

Supporting Learner Driven Learning In Malaysian Higher Education

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Abstract : Enormous changes are taking place in the 21st century. The fourth industrial revolution termed as Industry 4.0 will definitely change the education landscape and will transform higher education. The internet, cloud computing and the advances in robotics are major game changers that have spurred big data, accessible content, ubiquitous learning, global learning and the Internet of Things. According to Fisk (2017), Education 4.0 is inevitable and among many things

INTRODUCTION

Learning is now becoming an activity that can happen anywhere, any place, anytime, anyhow, on any device, in any context, with anyone, facilitated by anybody and through any path. The idea of a university life attending lectures in a hall for the duration of three to four years before venturing out into the world is essentially dead. Colleges and universities are evolving from being the center of knowledge dissemination to supporters of students' education (Leef, 2016). The Malaysian higher education is also undergoing a transformation in response to the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world. Amidst all the looming changes, the Malaysian learners are given the opportunity to be involved in the provision of flexible curriculum that encompasses ubiquitous learning, work based learning, local and global mobility and many more. The Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025) put forward ten shifts to transform higher education. Global online learning is one of the shifts; universities have been harnessing the talent of academics to develop and offer massive open online courses that can connect the learners to their counterpart from across the world. The readiness of the learners to respond to the dynamism of this exciting era is however, still very much left unexplored.

The main objective of the chapter is to deliver an idea of learning that is self-driven and to situate it within the context of Malaysian learners. Voices of these learners extracted from a two-year classroom research are incorporated

in the chapter. Data were gathered from four groups of Malaysian students who were studying research methodology. They were given open ended questions on their views on meaningful and significant learning. In total, sixty eight (68) students provided qualitative data that were analyzed and themes generated. Figure 1 illustrates the themes generated. The learners find learning meaningful and significant when it is authentic and involves diverse, active processes of change that are both socially and personally relevant. The findings are used to design learning in the subsequent semesters and as previously mentioned, are also assimilated in this chapter.

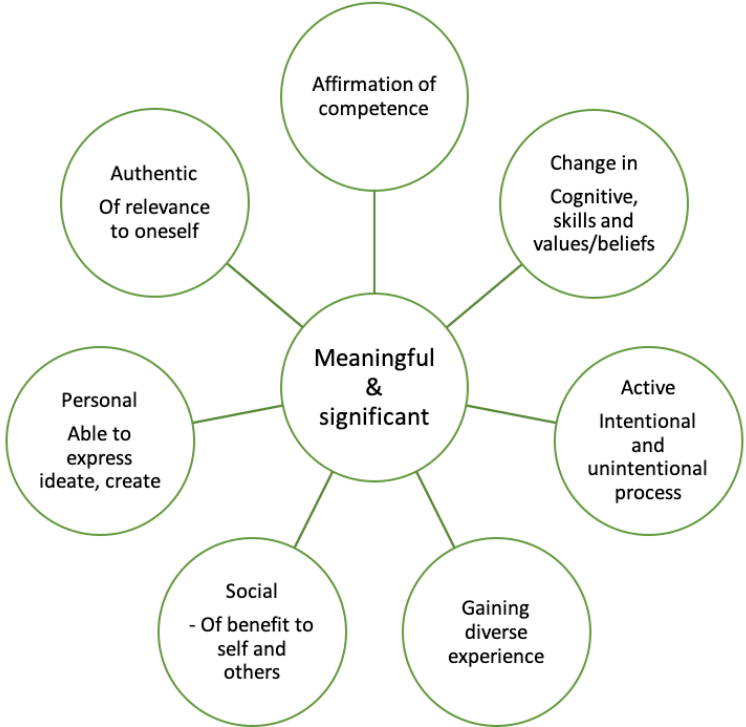


Figure 1: Generated Themes

A brief snapshot of the Malaysian learners is presented before advancing to the main sections of the chapter.

THE ASIAN LEARNERS

The attributes of the Malaysian learners vis a vis the Asian learners have been studied for many years. In a tribute to David Watkins, Springer publishes a Festschrift that deliberates on the many aspects of learning among Asian learners including motivation, efficacy and academic self-concept. The uniqueness of the Asian learners have been identified by Densten (2017), Yeung, Han and Lee (2016), Ho (2009), Gan (2009), Alias (2007) and Mcinerney (2006) to be

- 1) Teacher –reverence
- 2) Respect for knowledge
- 3) Lower self efficacy and self concept
- 4) Remain humble and avoid arrogance
- 5) Good at repetitive learning - Good at memorizing data
- 6) Seek perfection and affirmation of competence
- 7) Seek harmony
- 8) Cooperative – group work , relying on capable members

In particular, teacher reverence is very much apparent among the Asian learners.

In an online or distance learning environment, Sangra, Porto and Jung (2015), Nong (2013) and Jung (2012) found that the Asian learners tend to look for teacher support, lurk in silence and seldom initiate discussion. Questions are normally directed to the instructor and not to the group. Past experience showed that when facing difficulties with the course, the learners tend to send personal email to the instructor rather than discussing it in the group forum. The Asian learners value student-instructor interaction; this is aligned to the notion of respecting the ‘teacher. Asian learners were more comfortable in environments that had a strong, visible teacher presence. Wee and Quek (2014) found adult learners to be less ready for online environment due to their past learning experiences which were mostly teacher-centered environment.

The findings from later studies of Asian online learners have increasingly skewed to less dependent tendencies among the learners as depicted in Jung and Suzuki (2014) and Jung and Gunawerdana (2015). However, the shift

is at a slower pace and is not in tandem with the era of rapid change. The 21st century learning requires learners to communicate and collaborate and most importantly, become independent learners. Cultural traits should not inhibit or hold these learners back. They must be able to drive their own learning and be at par with other learners as they converge to a common global platform.

In the next section, the author will discuss learner driven learning and how it fits into the 21st century learning landscape.

LEARNER DRIVEN LEARNING

In 1999, Altbach and Peterson posited that higher education in the 21st century is about the broadening of a young person's cultural horizons, increasing their capacity to think and work globally, and the creation of opportunities for them to participate in making the world a less dangerous place. Their statement became a reference in many literature and is still very much relevant today. The 21st century is about the many opportunities to learn beyond the traditional classroom; it is about the young person's driving his or her own learning and development.

In essence, learning entails the changes that take place when the learner interacts with the content and gain experiences in a learning environment whereby the instructor and peers actively interact. These learning outcomes may be cognitive, psychomotor and affective; the main idea is to make sense of the world he or she lives in. Findings from a qualitative study done over four semesters with different groups of learners show that learners see learning as meaningful when there are reciprocal interactions between the learners, peers and instructors, applications to their real life, relevance to what is 'close to their heart' and spaces where they can ideate and create. A student wrote

“Meaningful learning to me is when learning activities relate with ICT because it gives me a space for expressing my own ideas, designs and I can create”..

Another stated

“...look out for progress other than the final product, start to trust on

what (the learners) are doing (to learn). What's more important than truth and freedom?"

These are instances when students are more driven towards meaningful process, ownership and expression of self. These are attributes that can be expected from many other 21st century learners.

Figure 2 below illustrates basic dimensions that must be duly scrutinized to ensure learning happens. The self includes psychological aspects of grit, attitude, motivation, drive, interest and many more that are beyond the limit of discussion in this chapter.

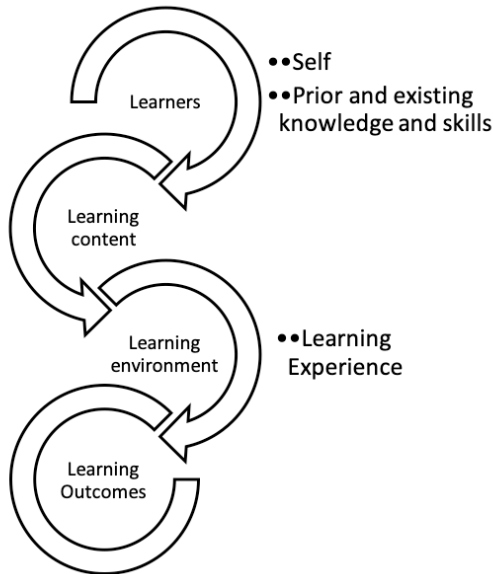


Figure 2: Basic Dimensions

In learner driven learning, the learner charts his or her learning path and orchestrates his or her learning by pacing themselves. Watkins (2009) wrote:

"We have an idea for a destination – perhaps a bit of a map of the territory; we have hands on the wheel, steering – making decisions as the journey unfolds; and all this is crucially related to the core process of noticing how it's going and how that relates to where we want to be"
(Watkins, *School Leadership Today*, 2009)

Learner driven learning thus, means planning, monitoring, and reflecting and knowing what one wants out of learning. How is learner driven learning different from learner centred learning and self-directed learning? All three terms have psychological connotations i.e the self. Learner driven learning however is more than just placing the student at the centre or the student ability to direct his or her learning, Learner driven learning requires the motivation, the internal drive to initiate and to propel one's learning into a more personalized space and at a personal pace. As stipulated by Watkins (2012), when learners drive their own learning, it leads to greater engagement and intrinsic motivation for them to want to learn. They set a higher challenge for themselves, they evaluate their own work, and they have better problem-solving skills.

Bray and McClaskey (2013) build on personalization as an instance where the learner drives his or her own learning and connects learning with interests, passions, and aspirations. In addition, this learner employs assessment as learning. As a person who drives his or her own learning, the learner further self-directs and self-regulates his or her learning. He or she has a voice and values choices about his or her learning. Bray and McClaskey (2013) developed several continuums to illustrate how learners move from teacher centered to learner centered and to learner driven. Continuum of ownership is one of them. In the depiction of this continuum, a learner is seen to move from compliance to autonomy.

How then is learner driven or student driven learning relevant in the new era? The learners in the post 2020 must not be overwhelmed with the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world, so much so they would not know what to do. They must be able to respond positively to change, to leverage on technology to apprehend the uncertainties and keep them posted. Lifelong and life wide learning become indisputably important. Adhering to a set of rigid syllabi and learning within the confines of time and space will actually be debilitating for a learner in a VUCA world. The learner must thus, take charge.

As advocated by Glatter, Deruy and Wong (2016), the 21st century classroom is to align the core of new learning models, which are the principles of student agency, flexibility and choice. This echoes well with learner driven learning where agency is seen as the crux of the learner's ability to be

successful in the 21st century learning environment.

The Notion of Learner Agency

Learner agency refers to the actions learners can and do to influence their learning (Annan, 2016). This relates to the control, autonomy, and power that a learner experiences in learning circumstances. That agency is the opposite of helplessness; it is the “capacity and propensity to take a purposeful initiative”. He further explained that young people tend to seek meaning and act with purpose in order to attain their desired conditions in not only their own but also others’ lives. Hence, they “do not respond passively to their circumstances” as someone with high levels of agency (Ark, 2005).

Agency as the ability to act with initiative and effect in a socially constructed world was earlier suggested by Hunter and Cooke (2007). The idea of social interaction is also apparent in a report by Klemencic, Bergan and Primožic (2015) who describe agency as the quality of students’ self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment that encompasses variable notions of power and will.

The learner acts as his or her own agent and is not independent of their environment. Clark and Taylor (2017) put forward a framework that situates learner agency as emerging internally with the learners own set of beliefs and ambitions but the learner’s external influences and relative practices play contribute to learner agency. The challenge is however to convince the learners that they are actually capable of learning anything they want to. Since learner agency differs at different stages, support and regulation become necessary. Hence, the learning environment that includes the peers and the instructors is significantly important.

Learner Voice and Choice

Learner voice and choice are two other elements that are crucial for the personalization of learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2013). Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006) define giving the learners voice as by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to empower learners. Giving the learners voice also includes respecting everyone’s say,

considering their perspectives and ideas of learners, taking risks, sharing, listening, engaging and working together in partnership (Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006, p.8).

The UK government espouses providers to improve their teaching, learning and assessment, by drawing fully on learners' views about the teaching, learning and assessment that they receive to inform self-assessment and improvement actions (Government of UK report, 2015). For a learner to drive his or her own learning, the opportunity to be heard and to be able to offer their perspectives or even solutions to their own learning problem will be a tremendous plus.

A rigid learning scheme and a pre-determined schedule will not associate well with the notion of voice and LDL. Thus flexibility and choices become essential. By having alternatives and options, the learner's learning styles and preferences are also supported.

In relation to the preceding discussion, a heutagogical approach is seen appropriate to sustain the development of learner capacity and capability with the goal of producing learners who are well-prepared for the complexities of today's workplace (Blaschke, 2012). Heutagogy is self-determined learning where learners serve as "the major agent in their own learning, which occurs as a result of personal experiences" (Hase & Kenyon, 2007, p. 112). This means moving from a pedagogic model of learning (teacher-focused) toward andragogic and ultimately heutagogic model of learning. It is also in tandem with what the learners view as meaningful and significant learning. However, due to the the prior experience of the Malaysian learners and learners being independent at different paces, supporting the learners cognitively, metacognitively and affectively is pertinent.

The next section will focus on scaffolding, a process where support is made available to the learners and removed as they become fully capable of driving their own learning.

SCAFFOLDING TOWARDS LEARNER DRIVEN LEARNING

The concept of scaffolding is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of assisted learning and learning potential as described by the zone of proximal development. The term scaffolding however, was introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to mean tutoring or other assistance provided in a learning setting to assist students with attaining levels of understanding impossible for them to achieve without assistance. The idea of scaffolding is similar to having structures erected alongside buildings to support construction workers and later removed when the building is completed. Scaffolding involves providing learners with more structure during the early stages of a new learning venture and gradually turning responsibility over to them as they become independent in their learning environment. A scaffold bridges the gap between what students can do on their own and what students can do with guidance from others.

Scaffolding is thus, a process in which a teacher/instructor/facilitator supports students cognitively, motivationally or emotionally while helping them to further develop independence and self-direction.

Scaffolding Towards LDL

Many studies concurred on the necessity of scaffolds in a learner centred learning environment (Winnips, 2001; McMahan, 2002; Brush & Saye, 2002; Boyer & Maher, 2004; Bárcena & Read, 2004; Alias, 2007; Sharma & Hannafin, 2007; Livengood, Lewallen, Leatherman & Maxwell, 2012; Stecklein, 2014). As LDL is very much an extension of learner centered learning, scaffolding is important to provide clear directions, purpose and expectations. Just as driving on a road, the learner requires a map and be certain of his/her destination.

There are many aspects to be considered when developing scaffolds to move learners towards self-driven learning. In order to provide cognitive, metacognitive and affective or motivational scaffolds, the learning environment must first be designed to be conducive for nurturing agency, and giving voice and choices.

Fundamentally, the function of the learning environment is to support personalized learning in a connected world. It must be designed with

technology tools, affordances and a wide range of resources that encourage the setting up of learning spaces that promotes access and leisure of learning. Nevertheless, the first thing to do is to ensure a safe and inclusive environment.

Setting A Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment

The instructor plays a pivotal role in assuring the learners that they have what it takes to be successful. Orientating the learners to the course in an emphatic manner is an effective way of showing one's early support. Technology makes it effortless as early words of encouragement are easily posted, shared and may remain in the learning platform until the end of the course. Acknowledging the diversity of the group by providing links to pre requisites (material, courses etc.) is a step easily taken so no one is left behind. Pacing oneself is an essential process that requires an inclusive environment. A fifty year old learner who came back to study after many years leaving college was initially apprehensive but an inclusive environment led her to succeed. At the end of the semester, she described her experience in her blog.

... learning has been fun even though I am decades older than my coursemates... (Anna, Edu702)

Empathy, praise and attention experienced in the learning community instigates a sense of belonging where a group specific inclusion is felt. In addition, a sense of relatedness is experienced when learners have enough information, awareness of activities and security in relationships with their peers. Ultimately, a sense of connectedness is apparent as learners share, and work together in tandem. Once a safe and inclusive environment that connects learners, instructors and resources is in place, scaffolding towards learner driven learning becomes easy.

Below are scaffolding processes that have proven effective by the author in her many years of facilitating online learning and expounding learner driven learning. Each of the process is supported by the underlying principles of agency, voice and choice.

Scaffolding From Instructor Reverence To Capturing Learner Voice

This is a challenging task in the Malaysian education scenario. Being part of an Eastern culture that exudes authority and very much a power-distance culture, moving from instructor reverence is quite a task. Nonetheless, it can be done by inviting more participation from the learners. An example is a move from teacher led to negotiation of tasks and activities by the learners. Learners are found to be receptive to the idea of providing their ideas and completing tasks they choose as long as the outcomes remain the same. In this case, the lecturer or instructor must first be ready to slowly surrender his or her traditional role.

Scaffolding from instructor centric to learner centric tasks

To support LDL, an instructor or a teacher needs to envisage learner centered teaching as the mainstay of his or her teaching. Learners have different styles and preferences. They come in with different levels of knowledge and varied experiences. The idea of outcomes to be achieved must precede uniformity of tasks or assignments. For example, a video proposal in contrast to a written proposal is more appealing to visual learners.

Scaffolding from textbook learning to relevant and authentic learning

This follows the above recommendation. Relevance is key in a learner driven learning environment. By focusing on real world complex problems, learners are more driven towards finding solutions and understanding the implications on theirs and other people's lives. This also allows the learners to delve into relevant experiences and more often than not, satisfies their intrinsic needs or goals. A student narrated,

..learning is meaningful when when I acquire knowledge that i am most passionate about, something that is super personal, close to my heart and will weigh significant impact - not only directly to me but also will benefit my family, friends.. (Maria, Edu 702)

Scaffolding from transmission of content to learner created content

Content is everywhere. Learning is not about taking down notes from a learned person in a physical space at a specific time anymore. Making content and facts discoverable rather than transmitted is a tactic that eventually leads to the learner being more participative in his or her learning. Students initiating a debate or student led discussions are applicable measures to support learner agency. As learners curate and synthesize their knowledge, they are able to propose and construct new content – a valuable skill needed in the 21st century. For instance, learners who develop portfolios and Wikis tend to be more reflective; their ability to scrutinize existing practices and project new ideas is apparent (Zubizaretta, 2008; Corley & Zubizaretta, 2012; Burns & Buza, 2016)

Scaffolding from disciplining to regulating

A notable strategy to support learners to drive their own learning is to move from the traditional classroom disciplining to regulating learning. Setting class attendance requirement for instance, will soon be unheard of. Once learning outcomes are agreeable to the learners, regulating learning may include

- a. Tracking and reminding
- b. Giving marks for participation
- c. Giving freedom to initiate
- d. Providing individual feedback
- e. Allowing learners to showcase
- f. Rewarding competence

An important aspect to consider is regulation of motivation (Alias, 2007). This requires an in-depth discussion and is not within the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that for a learner to sustain his or her motivation to learn, the preceding listed items plus effort such as environmental restructuring is imperative.

Scaffolding from passive classroom learning to active, learning in a community

A constructivist approach that requires learners to be more active such as problem based and project based will lead them to be more independent of the instructor while engaging them to work as part of a team. These and other forms of active learning in a community would be a potential formula for learner driven learning. These types of learning are less effective when confined to a classroom or strictly following a class schedule. A simple example is to flip and make learning seamless. Learners are given group tasks to complete before regrouping them in an active class session. Another option is to link the learners to other learners in different parts of the world by enrolling them in a global learning platform. Wrapping a course around a MOOC will provide an initial structure. As learners become more confident, they will connect to other learners by participating in other MOOC as well. They will be connected to multiple resources and experts.

The table 1 below summarizes the proposed scaffolding processes in relation to the three elements that frames learner driven learning.

Table 1: Proposed Scaffolding Processes

	Scaffolding	Elements supported
Set a safe and inclusive learning environment	From instructor reverence to capturing learner voice	Voice Choice
	From instructor centric to learner centric tasks	Agency Choice
	From textbook learning to relevant and authentic learning	Agency
	From transmission of content to learner created content	Voice Choice
	From disciplining to regulating	Agency
	From passive classroom learning to active, learning in a community	Agency Voice Choice

IMPLICATIONS

An obvious implication of LDL is the learning assessment. Though not directly treated in this chapter, moving from standardized assessments to authentic assessment is extremely vital in order for LDL to materialize. There must be a mix of assessment for learning, assessment as learning and assessment on learning to support the processes discussed in the preceding section.

The biggest implication of LDL is undoubtedly, a shift in mindset, especially among the educators, lecturers or instructors as we are commonly called. Roles must be varied and at times, reversed. Playing multiple roles from an instructor to a designer to a co-learner and then to a curator and a corroborator would be the appropriate thing to do rather than relinquishing all traditional roles at the same time. The learners still require ‘a sign on the road’ or a Waze as they maneuver and drive their own learning. The basic idea of ‘teaching in the 21st century is to inspire learner driven learning. Ultimately the students will drive on their own, not haphazardly but with a comfortable velocity (with magnitude and direction) and at times, accelerating where and when they see necessary.

CONCLUSION

The 21st century learners are expected to be self-driven learners who among other things, are thinkers, inquirers, communicators, and risk-takers. They are also likely to be reflective and balanced individuals who are ethical and have essential fluencies such as creativity and collaborative team-work skills. With the rapid technological advances, changes are volatile and at most times, uncertain. Major disruptions are taking place in the way one learns and acquires skills. The main take away from the chapter is the need for learner driven learning (LDL) in a VUCA world, and scaffolding towards LDL in a safe and inclusive learning environment. Based on research-related evidences, proven practices and the author’s experience accumulated over the last seven years, the chapter promulgates that for learners to drive their own learning, they require the motivation and the internal drive to initiate. Learner agency, voice and choice are the mainstay of LDL. It is important to support the learners in strategizing their learning as a meaningful process

in a more personalized space and at a personal pace. Scaffolding from a traditional instructor centric to a learner centric approach is hence, pertinent especially in terms of delivery of content and roles of both the learner and the instructor.

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