CONSTRUCTING AUTONOMY ORIENTED NETWORK
LEARNING MECHANISM OF GENERATION Y

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Abstract

Autonomy Oriented Education (AOE) is a common focus of academia and business community. In this paper, based on the successful experience in the promotion of Autonomy Oriented Education, we present the background, concept, empowerment mechanisms, psychological support, as well as practical applications of AOE in Europe, and conclude relevant recommendations of constructing autonomy oriented network learning mechanism of domestic Generation Y.

Key words: Autonomy Oriented Education, Autonomous learning, Generation Y
1. INTRODUCTION

Autonomy Oriented Education (AOE) has been developed in the implementation process of the humanistic value of teaching for nearly two decades. This educational philosophy was all the rage in Europe, and brought tremendous changes to the field of education throughout Europe. Today, with the development of the concept of post-modernism, and the learning problems of new generation, autonomous learning has been brought to the screen of history. AOE applications are very worthwhile for us to explore and to study.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTS OF AOE

AOE is an educational framework-theory developed by scholars, such as Prof. Aviram, Emmanuel Blanchard and Claude Frasson (Aviram, 1993, 2000; Aviram, 1998; Blanchard & Markus, 2004), based on the concept of Autonomy, as conceived by various Humanist thinkers such as J. S. Mill in the 19th century and Rogers (Mill, 1999; Rogers, 1969), Masslow (H, 1970) and later generations of Humanist Psychologists in the 20th and 21st centuries and inspired by Humanistic thinkers such as Goethe, Schiller, Herder and W. V. Humboldt. It incorporates and is validated by state-of-the-art studies, theories and methodologies in cognitive psychology and learning theory and supplemented by a social component, derived from J. S. Mill's concept of liberal-democratic society and Karl Popper's notion of Open Society, i.e., the concept of Dialogical Belonging, that embed the individual self-development process in social/communal context.

AOE were first developed and implemented between 1993 and 1997 in a future oriented project named “School as a Communication Center” by Israeli Ministry of Education and CFE. It was applied and developed in Today’s Stories project (1998-2001), and further applied in the project of CFE. All the above projects are specific implementations of AOE. They have been applied to specific target populations with certain age and certain characteristics. It becomes popular in the field of education in Europe.

AOE pursues the development of belonging and autonomy in individual. Relying on the reflective experimental processes which combine with humanistic tradition, AOE was transformed into an actual process which aimed at developmental education or empowerment process, with the support offered by ICT modes, and enhanced the basic values in young people and adults as well.

2.1 AOE functionality

AOE serves as a protective mechanism against the dangers of the postmodern era through empowerment. Empowerment is a broad term. It has been applied to many fields of social sciences, as well as different issues. It is interesting that empowerment is a timeless topic in tons of management literatures (Moattari et al., 2012; Rhodes, 1999).

AOE approach is essentially close to the tradition of experiential learning. It emphasizes the personal experience, reflection processes and the responsibility over learning of learners. AOE focuses on positive capabilities of the inward individual and the enabling factors, other than those factors preventing self-actualization and self-mastery.

The postmodern era is an era full of confusion (Stanley, 1992). People were flooded with too much information and stimuli while freedom is too much for individual. The individuals may seek approaches to escape this freedom, rather than dealing with it in a healthy and effective way. When people feel that they are unable to deal with their freedom, and have no idea how to choose appropriate freedom, they may turn to pure self-entertainment. They may go to cinema, enjoy music, watch television, and indulge in party. These above leisure activities cannot add any
meaningful stuff to their lives, but the activities can make them “kill time”. In other words, individuals, in order to get rid of freedom and their true selves, may attend meaningless activities.

Against negative effects of the postmodern era, AOE can serve as an empowerment mechanism that is a framework of individual learner. AOE seeks to build a strong inner focus of strength within an individual. An autonomous individual follows the principles of AOE, and they know what they want and what they need. If a person with a strong self-awareness faces lots of information and changes, they could handle the situation, and become less vulnerable as well. An autonomous person knows how to face difficulties and enrich his/her life.

An autonomous person can also regulate their emotions well. They could adjust themselves to adapt to the relevant reality. An autonomous person is more likely to deal well with confusions they face (as many people nowadays feel), adjust their emotions, try to solve the emotion problems, and not to be overwhelmed by the issues.

Another point is that an autonomous person is less likely to feel the emptiness. They are more capable of filling themselves with meaningful stuff and productive contents. They could direct the activities accordingly.

2.2 Psychological Support of the AOE

The principles and suggested practices of AOE empowerment embody a methodology for achieving psychological empowerment of learners. The aim of AOE empowerment is to enable a person to experience a more satisfying life. The objective of AOE empowerment is to identify the obstacles that prevent individuals from achieving their goals, hence autonomous self-actualization and satisfaction subsequently help individual to overcome the obstacles.

According to AOE, authenticity and self-direction are the two components of autonomy. Authenticity means an individual’s ability to know clearly about their own interests, values, performance styles, and intelligences. They can adapt these to one another, and are willing to express their thoughts and specific characteristics in daily life. “Self-direction” indicates an individual’s ability to identify goals and make action-plans based on their actual situation, as well as implementing the plans. In fact, the most important factors are an individual’s rationality that is necessary for self-knowledge, and emotional maturity that is necessary for their realization.

Belonging is perceived as an individual's conception of themselves while they are being dialogically involved with some social groups. AOE seeks to develop a sense of dialogical belonging. The dialogical belonging is referred to a person’s need in terms of feeling part of a group, while ensuring that the group supports their autonomy via dialogue.

As described above, autonomy and dialogical belonging are the main elements of AOE. The following section will present the importance of Autonomy. The specific components of Autonomy, such as self-knowledge, self-direction, and self-efficacy, will be elaborated, as well as the importance of dialogical belonging.

2.2.1 Self-knowledge

To achieve self, a person has to know a true himself/herself. This is what self-knowledge means exactly. AOE holds the belief that knowing one’s self is a key point to an individual’s ability for self-fulfilment, consequently for personal autonomy, development and life satisfaction. Furthermore, AOE claims that knowing oneself is a continuing on-going active-reflective process, and this leads to the necessity of self-knowledge.

The basic premise of the view of self-knowledge is that when we want to figure out how we should live from the most basic aspects, such as relationships, and career to even more
meaningless questions, such as deciding where we should live, we have to rely on the estimation and cognition we have at the moment of who we are. Just as the other kinds of knowledge, self-knowledge is based on hypotheses or estimations. During the meandering life, many individuals could not take into account the most crucial element of self-awareness. They have to pay extremely high price in having to live on frustrated, alienated, and meaningless lives because of their ignorance.

AOE does not concern whether people ever know enough about themselves or not. Rather, the question AOE concerns is - do people know enough about themselves to determine the course of their life and make choices in a best possible way for them? In other words, to lead an intentional and meaningful life, an individual needs to know enough about their capacities, interests, and performance styles. After all, self-knowledge focuses on what the three questions ask: What do I want to do? What Can I do? How do I prefer going about things?

These questions and the search for their answers are the most basic prerequisites for an autonomous, meaningful and satisfying life. Self-knowledge is the first and necessary component, but it is insufficient for autonomous action as it also requires self-direction and self-efficacy.

2.2.2 Self-direction

Self-knowledge is the condition for self-direction. AOE claims that along with self-knowledge and self-efficacy, self-direction is a necessary, indispensable, and integral part of autonomy. Self-direction means they should know how to navigate themselves in an on-going manner to attain the goals as long as a person knows their interests and capabilities. Through self-direction, when individuals are pursuing their goals, they could regulate their thinking and actions in accordance with their own characteristics (capacities, performance styles and interests) and the external reality in which they live.

The process of self-direction is as the following five main steps:

- Setting of individual ideal goals stemming from Self-Knowledge
- Analysis of the relevant reality (relevant to the ideal goals)
- Setting of individual realistic goals stemming from an integration of the two steps above
- Formation of a ‘life plan’ for the fulfillment of the above goals.
- Implementation of the plan based on a permanent feedback loop

The self-direction process is on-going and spiralling. Rational thoughts combined with emotional intelligence are central components in this process. The knowledge that an individual person develops through the use of rational thinking strategies (i.e. such as analysis, integration, reaching conclusions, matching means to objectives and making plans) while identifying and managing relevant emotions, can be applied as the basis for setting realistic goals and planning actions necessary and coping with the possibilities one is liable to encounter.

2.2.3 Self-Efficacy

AOE maintains that if individuals want to be autonomous, they must have a certain degree of self-efficacy. Self-Efficacy is based on the notion that what individuals believe, think and feel could inevitably influence the way they behave. Bandura has explained that “Self-efficacy is not the skills one has but rather one's judgment of what one can do with those skills.” The AOE view partially relies on Bandura’s understanding of self-efficacy. AOE adopts the importance of self-efficacy in goal attainment, while adding the significance of deciding which goals to attain, and points out that if only personal goal matched the real person (capacity, interest and consistent performance style), could self-efficacy impact result.

Self-Efficacy explains why people with similar knowledge and skills have different behaviour. It is individuals’ belief in their own intelligence and capabilities that most influences the final
outcome. Achieving personal fulfilment by pursuing our personal goal requires a certain level of self-efficacy. Numerous studies have shown that a person who believes they can carry out the action needed for a certain goal is more likely to actually achieve than a person who lacks that belief. Furthermore, individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to use rational thinking when approaching problem solving.

It has been shown that the children with stronger self-efficacy beliefs in math could solve problems more efficiently, dissolve faulty strategies more quickly, and rework more problems they failed. Regardless of cognitive ability, the children with stronger self-efficacy could manage time better, solve problems more successfully. They are more persistent, more focused, and less likely to reject correct solutions without thinking.

Self-Efficacy influences behavior in following four ways:
- making choices – people will try to avoid tasks they are not confident in, and they are likely to engage in tasks they feel competent in
- how much effort they will expend
- how long they will persevere when facing challenge
- when individuals are handling tasks, the degree of anxiety or confidence they feel – people with low self-efficacy may regard tasks as more difficult than the tasks actually are and approach the tasks with feelings of anxiety and stress, while individuals with high self-efficacy will feel tranquil and confident when approaching the tasks.

The above three components of autonomy are indispensable for AOE, while they are independent elements in themselves, also rely on the other and complement each other.

2.2.4 Dialogical Belonging

While today’s individual can transcend the boundaries of language and geography to contact others with more and easier ways, but the truth is that they have less access to actual groups, such as religious communities, neighbourhoods or peers bounded by similar or shared culture and geography. Belonging has long been recognized as a basic human need that individuals strive to fulfil. From our earliest attachment to our mothers, to the peer groups we join as adolescents, and to the different affiliations we have as adults, our self-sense depends on the groups to which we belong. The concept of belonging can be referred to by different names (relatedness, attachment, connection, communion, etc.), but no matter the term used or the theory behind the term, all put emphasis on the importance of the interpersonal as a human need and central to well-being. Belonging, beyond being a need in itself, may also be a source of security, comfort, and self-esteem.

We can conceptualize belonging in three levels: interpersonal, group, and collective level.
- Interpersonal Level – This level is similar to the belonging we feel with a partner, a close friend or a family member. It pertains to the acceptance and warmth we receive from those people who are close to us.
- Group Level – This level is associated with some small groups, this “group” may refer to a group of peers (friends, fellow students, co-workers etc.), or groups based on similar characteristics or interests (such as learning group, volunteer group, etc.).
- Collective Level – This level is associated with ethnic, cultural and national belonging. It is more comprehensive than international and group level.

AOE mainly focuses on group level and strives to fulfil three basic goals concerning dialogical belonging:
- Know and understand dialogical belonging and its components (group identity, individual self-expression, etc.). This includes the importance of dialogical belonging and the
difficulties in achieving it in today’s society, as well as the negative effects of group belonging which is not dialogical.

- Be committed and strive to develop dialogical belonging.
- Develop the relevant abilities to enhance one’s dialogical belonging.

The dialogical belonging of a psychological aspect is a personal characteristic of the three qualities above. The dialogical belonging can also be regarded as social aspect.

3. **PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF AOE THEORY IN EUROPE**

In Israel education field, the concept of constructivist is widely adopted (Aviram, 2000). Israel researchers have explored and developed a lot about constructivist theory. Constructivist has been used in children education and teacher training program. AOE theory is a post-constructivist theory expanding constructivist theory and balancing the advantages and disadvantages of constructivist. Constructivist theory focuses on solving the most critical problem in learning process while AOE theory focuses on different methods to solve the problem. For instance, AOE emphasizes the meaning of learning process, as well as aiming at enhancing learners’ interest. Thus, AOE is called “Post-Constructivist Paradigm”. The most typical example about AOE adoption is “Today’s Story Project” supported by European intelligence project from 1998 to 2001. The objective of this project is to develop new information technologies to support the learning process of the children in 4-8 years old. The project was based on the principles of AOE theory. It created an interesting learning and developed context for children including various stakeholders, such as children, parents, and educators. This theory has been proven to be very useful through the experiments of two primary schools and several kindergartens.

“Today’s Story Project” covers four phases of education process. The first phase is activity stage. In this stage, children are in an open classroom and conduct their daily activities. The second phase is recording stage. In this stage, children and their guiders experience some meaningful activities together, and then are recorded. The third phase is narrating stage. Children independently sort their daily interesting things. Sometimes, guiders need to provide the children some help in this process. The third phase is self-examination stage and covers children’s self-examination of the whole process. It is done by children and educators together. Educators need to guide children to take the self-examination.

AOE provides various activities to stimulate the children to reflect and observe themselves based on their experiences. These reflective exercises can be grouped into four models as follows:

**Model 1:** Periodic and planned reflective activities: These activities are designed to develop reflectivity. It is a preliminary stage of inviting children “to tell stories” about their experiences. In this stage, children’s ability can be strengthened. This model can involve various techniques, for instance, using of documentary materials as stimulus for creating stories, or story-telling from memory and processing through dramatization via playback techniques.

**Model 2:** “Daily Meeting”: At the close of every activity day, children are invited to tell their experiences at the day and relate the experiences in a focused manner to AOE aspects. The instruction given to the children can be open, for example, “what did they do?”, “How did they feel that day?”, “What difficulties did they encounter?”, “What abilities did they come into play?”, and so on, or focused around a particular subject such as feelings, difficulties, or something new learned.

**Model 3:** Personal dialogues that the tutor conducts with children around questions such as, “Out of all the experiences I can choose during Today’s Stories time – What do I best like to do?”, “What corners don’t I usually choose?”, “Are there corners I haven’t tried at all?”, “Are there ones I participate in on a regular basis?”, “Do I want to operate my own corner?”, “What’s the
difference between operating a corner and participating in one?”, “How do I chose the corners in which I participate?”, “What kind of things do I learn during Today’s Stories time?”, “Did I learn something about myself, and if so – What?”.

Model 4: Unscheduled spontaneous reflexive discussions: These are conversations between an educator and a child or a group of children that develop spontaneously about a situation at hand. Discussion can focus on a rational analysis of a subject under observation, reflective observation of their behavior patterns and reactions of a certain situation, or the various feelings each senses from partners in a given situation.

The success of “Today’s Story Project” is mainly due to the following three reasons: First, the research is stemming from a daily life, rather than imposing upon the children. Second, during the project, children are able to select specific areas from their own lives and take the initiative to convey information to educators. Third, children can tell stories through their own perspectives. Through this project, educators could break through the shackles of rigid education mode subjected to the limitation of space and time.

4. COMBINING AOE THEORY AND E-LEARNING OF GENERATION Y

4.1 Generation Y and E-learning

Lancaster and Stillman (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002) conclude a historical perspective of Generation Y. This generation is composed of the last two decades of the 20th century. It is identified as technologically advanced and confident. The employees concern more about what their employer can do for them, rather than what they can do for their employer (Reilly, 2012). They seek a balance between work and personal life. They do not sacrifice their lives for work unlike the previous generations (Erickson, 2008). Some researches show that this generation has the following characteristics. They are personalized, market-oriented, entertained, international, and networking (Lan, 2007). In addition, they have totally different hobbies and interests, as well as self-awareness and self-consciousness. They pursue personalized liberation.

With the development of ICT, the Internet becomes an important part of Generation Y’s learning. As the Internet becomes a critical and indispensable tool of their learning process, E-learning of Generation Y becomes a hot topic of education field. It is significant to acknowledge that the quality of a learning process is a process of co-production between the learning-environment and a learner. It is not something as simple as being delivered to a learner by some e-learning providers (Ehlers, 2004). The effect of E-learning delivery is influenced by many factors which were studied academically. He also found there are 153 factors of subjective quality which form the basis of the empirical model. This paper focuses on improving the performance of Generation Y’s E-learning through enhancing personal autonomy.

4.2 Suggestions for Future E-learning Mechanism of Generation Y

Generation Y seriously emphasizes “self-centered”. Lots of research supports that self-learning context is more useful and performs better than target-guiding learning context for Generation Y. E-learning is the outcome of advanced technology development. It is also the future trend of learning. However, E-learning reduces students’ learning interests. In order to improve the performance of Generation Y’s learning, it is necessary to improve learner’s self-centered perception in E-learning process. In section 2, we have elaborated that AOE could serve an empowerment mechanism to realize the empowerment of individual learners. The process of
realizing self-knowledge, self-direction, and self-efficacy could help individuals to realize themselves, and the feeling of dialogical belonging could support autonomy.

Based on the above discussion, we propose to combine the AOE theory with the E-learning for the Generation Y education. We give the following suggestions for constructing E-learning mechanism for Generation Y.

- E-learning of Generation Y should combine the traditional learning with E-learning. E-learning is only a support in this process. Mentors play a key part in students’ learning process. They need to guide and manage the whole learning work. Some researchers found that tutor support is extremely important for learners in general (Ehlers, 2004), and the research result shows that in a survey sample, 74.4% to 97.7% of the learners regarded tutors’ support as an ‘important’ or even a ‘very important’ factor which influences the effect of E-learning delivery in general. Besides, E. Y. Huang (Huang et al., 2012) found that sensory students have a higher level of online participation, while intuitive students demonstrate a lower level of participation. During learning process, it is helpful for tutors to distinguish students from their personality.

- According to AOE theory, autonomy has a positive effect on learning. Mentors of the E-learning process need to enhance students’ autonomy. They can help students find their interested topics, and assist them to be self-awareness, self-centered, and self-efficacy. Students’ self-confidence can be enhanced in this process.

- During E-learning process, Generation Y should regularly take self-reflection activities. We can transplant the successful experience of Europe, such as “Today’s Story Project”, hold various activities to stimulate students to reflect and observe themselves based on their daily learning and experiences referring to the four models stated in section 3, and change the projects or set up new projects based on the actual environment. In self-reflection process, Disadvantages and benefits of self-learning can be realized. As a result, students can use the platform better in future.

- Students need to balance two parts of this platform, namely mentor-guided learning and self-learning. This E-learning platform needs to have an open context. Communication between students and teachers or communication between students themselves contributes to improving their perception of belonging.

- Related technical departments should enhance the education technology support. They should focus on constructing an open and personalized E-learning system. This system can be able to improve students’ enthusiasm and satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSION

In Europe, Autonomy Oriented Education has been practiced successfully. In this paper, we elaborate the background of AOE and describe the psychological support of AOE in details including dialogical belonging and the key components of autonomy: self-knowledge, self-direction, and self-efficacy. AOE serves as a protective mechanism against the dangers of the postmodern era. The aim of AOE empowerment is to enable a person to experience a more satisfying life. Combined with the characteristics of Generation Y and E-learning, we propose the idea of combining AOE and network learning mechanism of Generation Y. Some constructive suggestions for constructing E-learning mechanism for Generation Y are also mentioned in this paper.

Obviously, there is plenty of unfinished work ahead of us. Firstly, we brought forward the idea to combine the AOE theory with the E-learning for the Generation Y education for improving the performance of Generation Y’s learning, but we haven’t identified any evidence or citation to confirm its usefulness. Secondly, we just presented some suggestions for constructing E-learning
mechanism with the idea of AOE, but we haven’t given detailed instruction, dimensions, and measure variables of each suggestion, as well as not confirm the validity of the approaches.

Even though the study in AOE and its combination with E-learning has just been started in China, we believe that AOE will play a critical role in the research and development of E-learning. In future, we will continue our study to demonstrate the usefulness and validity of the suggestions described in this paper. We will find idiographic variables and dimensions to measure the effect of each suggestion.

References


