

“Reflections on autonomous learning in a world of uncertainty”

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Summary

An individual who is a member of a society which is in constant change, must have the capacity of learning autonomously and be able to modify himself accordingly. This will permit him to integrate himself in any context. Therefore, teachers and teacher trainers, among them language professionals, must be aware that the development of autonomous learning depends on them, and that it is vital in the world we live in.

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Today, society is characterized by its constant change and the precariousness of knowledge, work and human relations which has grown in the last 50 years due to the advances in technology and communication (Karsenti and Larose, 2001). These advances have modified the way we live, work, and produce, and the way we communicate, shop and sell. Therefore, today it is imperative that we prepare ourselves and learn to live in this new environment (Cardona-Ossa, 2001).

Due to these changes, the needs of learning and preparation have been modified. Today, individuals are students their entire lives, they must be able to assimilate, interpret and act according to changes as they occur. Because of this,

it is necessary to go from a traditional education, which does not satisfy the particular learning needs of an individual, to a form of autonomous learning that will permit the individual to take control of his own learning. These innovations, together with their family customs and the values of society, have a particular impact on students, who contrary to their predecessors, have new needs and expectations which manifest themselves in demands for new environments of teaching and learning and of social interaction.

Due to this situation, a new pedagogical model, supported by informative means, and changes in roles in the process of teaching and learning is required. In this new outline, the systems of tutoring and the process of orientation in learning have more relevance. This new process is directed toward developing the competence in students which will allow them to learn in an autonomous and free manner, to learn to obtain good information, associate it, understand concepts, manage contents and materials in interactive spaces, achieve critical learning, diagnose specific needs and process them both individually and as a group. This way each student achieves his own autonomy and passes from being the presenter to participant of his own knowledge, and to depend less on memory learning and more on autonomous learning, and values based on flexibility and own effort (Pardo, 2001). Being autonomy one of the most important processes of self-learning, the need for teachers who support the development of competences of reflection, interpretation, argumentation and proposition, as fundamental competences in the process of problem solution, conflicts and decision taking is required (Cardona-Ossa, 2001).

In this scenario, universities must go beyond training their students and teachers in the use of new technologies, and should have as a goal to prepare their students in study planning strategies, so that they may interact in autonomous learning environments, becoming responsible for their own learning (European Report, 2000) and as a consequence, give the students the opportunity of using different forms to access information, to generate learning that will allow them to improve their life in their professional, family, social, work and health environments, as well as emotionally.

Acknowledging these global realities, teacher trainers, as in the case of Facultad de Idiomas, must assume the challenge of designing and implementing institutional practices directed toward shaping the professionals of the XXI century, who should be able to perform appropriately in this new context using the methodologies and tools that will permit them to learn in an accelerated learning and “dislearning” context, where knowledge is not important but the ability to acquire it, interpret it and utilize it. As a practical example, in language learning, autonomous learning centers have been created. These centers are a resource which reshapes the teachers’ role, offering multiple tools which permit to design learning environments which are varied and complex, since the reality is that students must discover and learn. It is here where the teacher accompanies students in the learning process, so that they develop their own strategies for learning, teaching them how to learn, thus liberating them.

Today, it is impossible to manage pedagogical innovations that do not include the concepts of curriculum flexibility, semi-schooled, open or distance instruction, autonomous learning, continuous education and life long learning. With distance education the control of the teaching-learning process is transferred to the individual; he decides what he needs to know and then makes the best use of the available learning resources. At the same time, continuous education becomes more important and adapts to the learners’ own desires and individual needs, motivating their own development. (Vargas-Hernández, 2000). The modification of models brings forward the change in teachers and students’ roles.

The student is autonomous in his learning, advances at his own rhythm and grows with his own learning. He also develops metacognitive processes, such as the knowledge of his own possibilities of success, taking into consideration his limitations, difficulties and his mechanisms of control which permit him to overcome communication barriers. (Fernández-González, 2000). In addition, the student must study and learn without the presence of the teacher; and be capable to apply effective techniques for the designing of schedules and the administration of his own time. He also should be able to identify his needs

and self evaluate himself, with the support of didactic adequately designed material. (Covarrubias-Guerrero, 2000).

The teacher passes from being the provider of knowledge to a tutorial, facilitator, motivator and consultant of learning role. His interaction with the student will no longer be to provide the knowledge he possesses, but to share with him his own experiences, support and tutor him in his process of learning, especially to stimulate and challenge his capacity to learn. At the same time, the teacher becomes a student as he develops strategies of autonomous learning which will permit him to grow as well (Alcázar Cano, 2000).

Aside from the benefits that autonomous learning offers, there is some resistance on behalf of the teachers and students to develop it. Exists a perception that this type of learning can cause isolation between students because it might avoid interaction. It is also thought that it is not possible to learn through studying or having the computer as a means of information.

Conclusion

Having the capacity to learn autonomously is another tool that the student has to face the rapid changes of society. Nevertheless, the knowledge and use of this tool will not be relevant if individuals do not transform their way of thinking and feeling. This transformation will allow them to have a different image of themselves and their relation with the society they belong to.

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