) proposed a framework to explain the relationships among SRL processes and paramount learning beliefs and outcomes that contains three phases: forethought, performance, and self-regulation. In this framework, Phase I involves activities such as “goal setting” and “strategic planning”, where self-motivated learners prepare for and improve future learning actions. Phase II is the performance stage, where learners use strategies to take control of their own learning and seek help when required. Phase III comprises self-reflection, in which learners self-judge and self-react to their learning efforts, with the intention of maximizing learning outcomes. Zimmerman’s framework suggests that the self-regulatory process includes factors other than learner strategies, such as goal setting, strategic planning, and action plans (Tseng

et al., 2006). Above all, self-regulation involves learners being active participants in their own learning (Rose et al., 2018).

Autonomous learning and self-regulated learning share some similarities, as both emphasize intrinsic motivation as a key component, and both concepts require the participants' active engagement, goal-oriented behaviour, responsibility, control and metacognition (Deci & Ryan, 2002). However, they should not be confused with each other (Papamitsiou & Economides, 2019). The core of the concept of autonomy is to put the learner at the starting point of the learning task, as they have the freedom to choose (Andrade & Bunker, 2009). In contrast, SRL emphasizes a process that comprises a series of strategies, and the core of this concept is how learners can be effective without relying on the teacher's control or structure (Reeve, 2009; Stefanou et al., 2013).

Autonomous learning and online learning communities

Returning to Huang and Benson's (2013) three dimensions of autonomous learning that we discussed earlier, the freedom dimension means learners have the right to take control of their own learning (Benson, 2009) and that they also have freedom from others' control (Hamilton, 2013). In a similar way, Nunan (1996) states that contextual factors such as the philosophy of a culture or community can influence the degree of autonomy, as individuals could be "autonomous in one area while dependent in another" (Murray, 1999, p. 301).

A community is regarded as important for autonomous learning (Tassinari, 2017) because it provides opportunities and spaces for learners to be active participants (Huang & Benson, 2013). A number of researchers have stated the benefits of learning within a community. For example, Haythornthwait et al. (2000) assert that learners feel less isolated in a learning community in an online context. Further, Dede (1996) claims that membership in a community promotes support from other learners, a speedy exchange of information, collaborative learning among group members, dedication to fulfil the goals of the group, and satisfaction with the efforts and procedures of the group. In agreement with the researchers mentioned previously, Tassinari (2017) states that a community of practice (or a learning community) would be beneficial for autonomous learners to practise within a given context. In a learning community, "newcomers" become more proficient in the areas in which they are practising through collaborative learning with others who also belong to the community (Wenger, 1998). Wenger's view is rooted in a social learning perspective, which asserts that learning takes place when people observe other people in the group (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). During this learning process, self-regulated individuals serve as the major agents of their own change. Moreover, while learners with higher self-directing capacities could benefit more from a favourable learning environment, it can also foster learners to become more self-directed (Bandura, 1977). Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that "communities of practice" are everywhere and that people are generally engaged in many of them.

In the 21st century, educational technologies provide learners with numerous platforms for selecting information, sharing knowledge and skills, and engaging in collaborative learning. Moreover, advances in digital technologies and internet connections have changed the ways in which people interact with others and develop themselves (Hine, 2000). In other words, there are many new contexts within modern technology where members can engage in common activities and learn from individuals who are more experienced.

An OLC is an environment where continuous learning processes are obtained through receiving, generating, exploring, and shaping information. This is then facilitated in the community through interaction, participation, and communication among learners (Carlen &

Jobring, 2005), which can then be regarded as a special type of community of practice in the context of online learning.

OLCs provide a new domain or context in which SDL can take place, providing more opportunities to foster autonomous learning either within or beyond a classroom setting. In a technology-enhanced OLC, individuals learn to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning through interaction with peers and more experienced individuals. In practice, OLCs are increasingly being employed for the professional development of teachers, for creating knowledge-sharing settings (such as medical support groups and corporate helpdesks), and for formal education (Chang 2003; Pearson, 1998). Research has indicated that OLCs can take place in various new contexts, such as the online community of Duolingo (Palfreyman & Benson, 2019) and the online communities of Facebook users (Alm, 2015). Other forms may include groups formed around certain media, such as BookTubers (Suarez & Arguello, 2020) or bloggers (Tang & Lam, 2014).

Different types of online learning communities

In a digitally connected world, language learners (especially English language learners) can easily obtain additional learning resources and practice opportunities outside the classroom (Suarez & Arguello, 2020). Moreover, many online social networking platforms provide attractive and interactive learning resources for learners; hence, individuals are motivated to enter and explore them. When members of online social platforms share common features (such as learning goals, interests, identifying characteristics, and values) and deliver or support learning activities, online networking platforms can be considered OLCs (Tang & Lam, 2014). There are various social networking platforms, and we list a few currently well-known platforms below to illustrate why they can be regarded as good venues for accommodating OLCs.

Web forums. Web forums are asynchronous discussion platforms that provide services to people who share a specific interest, such as Fanfiction (Henderson, 2015). They are normally free to join, and participants are allowed to discuss various topics and seek help within the group (Sokkett & Toffoli, 2012). A healthy, sustainable web forum normally has at least one administrator to issue memberships and monitor the progress of the forum.

Facebook. The multiple interfaces or roles of Facebook (such as author, commenter, respondent, and approver) provide a supportive environment for language learners. With features such as a wall (which has been renamed a number of times throughout the site's history), information posting, blog-type posts, the ability to like and unlike posts and comments, and the ability to send one-on-one messages, learners have a number of opportunities to collaborate with other individuals on the platform (Liu, 2010; Shih, 2011). For example, Facebook has proved a useful platform for motivating university language students to be active second language learners in New Zealand (Alm, 2015).

YouTube. While audiovisual platforms such as YouTube facilitate informal learning practices, watching YouTube videos normally constitutes one-way communication. However, watching streamed media in its original language provides learners with more opportunities for shared language and values, meaning learners can belong to different communities where they can engage with other members (Sokkett & Toffoli, 2012). The BookTuber community introduced by Suarez and Arguello (2020) is another type of OLC, one where members have enhanced their critical thinking skills while also being motivated to make progress.

Others. Other social networking platforms (such as LINE, WeChat, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter) could also be considered OLCs. In these, people communicate and can

organize together in various ways through some shared characteristic (such as an interest or learning goal) (Hramiak, 2010), thus creating a sense of belonging to that community.

Key issues

Empirical evidence: OLCs as a promising platform for developing learner autonomy

Some empirical research studies support the idea that OLCs demonstrate the potential to foster autonomous learning (Yang, 2016). For example, in Gao's (2007) study of an online community formed by a group of English learners in mainland China, he described a dynamic community in which the Chinese learners aspired to "satisfy their needs for social exchanges and self-assertion in English" (p. 267), even though their opportunities for using English in real life were limited. The Chinese learners in his study practised language skills in an English club, which can be regarded as a supportive learning community. They gained a sense of belonging, which helped to sustain their continuing efforts of participating in the community. Gao (2007) further reported that strong learners played important roles in maintaining the cohesion of the community and guiding other participants in making friends by using English. The participants in the community felt relaxed and had an opportunity to be themselves, motivating them to voluntarily participate in the community for relatively long periods of time.

Another example is from Ma (2017), which revealed that mobile-assisted online communities can provide more interactions between language learners and other agents (such as teachers, peers, parents, relatives, and friends), who play important roles in facilitating learning, hence enhancing an individual's autonomous learning. Wu et al. (2017) demonstrated the positive effects that an OLC can engender in a flipped classroom in Taiwan. In their study, students were advised to take control of their own learning activities beyond the classroom setting by using LINE (a mobile app). The students were nurtured to gradually become self-directed learners who were responsible for their own learning, which augmented autonomous learning. Further, Suarez and Arguello (2020) reported on creating an out-of-class BookTuber community that motivated university students to make videos and develop their critical thinking skills, which are essential for peer evaluation and career development. Similarly, Ma (2020) reported on an interesting study in which a group of language learners engaged in co-authoring an online book using a wiki as the platform. The peers were motivated to interact and provide useful feedback for each other to improve the quality of the wiki writing.

Underdeveloped role of experts in online learning communities

From Wenger's (1998) perspective, recognized experts are paramount for building a sustainable community of practice because they can help to nurture less experienced members. This view is supported by Lantolf (2013), who states that human agency can only be developed through social interaction in formal or informal teaching or socialization. A number of empirical studies have also demonstrated the importance of having an expert (or teacher) in online communities. For example, we previously mentioned the importance of a group of strong learners (or coordinators) in the informal online English learning community in Gao's (2007) study. Further, the mobile-assisted informal OLC described by Wu et al. (2017) also benefitted from instructor guidance, allowing students

to build confidence and take an active role in the LINE-assisted learning community. Correspondingly, a study by Shea et al. (2006) revealed that a strong and active presence of online instructors has a positive association with students developing a stronger sense of a learning community.

Despite sporadic evidence reported by a few studies (e.g., Shea et al., 2006; Wu et al., 2017), there is a lack of empirical studies in language education that have clearly outlined the role of teachers in OLCs beyond the classroom (Lai, 2015). In addition, research shows that many teachers are not aware of the roles that they could play in enhancing students' autonomous learning outside the classroom (Toffoli & Sockett, 2013). As one relevant example, an online writing community did not lead to intended student learning outcomes in a university in Hong Kong due to low participation and interaction rates (Tang et al., 2020). The authors concluded that a lack of face-to-face teacher guidance before the start of the programme and a lack of teacher supervision during the programme were two critical reasons that contributed to the lack of success of the online writing community. Lai (2015) calls for more research attention and effort to understand how teachers can utilize their influence to enhance learners' out-of-class autonomous use of technology to achieve more satisfactory learning outcomes.

Lack of theoretical guidance in developing learner autonomy in OLC

Since the turn of the new millennium, the development of new technologies (especially mobile technologies) has led to more opportunities for out-of-class informal learning in a variety of contexts. Autonomous learning in this technological era needs to be understood from the perspective of looking at the dynamic interactions between learning contexts, personal attributes, and learning processes (Song & Hill, 2007). As previously mentioned, learner autonomy refers to a learner's ability to take control of their own learning (Huang & Benson, 2013), but it is vague as to exactly what "take control" should mean (Thornton, 2013). The flexibility provided by an online context offers more freedom for learners while creating challenges for the planning and monitoring of their learning, the evaluation of the learning, the learners' use of resources and strategies, and learner motivation (Song et al., 2004). Because self-directed learning is counted as a viable alternative to achieve learner autonomy (He et al., 2011), an updated self-directed learning framework might help. Nevertheless, until recently, Song and Hill's (2007) model is still the most current in terms of SDL (Şentürk & Zeybek, 2019) in an online learning environment because of the "learning context" dimension. To date, there is no theoretical framework for guiding the development of learner autonomy within OLCs. Therefore, there is a need to investigate whether and how learner autonomy could be developed with OLCs and to what extent various factors can help boost learning outcomes within a learning community.

Implications for learner autonomy and learning communities

The issue of fostering autonomous learning continues to be a focus for teachers and learners in language learning. Learners of a second language aspire to become autonomous learners so that they can take control of their learning and become successful in their fields. Moreover, teachers would prefer students who have a strong sense of learner autonomy. This would allow more teaching pedagogies to be applied with ease, which would enhance learning. Although teachers and students have different concerns, both are looking for different strategies or skills to foster autonomous learning journeys. It would appear that OLCs, which are

a type of technology-enhanced communities of practice, can foster autonomous learning, especially in informal learning settings. OLCs can also be utilized as powerful tools for sustainable and effective learning (Tang & Lam, 2014).

The key characteristics of OLCs that may facilitate learner autonomy beyond the classroom lie in the following three aspects. First, an experienced “recognized expert” who is often a teacher or facilitator, as shown by Gao (2007) and Wu et al. (2017), should be included in the OLC to play an active role and sustain the OLC. Second, having interaction among members is another key feature of successful OLCs; without this interaction, an OLC will eventually fail (Tang et al., 2020). Third, a sense of community can result in positive feelings that lead to engagement, satisfaction, and learning (Liu et al., 2007; Shea et al., 2006). This promotes increased participation and even deeper engagement (Tinto, 1997).

Learners can benefit from successful OLCs that are active and sustainable. Training in self-regulated learning skills, such as setting goals and planning, implementing learning activities, monitoring, and reflecting, can aid learners in gaining more from these communities. It should also be noted that having learners become more self-regulated can facilitate the growth of a healthy and sustainable OLC. This is because “newcomers” can eventually become established members (and leaders) of the group and attract more newcomers to join (Wenger, 1998). The synergies and dynamics created among the OLC are conducive for developing members’ learning autonomy.

Finally, contextual factors such as the culture or community can determine the degree of autonomy (Nunan, 1996). As Wood (2017) states, in cultures high in collectivism (such as China), the identities of individuals are deeply connected to their families, clans, and groups. In contrast, people tend to act relatively independently in cultures high in individualism (such as the United States) because there is a higher value placed on individual goals and identity. From the existing literature, it would appear that people from collectivistic cultural backgrounds are more willing to join and participate in online communities. Further, online communities in which the majority of participants value a collectivistic culture are more likely to achieve shared community goals (such as in improving their English proficiency together). This is similar to the finding of Gao (2007), who described that online English learning communities increased their memberships with many people from mainland China. In contrast, Alm (2015) reported that informal language engagement on Facebook by New Zealand university students was not regarded as useful in a formal language learning setting. However, if one considers that people from cultures higher in collectivism (such as China) feel that their identities are deeply connected to groups, it is reasonable that they will be more comfortable with a learning community. Conversely, people from cultures higher in individualism (such as the United States or New Zealand) will act more independently when compared to their counterparts from a collectivistic cultural background. Hence, interaction and engagement in learning communities are less likely to be perceived as comfortable, especially in informal settings.

Future directions

Most human learning takes place in an informal environment (Eraut, 2000, as cited in Rogers, 2008); hence, the development of new technology and the internet has increased the learning contexts in which naturalistic language learning can occur, regardless of geographical boundaries. However, there is a need for further research into how OLCs can foster autonomous learning beyond the classroom and how effective OLCs can be maintained and

sustained. Moreover, it takes devotion and skills to create an OLC (Sekulich, 2020). It is easy to dismiss OLCs created informally by learners if no rules and regulations are established or followed; however, they might represent a need that is being unfulfilled. In addition, the maintenance of an active OLC should not be neglected.

In terms of the SDL model created by Song and Hill (2007), an updated model is required to facilitate a more detailed understanding of the *design* and *support* aspects in mobile-assisted online learning. This is particularly relevant as incidental and informal learning has become increasingly more important to learners (Ma, 2017). For example, Chik (2017) reports that profiles, records, and different types of data have been stored in Duolingo forums over an extended period. While the question of how self-directed learners can utilize this type of data from online platforms using their smartphones in an informal context might be a challenge for researchers, an updated model could provide helpful insights.

There is also a need for a more detailed understanding of whether age plays a role in the formation and sustainability of online learner communities. It is reported that young people prefer using online networks and media to develop second language proficiency (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Further, Wu (2011) reported that university students and white-collar staff in the south-west coastal areas of mainland China are more interested in massive open online courses (MOOCs). It is believed that these cohorts are more comfortable financially than people in other regions of China. Other relevant areas that could be addressed in future research could include the online engagement of primary and secondary students (such as whether and how they form any informal online learner communities) and how this new paradigm affects senior citizens.

Finally, although many researchers have emphasized the importance of recognized experts in OLCs (e.g., Sun et al., 2015), few empirical studies have clearly outlined the role of teachers in informal OLCs (Lai, 2015). Key questions for future research in this area could include why teachers should spend time with informal OLCs and what strategies they could adopt to facilitate autonomous learning in informal OLCs.

Conclusion

Although discussions about autonomous learning beyond the classroom have drawn the attention of many people, using OLCs to foster autonomous learning has been inadequately researched. Rooted in social learning theory, an online learner community is an extension of a community of practice, where learners can meet regularly with common learning goals. Importantly, their presence is not restricted by geographical range due to advances in educational technologies, especially mobile technologies. Most learners who join informal OLCs with shared goals do so voluntarily, meaning they are motivated to take purposeful actions to fulfil their goals. Moreover, the online environment provides a context in which learners can take an active role in the pursuit of their learning. Moreover, through collaborating with others and learning from more experienced experts and peers, learners can gain the skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning processes, which will help them become autonomous learners. Accordingly, we advocate the creation of sustainable OLCs to foster autonomous learning.

Reflection questions

To advance study in this area, we present the following three reflective questions to extend our discussion:

- 1 How can an informal online learning community be created to foster autonomous learning?
- 2 How can online learning communities help learners develop their learning agency?
- 3 How can learners develop SDL skills within online learning, especially in the mobile-assisted online learning context?

Recommended readings

For those wishing to learn more about using online learning communities to foster autonomous learning beyond the classroom, we recommend the following:

Lai, C. (2015). Modeling teachers' influence on learners' self-directed use of technology for language learning outside the classroom. *Computers & Education*, 82, 74–83.

This article provides a conceptual model of three types of teacher support that could influence how students use self-directed technology beyond the classroom. Further, it is one of the few empirical studies that explores the role teachers could play in online language learning beyond the classroom. We drew on the review of self-directed use of technology to support language learning when writing this chapter. The research findings of this article are inspiring, particularly because a model is proposed that can guide teachers in supporting student language learning beyond the classroom.

Lai, C. (2017). *Autonomous language learning with technology beyond the classroom*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

This book provides rich resources and guidance for people who want to know more about fostering autonomous learning beyond the classroom by using technology. The first part of the book introduces key concepts that are related to autonomous learning and provides a theoretical framework to help understand out-of-class autonomous learning in a technology-supported environment. Although this book does not specifically address using online learner communities to foster language learning, it covers many key concepts that we have discussed when writing this chapter, such as “autonomous learning” and “out-of-class learning”.

Palfreyman, D. M., & Benson, P. (2019). Autonomy and its role in English language learning: practice and research. In X. Gao (Ed.), *Second handbook of English language teaching* (2nd ed., pp. 661–681). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02899-2_38

This book chapter is an extension of the authors' previous discussions regarding the influence of autonomous learning on applied linguistic and language education. It provides a useful overview of autonomy and the role it plays in language education. In our study, we drew on her definition of autonomous learning and its three dimensions, and the dimensions helped us to link autonomous learning with SDL and technology-enhanced learning. It would be useful reading for anyone seeking further information about autonomous learning.

References

- Alm, A. (2015). “Facebook” for informal language learning: Perspectives from tertiary language students. *The EuroCALL Review*, 23(2), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2015.4665>
- Andrade, M. S., & Bunker, E. L. (2009). A model for self-regulated distance language learning. *Distance Education*, 30(1), 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910902845956>
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall: Englewood cliffs.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2009). Making sense of autonomy in language learning. In R. Pemberton, S. Toogood, & A. Barfield (Eds.), *Maintaining control: Autonomy and language learning* (pp. 13–26). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Carlén, U., & Jobring, O. (2005). The rationale of online learning communities. *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, 1(3), 272–295.
- Chang, C. C. (2003). Towards a distributed web-based learning community. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 40(1), 27–42.
- Chik, A. (2017). Learner autonomy and digital practices. In A. Chik, N. Aoki, & R. Smith (Eds.), *Autonomy in language learning and teaching: New research agendas* (pp. 73–92). London: Palgrave.

- Colugh, G., Jones, J., McAndrew, P., & Scanlon, E. (2009). Informal learning evidence in online communities of mobile device enthusiasts. In M. Ally (Ed.), *Mobile learning: Transforming the delivery of education and training. Issues in distance education* (pp. 99–112). Athabasca: Athabasca University Press. <http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120155>
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy. *ELT Journal*, 49(3), 219–227.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2002). *Handbook of self-determination research*. New York: University of Rochester Press.
- Dede, C. (1996). The evolution of distance education: Emerging technologies and distributed learning. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 10(2), 4–36.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Gao, X. (2007). A Tale of Blue Rain Café: A study on the online narrative construction about a community of English learners on the Chinese mainland. *System*, 35, 259–270.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2018). Chasing the butterfly effect: Informal language learning online as a complex system. *Language Learning & Technology*, 22(2), 8–27.
- Guglielmino, L. M. (2008). Why self-directed learning. *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning*, 5, 1–14.
- Hamilton, M. (2013). *Autonomy and foreign language learning in a virtual learning environment*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing.
- Haythornthwaite, C., Kazmer, M. M., Robins, J., & Shoemaker, S. (2000). Community development among distance learners: Temporal and technological dimensions. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 6(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2000.tb00114.x>
- He, Q., Valcke, M., & Zhu, C. (2011). Promoting a special learning environment for second language learning in a Chinese rural primary school. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 12, 137–144.
- Henderson, S. (2015). *The Hunger Games fanfiction as a community of practice: Forming identities in online communities*. [Master's Thesis/Dissertation, University of British Columbia]. UBC Theses and Dissertations. <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0166554>
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Hramiak, A. (2010). Online learning community development with teachers as a means of enhancing initial teacher training. *Technology Pedagogy and Education*, 19(1), 47–62.
- Huang, J. P., & Benson, P. (2013). Autonomy, agency and identity in foreign and second language education. *CJAL*, 36(1), 7–28.
- Ke, F., & Hoadley, C. (2009). Evaluating online learning communities. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 57(4), 487–510.
- Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. New York: Association Press.
- Laal, M., & Salamati, P. (2012). Lifelong learning, why do we need it? *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 31, 399–403. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.12.073>
- Lai, C. (2015). Modeling teachers' influence on learners' self-directed use of technology for language learning outside the classroom. *Computers & Education*, 82, 74–83.
- Lai, C. (2017). *Autonomous language learning with technology beyond the classroom*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2013). Sociocultural theory and the dialectic of L2 learner autonomy/agency. In P. Benson & L. Cooker (Eds.), *The applied linguistic individual: Sociocultural approaches to identity, agency and autonomy* (pp. 17–31). Sheffield, UK: Equinox.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik Language Learning Resources.
- Littlewood, W. (1996). Autonomy: An anatomy and a framework. *System*, 24, 427–435.
- Liu, X., Magjuka, R. J., Bonk, C. J., & Lee, S. H. (2007). Does sense of community matter? An examination of participants' perceptions of building learning communities in online courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 8(1), 9–24. <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/106720/>
- Liu, Y. (2010). Social media tools as a learning resource. *Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange*, 3(1), 101–114.
- Lomicka, L., & Lord, G. (2009). Introduction to social networking, collaboration and Web 2.0 tools. In L. Lomicka & G. Lord (Eds.), *The next generations: Social networking and online collaboration in FL learning* (pp. 1–11). San Marcos TX: CALICO Consortium.

- Ma, Q. (2017). A multi-case study of university students' language-learning experience mediated by mobile technologies: A socio-cultural perspective. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 30(3-4), 183-203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2017.1301957>
- Ma, Q. (2020). Examining the role of inter-group peer online feedback on wiki writing in an EAP context. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 33(3), 197-216.
- Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1991). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Murray, G. L. (1999). Autonomy and language learning in a simulated environment. *System*, 27, 295-308.
- Nakata, Y. (2014). Self-regulation: Why is it important for promoting learner autonomy in the school context? *SiSAL Journal*, 5(4), 342-356.
- Nunan, D. (1996). Towards autonomous learning: Some theoretical, empirical and practical issues. In R. Pemberton, E. S. L. Li, W. W. F. Or, & H. D. Pierson (Eds.), *Taking control: Autonomy in language learning* (pp. 13-26). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Paiva, V. L. (2006). Autonomy and complexity. *Linguagem & Ensino*, 9(1), 77-127.
- Paiva, V. L., & Braga, J. D. (2008). The complex nature of autonomy. *DELTA: Documentação de estudos em lingüística teórica e aplicada*, 24(SPE), 441-468.
- Palfreyman, D. M., & Benson, P. (2019). Autonomy and its role in English language learning: Practice and research. In X. Gao (Ed.), *Second handbook of English language teaching* (2nd ed., pp. 661-681). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02899-2_38
- Papamitsiou, Z., & Economides, A. (2019). Exploring autonomous learning capacity from a self-regulated learning perspective using learning analytics. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(6), 3138-3155.
- Pearson, J. (1998). Electronic networking in initial teacher education: Is a virtual faculty of education possible? *Computers & Education*, 32(3), 221-238.
- Reeve, J. (2009). Why teachers adopt a controlling motivating style toward students and how they can become more autonomy supportive. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(3), 159-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903028990>
- Rogers, A. (2008). Informal learning and literacy. In B. Street & N.H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (2nd ed., pp. 1-12). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_41
- Rose, H., Briggs, J. G., Boggs, J. A., Sergio, L., & Ivanova-Slavianskaia, N. (2018). A systematic review of language learner strategy research in the face of self-regulation. *System*, 72, 151-163.
- Saks, K., & Leijen, Ä. (2014). Distinguishing self-directed and self-regulated learning and measuring them in the e-learning context. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 112, 190-198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1155>
- Sekulich, K. M. (2020). Developing an online community of learners. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 86(5), 17-22.
- Şentürk, C., & Zeybek, G. (2019). Overview of learning from past to present and self-directed learning. In F.G. Giuseffi (Ed.), *Self-directed learning strategies in adult education context* (1st ed., pp. 138-182). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Shea, P., Li, C. S., & Pickett, A. M. (2006). A study of teaching presence and student sense of learning community in fully online and web-enhanced college course. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 9(3), 175-190. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2006.06.005>
- Shih, R. C. (2011). Can web 2.0 technology assist college students in learning English writing? Integrating Facebook and peer assessment with blended learning. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 27(5), 829-845.
- Socket, G., & Toffoli, D. (2012). Beyond learner autonomy: A dynamic systems view of the informal learning of English in virtual online communities. *ReCALL*, 24(2), 138-151.
- Song, L., & Hill, J. (2007). A conceptual model for understanding self-directed learning in online environments. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 6(1), 27-42. <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/6.1.3.pdf>
- Song, L., Singleton, E. S., Hill, J. R., & Koh, H. M. (2004). Improving online learning: Student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(1), 59-70.
- Stefanou, C., Stolk, J. D., Prince, M., Chen, J. C., & Lord, S. M. (2013). Self-regulation and autonomy in problem- and project-based learning environments. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 14(2), 109-122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787413481132>
- Suarez, M. M., & Arguello, M. V. (2020). Becoming a good BookTuber. *RELC Journal*, 51(1), 158-167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220906905>

- Sun, Y., Franklin, T., & Gao, F. (2015). Learning outside of classroom: Exploring the active part of an informal online English learning community in China. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 48(1), 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12340>
- Tam, G., & El-Azar, D. (2020, March 13). *3 ways the coronavirus pandemic could reshape education*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/3-ways-coronavirus-is-reshaping-education-and-what-changes-might-be-here-to-stay/>
- Tang, E., Cheng, L., & Ng, R. (2020). Online writing community: What can we learn from failure? *RELC Journal*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220912038>
- Tang, E., & Lam, C. (2014). Building an effective online learning community (OLC) in blog-based teaching portfolios. *Internet and Higher Education*, 20, 79–85.
- Tassinari, M. G. (2017). Encouraging autonomy through a community of practice: The role of a self-access centre. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 8(2), 57–168.
- Thanasoulas, D. (2000). What is learner autonomy & How can it be fostered. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(11), 37–48. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Thanasoulas-Autonomy.html>
- Thornton, K. (2013). Supporting self-directed learning: A framework for teachers. *Research and practice in English language teaching in Asia*, 59–77. http://www.leia.org/LEiA/LEiA%20VOLUMES/Download/Research_and_Practice_in_EL_T_in_Asia.pdf#page=73
- Tinto, V. (1997). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 167–177.
- Toffoli, D., & Sockett, G. (2013). University teachers' perceptions of online informal learning of English (OILE). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2013.776970>.
- Tseng, W. T., Dornyei, Z., & Schmitt, N. (2006). A new approach to assessing strategic learning: The case of self-regulation in vocabulary acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 27(1), 78–102.
- Wenden, A. L. (1991). *Learner strategies for learner autonomy*. London: Prentice Hall International.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, J. T. (2017). *Communication mosaics: An introduction to the field of communication* (8th ed.). Singapore: Cengage.
- Wu, H. (2011). Playing truant, choosing classes or scrounging a free classes?: Reflection on the popularity of open online courses (in Chinese). *Qing Nian Xian Xiang (in Chinese)*, 9(85).
- Wu, W. V., Chen Hsieh, J., & Yang, J. C. (2017). Creating an online learning community in a flipped classroom to enhance EFL learners' oral proficiency. *Educational Technology & Society*, 20(2), 142–157.
- Yang, Y. (2016). Self-directed learning to develop autonomy in an online ESP community. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 24(7), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2015.1041402>
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Attaining self-regulation: A social cognitive perspective. In M. Boekaerts, P.R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation, research, and applications* (pp. 13–39). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2011). Motivational sources and outcomes of self-regulated learning and performance. In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance* (pp. 49–64). New York: Routledge.