PERCEPTIONS OF INTERACTION AND LEARNER AUTONOMY – A CROSS-CULTURAL INQUIRY INTO DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UK AND RUSSIA

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Introduction

Notions of learner autonomy and interaction are central to virtually any theoretical framework in distance education. Early theorists in the field stressed the need for providing adult learners with more choice and responsibility in their studies and empowering them to make independent decisions on their learning. According to Farnes (2000), these theoretical frameworks, which originated mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, can be also be defined as theories of autonomy and independence. Wedemeyer's (1981) theory of independent learning is illustrative of these early conceptualisations. Wedemeyer advocated a model of independent study, where learners would be free to set their own goals, select learning activities and determine the sequence of topics for study at a time and place suitable for them. Drawing on Wedemeyer's ideas, Moore (1972) considered learner autonomy to be an integral element of any distance education programme and stressed its importance through incorporating it as a separate dimension in his transactional distance model, one of the most well-known theoretical frameworks in distance learning to date. According to Moore, learner autonomy can be defined as a possibility "for a learner to define his own goals and problems and to evaluate his progress" (p. 81).

However, wide integration of new information technologies into distance teaching and learning changed its nature. Highly flexible and interactive modern instructional media are capable of bridging the gap between learners in various locations, providing unique opportunities for interaction and collaboration. As result, the emphasis of recent contributions to distance education theory shifted towards notions of interaction and communication. For example, Garrison (1989) replaces the concept of learner independence with a concept of learner control in his model, defining the former as "the opportunity and ability to influence the education transaction" (Garrison, 2000, p. 10), which is exercised through two – way communication between teacher and learner. Anderson (2004) suggests a model of e-learning, which could serve as the basis for developing a theory of online teaching and learning. In both collaborative and independent study modes, which are viewed as the most pervasive modes in online learning, various types of interpersonal and content interaction play a crucial role in determining relations between the core concepts. Today learner autonomy is increasingly perceived as only one of the elements of a distance learning system, where tradeoffs have to be made between creating a learner – centred environment and provision of adequate support in the form counselling or tutoring (Holmberg, 2005).

However, no conclusive empirical evidence has been produced so far on how learner autonomy and different forms of interaction interrelate to one other and to what extent perceptions of these constructs are shaped by cultural characteristics of the learner. Several studies on the subject point at the challenges that some cultural groups experience in distance education (Al-Harthi, 2005; Gayol, 1995; Goodfellow et al., 2001; Gunawerdena et al., 2003), but empirical research on the topic is scarce. It is also not clear how these cultural differences manifest themselves in distance learning and whether they contribute to changing interrelationships between the key theoretical constructs.

Research Goals and Methods

The present study aimed to contribute to both theoretical knowledge and body of empirical work on the subject and investigate experiences of distance learning in the contexts of the UK and Russia. More specifically it was intended to 1) explore the extent to which perceptions of dialogue and learner autonomy differed between learners, who belonged to different cultural groups and 2) elucidate relationships between learner autonomy and various types of learner interaction The inquiry was guided by two key research questions – Are there any differences in perceptions of dialogue and learner autonomy across the two cultural groups under study? What are interrelationships between learner autonomy and dialogue across the two groups of learners?

Interaction was conceptualised in agreement with Moore's (1991) model of interaction empirically tested by Cheng (2001) and was comprised of three types: learner – learner, learner – tutor and learner – content interaction. Based on the author's previous work on the subject (Ramanau, 2004), learner independence and learner control were delineated as two key dimensions of learner autonomy.

The empirical data was collected using the Distance Learning Experience Questionnaire, developed by the author of the study. It was partly based on previously used instruments on the subject, such as surveys on transactional distance and learner control by Bischoff et al. (1996), Cheng (2001), Baynton (1992) and Ramanau (2004) and course experience questionnaire adapted by Richardson and Woodley (2001) to distance learning settings.

The instrument comprised of a total of 28 closed self-report items on a 7-point Likert scale. The interaction and learner autonomy sections dealt with key dimensions of the constructs under study and their aspects – learner-learner, learner-tutor and learner-content interaction, learner control and learner independence. The questionnaire was subject to expert review and pilot testing on a sample of learners with characteristics similar to that of the target group. Cronbach's alpha results for the five key scales were at the appropriate level in both samples – from .69 to .85. Factor analysis revealed 5 main factors roughly corresponding to the questionnaire scales.

Institutional and course contexts

The sample of the present study included students at the Open University of the United Kingdom and at LINK, International Institute of Management in Russia. Both groups of learners studied on a postgraduate management course, designed by the Open University Business School and delivered in a distance mode over the course of 12 months. Although LINK had the right to change up to 25 percent of course content, both groups of students used very similar course materials and instructional media. Most instruction was focused on students' independent work with course materials with monthly face-to-face tutorials and regular online discussions. Although the two institutions used different online conferencing systems, both made use of the course website to provide access to various electronic resources, including the course calendar and a wealth of external resources on the Internet. In the UK the course was taught in English by UK-based Open University tutors. In Russia the language of instruction was Russian and students used Russian translations of course textbooks. Both groups of learners were regularly assessed by TMAs (tutor-marked assignments), submitted electronically via electronic TMA system or by e-mail. Students received feedback on their work and progress on the course from their tutor in the written form.

Sample Description and Descriptive Statistics

The questionnaires were distributed to samples of learners in both countries in spring and autumn 2005. The UK respondents received and returned the questionnaires by post and over the Internet, while the Russian participants completed them in before or after the tutorials or at residential schools in Korolev, Moscow Region. A total of 158 UK and 125 Russian respondents returned the questionnaires. The response rates for the UK sample were 39.5 percent for both postal and electronic versions of the survey and differences between them were not statistically significant.

The participants represented all 11 Open University regional centres in England and 12 LINK regional centres in the Russian Federation. Regional distribution varied significantly in the two

samples – only 27 percent of British students were based in London and the South East, while 60 percent of Russian participants were registered with regional centres in Moscow and the Moscow Region. In general, Russian students were younger than their UK counterparts with mean age for the group of 34.9 years of age as opposed to 37.6 in a sample of UK-based students. The percent of men was slightly higher in the Russian sample – 61.4 as compared to 58.2 percent in the British sample.

Frequency and Preferred Methods of Interaction

Before exploring the differences in student views on various facets of interaction and learner autonomy data on frequency of interaction and preferred methods of interaction were analysed. The results of Mann U-Whitney test showed that Russian learners reported more frequent learner – tutor interaction (U = 6176, z = - 2.406, p = 0.016) than their peers in the UK, while the UK respondents reported more frequent interaction with course content (U = 44408.5, z = - 5.632, p < 0.001). There were no significant differences in reported frequency of learner – learner interaction (U = 6622.5, z = - 1.241, p – n.s.).

Students from both countries preferred different methods of contact between one another (U = 5043.5, z = - 4.369, p < 0.001). 48.5 of Russian respondents preferred face-to-face communication with other students compared to only 29.1 students in the British sample. 8.1 of Russian students as compared to 2.0 percent of British learners preferred telephone to contact other students. While around a quarter of students in each sample named e-mail as their preferred method of contact, UK students were more likely to use the Internet in communicating with their peers – 41.2 as opposed to 18.2 percent in the Russian sample. Differences in the preferred method of learner – tutor contact were not statistically significant (U = 6539, z = - 1.384 p - n.s.), although slightly higher proportion of Russian students relied on more traditional methods of contact (face-to-face and telephone) and British respondents were more likely to use the Web. 8 pairs of associations in the Russian sample and 5 - in the UK sample proved to be non-significant.

Perceptions of Dialogue and Learner Autonomy

Because sample sizes were unequal Mann U – Whitney test rather than one-way ANOVA was chosen for investigating differences in perceptions of learning across the two groups. The means for each scale were obtained through calculating the mean across its items. This was followed by Mann U-Whitney test of association between perceptions of the three types of dialogue, learner control and learner independence as dependent variables and membership in one of the two cultural groups as a factor. In addition to that, correlation analysis was used to explore interrelationships between mean scale scores of learner autonomy and interaction.

In line with the findings on the frequency of different types of interaction, their perceived importance also differed across the two cultural groups in question. UK students, who reported more frequent learner – content interaction, reported less reliance on interaction with content than learners in Russia (U = 6312, z = -2.020, p = 0.043). While there were few differences between the two groups under study in reported frequency of learner – learner interaction UK students relied on other learners in their studies to a greater extent than learners in the Russian group (U = 5989, z = -2.593, p = 0.01). On the other hand, while students in Russia reported more frequent interaction with their tutors, there were no significant differences in its perceived importance between them and students on the UK course ((U = 7384.5, z = -0.070, p – n.s.).

Cross-cultural differences in perceptions of learner independence and learner control were even more pronounced. UK respondents perceived themselves as more autonomous in their learning than students in Russia (U = 4067, z = - 5.880, p < 0.001), but Russia participants reported more control over their learning (U=5556, z = - 3.165, p = 0.002).

Finally, correlation analysis between three types of interaction, learner independence and learner control were carried out across both samples. Because the obtained dataset dealt with quasi interval data, a Spearman's rho (ρ), rather than Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient was chosen as more appropriate measure of the strength of relationship between the variables under investigation. Analysis of correlations indicated that direction and strength of the correlations between learner perceptions of dialogue and autonomy were different across the two cultural groups. A significant positive correlation was discovered between learner autonomy and learner control over their learning ($\rho = 0.20$, $p = 0.043$) and learner control and learner - content interaction ($\rho = 0.26$, $p = 0.009$) in the Russian sample. Likewise, in the British sample with growth in perceived importance of interaction with content learners reported more control over their learning ($\rho = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), although the relationship between these two variables was somewhat stronger than among learners in Russia. In addition to that, there was significant positive interrelationship between learner autonomy and learner control ($\rho = 0.19$, $p = 0.23$), learner – tutor interaction and learner control ($\rho = 0.25$, $p = 0.002$), learner – content interaction ($\rho = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) and learner – learner interaction ($\rho = 0.33$, $p = 0.009$) in the sample of British students.

Discussion

The present study sheds more light on both the nature of cross-cultural differences in distance course delivery and interrelationships between learner perceptions of interaction and learner autonomy. Apparently, there are serious limitations to generalisability of its findings – the instrument chosen for the study is yet to prove its validity, particularly its Russian version, which was only administered on one occasion. The participants had a limited choice of response categories and although a separate section on open-ended comments was used, very few participants (particularly among the LINK students) made any verbatim comments. Moreover, it is very difficult to establish whether it was cultural differences between the two groups of learners or differences in surveying conditions and types of instrument administration that contributed most to differences in responses. Even if culture were to make an impact on perceptions of distance learning, it was not possible under the constraints of the present study to establish which of its dimensions shaped learner experiences.

Institutional differences between the Open University and LINK contribute to the complexity of analysis. Despite the fact that both groups of learners were registered with the Open University in the United Kingdom, their recruitment, tuition and tutorial support were organised by independent education providers that are part of the LINK distance learning network. Most of these institutions are either state universities to small for-profit providers and private higher education institutions (Schennikov, 2003). The amount of student support in bigger regional centres and smaller for-profit providers, which have a vested interest in student retention on the programme, might vary enormously.

According to results of data analysis, perceived levels of learner independence were positively related to both perceptions of learner control and learner – content interaction across the two groups of learners. Findings from this research are consistent with the findings of the author's previous study, in which positive association between learner – tutor and learner – learner interaction, learner – tutor – interaction and control, control and learner – content interaction was reported in a sample of 87 Open University students (Ramanau, 2004). It should be noted, however, that students from the previous study were enrolled into Web-based courses, while the curriculum of the present programme relied on the use of online media to a far lesser extent, which places limitations on comparability of the two contexts. However, as in earlier studies (Ramanau, 2004 and 2005) tutor-learner dialogue appeared to be central to learner perceptions of distance learning among British students, although present piece of research found no significant relationships between learner – content interaction and learner independence.

From the cross-cultural perspective, the findings of the present project seem to suggest that there were more differences than similarities in perceptions of the two groups of students. Statistically significant

differences were reported on four out of five dimensions of interaction and learner autonomy. It might be argued that learner perceptions of distance learning are shaped by cultural characteristics of students and the institutional context in which learning occurs. Students from the two countries seemed to organise their studies differently – while UK participants preferred to work with course materials more often, they relied on them less in their coursework than their Russian peers, placing more emphasis on interaction with other learners. Students from Russian tended to contact their tutors more frequently, but relied on interaction with content to a greater extent. British students saw themselves as autonomous in their learning, but with little control over the learning process. On the contrary, Russian students perceived themselves in control of their learning, but having less independence than UK learners.

Conclusions

To draw a conclusion, the extent of differences in learner perceptions of dialogue and learner autonomy that this study reveals questions the degree to which many theories of distance education are applicable to analysing distance learning experiences in cultural settings outside Western Europe and North America, where an overwhelming majority of them originated. Although most theorists in the area seem to acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural differences in distance learning the nature of their impact on learning experiences is yet to be investigated, particularly through empirical studies. Arguably, as is the case with cross-cultural studies in organisational research (Schaffer and Riordan, 2003), culture could be incorporated as one of the variables in future theoretical models of distance education to take full accounts of its effects on all aspects of teaching and learning at a distance. Moreover, future cross-cultural research in the area could seek to investigate the extent to which individual dimensions of culture (e.g. based on theoretical frameworks suggested by Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997)) shape learning experiences and behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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