Promoting Autonomous Learning through Self-, Peer-, and Co-assessment to Ensure High Quality in Georgian Higher Education (a case study of International Black Sea University, Georgia)

Irma Mesiridze[*]

Nino Tvaltchrelidze[**]

Abstract

The Bologna Process, Information and Communication Technology, and market forces have brought many innovations and great changes to higher education systems throughout Europe. Reforms in higher education have taken a new direction, towards making higher education students more autonomous. However, many countries have not really adopted this innovative way of teaching and still maintain an old 'transmission' style which often entails teachers trying to pour knowledge into the minds of their students. Promoting autonomous learning (the ability of students to manage their own learning) in higher education is crucial both for the individual and society, as the idea of an academic student comprises critical reflective thinking and the importance of becoming an independent learner. This article will discuss the importance of promoting autonomous learning throughout self, peer and co-assessment for higher education quality enhancement. The paper will examine the case of International Black Sea University's MA students enrolled in the Higher Education Management program. The analyses of a survey will be used to discuss the significance of autonomous learning for students and their readiness for self, peer and co-assessment.

Key Words: Autonomous learning; Independent learner, Peer-assessment, Self-assessment, Co-assessment

Introduction

In recent years educational planners and authorities have become increasingly concerned about improving the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education and, to attain this, more attention has been paid to strategies which focus on autonomous learning in higher education. According to Goodman and Lesnik (2001), student autonomy emerged during the ancient Greek period, then was temporarily forgotten, and the revival and the

[*]   Assoc. Prof. Dr., International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
      imesiridze@ibsu.edu.ge
[**] Assoc. Prof. Dr., International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
      ntvaltchrelidze@ibsu.edu.ge

widespread popularity of the idea in our age is due to the growth of globalization, the Bologna Process, the influence of democracy as a system, and the philosophy of critical thinking. The Western world has been championing student autonomy over recent decades (Bedoya, 2014; Lu & Liu, 2016; Ribbe & Bezanilla, 2016), but there is still a lack of understanding and practice of student autonomy in Georgian higher education.

The article aims to highlight the necessity of empowering higher education students to become autonomous in the sense of taking charge of their own learning. This includes socializing their learning and recognizing the benefits of working with others, observing and participating in new experiences, incorporating new knowledge into existing knowledge and modifying the latter where necessary (Council of Europe, 2001). The paper will also discuss self, peer and co-assessment as important elements in developing autonomous learning. The results of a survey will be used to illustrate the International Black Sea University students' attitudes and readiness towards self, peer and co-assessment.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning is understood in a variety of ways. Crome, Farrar, & O'Connor. (2009, p.112) defines autonomous learning as "the ability to think and act critically and independently, to self-manage study and learning, and realistically to appraise one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner. It is not simply one transferable skill among others; rather it is a disposition towards learning that is integral to the acquisition of all other skills and knowledge".' According to Little (2009) learners become autonomous by assuming responsibility for their learning. This includes being involved in all aspects of the learning process: planning, implementation and assessment. Hoidn and Kärkkäinen also state (2014) that students need to be actively involved in their own learning in order to understand the world. But, the fact that for most learners the growth of autonomy requires the stimulus, insight and guidance of a good teacher is also acknowledged. Besides, fostering autonomy in the classroom is done by empowering learners with opportunities to make significant choices and decisions about their learning in an informed way.

For the efficient implementation of autonomy in the classroom, it is crucial to employ diverse teaching and learning strategies, and assist the learners to determine or recognize the methods that best suit them based on their individual needs and aspirations. The learners have to be given the necessary tools to become more self-sufficient and independent One of the factors that is vital to learner autonomy is the implementation of self- and peer -assessment.

Self and Peer-assessment

In the last decade scholarly concern (Carless, Joughin & Liu, 2006) has been drawn to the idea that assessment needs to contribute to students' future learning, their success in higher education programs and in their professional lives after the graduation In higher education settings, once students submit their work, they often become disengaged with the assessment process and become passive beneficiaries or recipients of the assessment of their assignments. The contemporary approach to this dilemma is that students should be engaged in the assessment process to advance both short- and long-term outcomes by requiring them to make sophisticated judgments about their own and their peers' learning. In this case, teachers can improve the effectiveness of self- and peer-assessment by providing the students with a clear explanation how they will benefit from participation (Ribbe & Bezanilla, 2016).

Self-assessment refers to the learners' involvement in making judgments about their own learning, their achievements and the outcomes of their learning (Boud & Falchikov, 1989). According to Boud (1995), this is the best way of enhancing students' participation in their own learning process and it is mostly used for formative assessment to reflect one's own learning processes and results (Sluijsmans & Dochy, 1998).

Turloiu & Stefánsdóttir (2011) claim that it is vital for learners to build up their own personal assessment criteria to develop independence from the teacher and to judge their weaknesses and strengths. However, helping students to learn to continuously monitor the quality of their work in order to make improvements in real time is also of great importance (Montgomery, 2000). For instance, lecturers can require from students to use rubrics to assess their own work and become realistic judges of their own performance, rather than relying on their teachers for feedback (Crisp, 2007; Sambell, McDowell, & Sambell, 2006). Lecturers can also set specific goals for their students, such as those relating to professional standards or key skills. Students can be encouraged to self-assess their performance at the start of a program. As the program progresses, the students can be asked to re-assess themselves and update their self-assessments until they have reached the appropriate level. Lecturers can also be supportive in developing students' personal action plans to achieve their goals. It is also notable that instruments for self-assessment can vary from Likert scales, ability listings and written tests to portfolios, audiotape assessments and electronic interactive systems.

According to Falchikov (1995), peer-assessment is the process that takes place when groups of individuals assess their peers. Students use rating instruments or checklists, which may have been designed by the user-group or others, before the peer-assessment exercise to meet their particular needs. Peer-assessment methods should allow learners to practice making reasonable judgments about the level to which their peers have achieved the intended standards and learning outcomes (Falchikov, 2007). Falchikov (2007) suggests three strategies to improve the quality of peer-assessment: *modelling, scaffolding, and fading.* In modeling the teacher will show the students how she/he does the assessment, in scaffolding she/he will guide the students through

self- and peer-assessment, while on the fading stage ste teacher less and less interferes in students' self- and peer-assessment.

Before students are engaged in peer-assessment, in order to improve reliability and accuracy, lecturers can provide examples of how they personally use assessment tools and strategies. In terms of scaffolding, it is advisable that lecturers provide students with structured grading schemes (for example, rubrics), before moving to less structured systems where students negotiate the assessment criteria among themselves and / or with their teacher. As students achieve greater independence in peer-assessment and are capable of developing their own criteria, the amount of lecturers' direction and level of support fades over time (Falchikov, 2007).

Apart from a grading procedure, peer-assessment is a part of the learning process where skills are developed. The contribution of other students can be a very useful input into the self-assessment process. Students have an opportunity to observe their peers throughout the learning process and, compared to their teachers, they can obtain a more detailed knowledge of the work of their peers. Thus, according to Keaten & Richardson (1993), peer-assessment fosters high levels of responsibility among students as they must be fair and accurate with the judgments they make regarding their peers. Peer-assessment can be seen as a valuable instrument of the learning process as students are more involved in the learning and assessment processes and find it a fair and accurate form of assessment.

Though there are some disadvantages of self- and peer-assessment, such as reluctance to participate or friendship marking, these two forms of assessment are often used in combination for more efficient results. The development of self- and peer-assessment skills is crucial for the development of autonomous individuals (Picón Jácome, 2012).

The main aims of self- and peer-assessment are to:

- develop students' responsibility and autonomy;

- increase students' motivation and self-esteem;

- advance the understanding of subjects, skills and processes;

- encourage students to become active learner and assessors and learn from each other;

- involve students in critical reflection; and

- develop students' understanding of their own subjectivity and judgments.

It is also notable that self- and peer-assessment require a classroom culture or a learning community where errors are valued as learning opportunities, and that not understanding something is acceptable as a temporary state. It is important that students, instead of being just friend, become critical friends and criticize their friends in such a way that both supports and challenges them and facilitates their future success. Both lecturers and students need to treat mistake as a natural way of learning; students should realize that lecturers, too, make

mistakes and try to rectify them (Sato & Takatsuka, 2016). However, the creation of such a classroom culture requires time and effort, and may well challenge conventional ideas about the teacher's role and authority in the classroom and in the marking of students' assignments.

Co-assessment

Co-assessment comprises the active participation of both the students and the tutor in the assessment process, and it can be used for both formative and summative purposes while self-and peer-assessment are often only applied   for formative assessment exercises and tasks. Somervell (1993) discusses co–assessment as a collaboration between the students and their tutor during a teaching and learning process to clarify the objectives and standards of academic achievements. In other words, it is a mutually agreed assessment of the student's knowledge which entails negotiation concerning the details of assessment.

Falchikov (1986) considers that self- and peer-assessment can be used for summative purposes as part of a co-assessment process. According to Falchikov's (1986) model, tutors and students set separate criteria with which students first mark themselves, then each group member, and the tutor provides his/her assessment as well. Later, the marks are compared and the tutor has the power to determine the final decision about the marks or grades that are awarded. This type of assessment is radically different from traditional assessment processes, and it paves the way to higher levels of understanding between students and tutors. It also fosters motivation, self-esteem, students' own subjectivity and judgment qualities that are that are crucial for autonomous learning.

Although student-centered approach is officially accepted in contemporary education, in practice it is not easy to apply, so both teacher and student resistance is notable (Izci, 2016; McDonald, 2012). Correspondingly, to change teacher and student prejudice towards the application of self-, peer and co-assessment, gradual and long-term work has to be carried out: research showing that it is effective, teacher-trainings and workshops where teachers will not only get acquainted with the advantages of the approach, but also practically experience them. Students will also need support, teachers will have to explain to them how to use assessment rubrics effectively, and to practice co-assessment step by step (Falchikov, 2007; Ribbe & Bezanilla, 2016). It is also very desirable that, while educating future teachers, student-centered teaching, autonomous learning and self-, peer- and co-assessment are emphasized, that they are not just terms to be learned, but they have to be implemented in practice.

Case Study

The following case study was held at a newly opened at International Black Sea University Master program of Higher Education Administration. The limited number of participants is connected with the number of students at

that moment registered at the program (12 people). The study explores the importance of autonomous learning for MA students enrolled to the given program and their readiness for self, peer and co-assessment. The researchers used the online software package www.surveymonkey.com in order that the survey was easy to use, and we constructed an optional type of questionnaire (consisting of constructed-response and selected-response items). Students were asked to rate their responses to particular questions. A total of 11 responses were returned. Readers can see the questionnaire using the following link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BZF9LHB. Here, the findings related to each of the questions that were asked are presented.

Section 1. Choose whether you strongly agree, partially agree, neither agree nor disagree, partially agree or strongly agree with the items below.

**Proposition 1:** *Assessment determines if a student meets a qualification standard*

Figure 1. The role of assessment
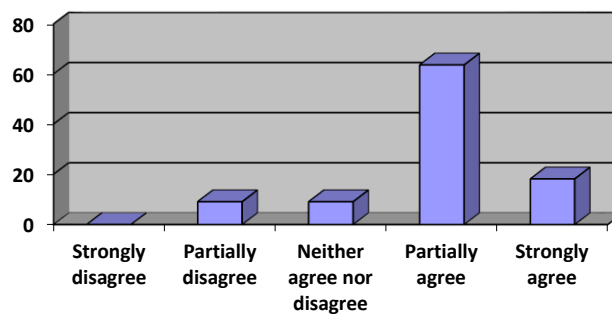
The figure shows that some students partially disagree or neither agree nor disagree with the statement, and that only 18% of the participants strongly agree with the idea. However, the majority of the students (64%) partially agree with the idea that students' achievement of a qualification standard is determined by assessment.

*Proposition 2: Self, peer and co-assessment is not widely applied in Georgian HE*

Figure 2. Application of self, peer and co-assessment in Georgian HE
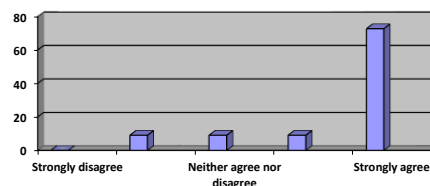
The great majority (73%) of the participants strongly agreed with the idea that self, peer and co-assessment is not widely utilised in Georgian HE. This suggests that we may hope that this will work as a basis for future implementation of the above-mentioned assessment types.

Proposition 3: From cultural perspective peer and co-assessment is unusual and often rejected in Georgian HE institutions.

Figure 3. Cultural outlook of peer and co-assessment in Georgian HE institutions
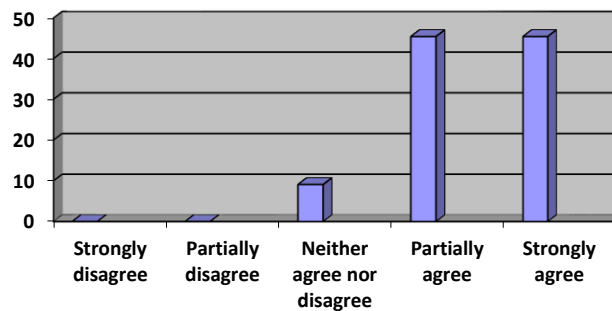
The finding here is that most of the students believe that peer and co-assessment are often rejected in Georgian HE as they are not considered as part of the educational culture of the country and from cultural viewpoint students avoid practicing in self, peer- and co-assessment. Accordingly, the responses 'partially agree' and 'strongly agree' collected 42% each. However, a low percentage (9%) of the participants neither agrees nor disagrees with the statement. We may think that from the students' viewpoint one of the reasons why Georgian HE institutions lack such strategies for promotion of autonomous learning as peer and co-assessment is the higher education culture.

Proposition 4: Self, peer and co-assessment help students improve their learning.

Figure 4. The role of peer, self- and co-assessment
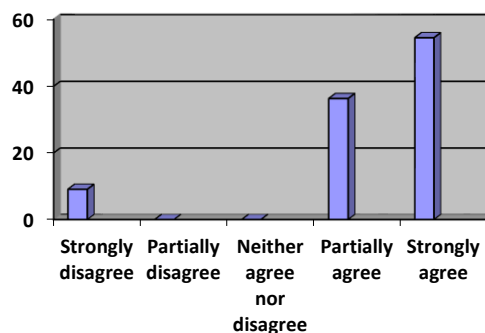
Clearly, the majority of the participants believed in the important role of self, peer and co-assessment in their learning, though a minority thought that these types of assessment do not have a positive effect on their learning. This makes us think about the ways to raise the students' awareness of the significance of the above-mentioned assessment types in promoting autonomous learning.

Proposition 5: *Self, peer and co-assessment help students to assess themselves accordingly and observe their weak and strong points.*
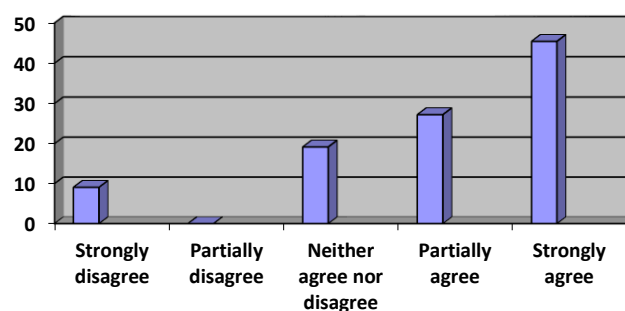
Figure 5. The self, peer and co-assessment help students to be objective and critical towards themselves
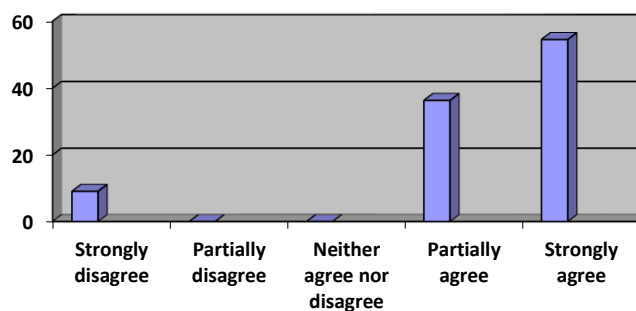
More than half of the participants (55%) appreciate the benefits of self, peer and co-assessment, and this is really promising. They strongly agree with the statement that these types of assessment give them the opportunity to observe their weak and strong points and to be objective and critical towards themselves. However, one student strongly disagrees with the statement and a significant minority (36%) partially agrees with it.

Proposition 6: *Self, peer and co-assessment promotes the efficiency and effectiveness of the course*

**Figure 6. Students' belief in efficiency and effectiveness of the course**

Although above 54% of the participants strongly agreed with the proposition that self, peer and co-assessment help them observe their weaknesses and become self-critical, 45% of them believe in efficiency and effectiveness of the above-mentioned assessment types. One student was skeptical and 27% only partially agree with the

statement above. This again raises the issue of awareness of efficiency and effectiveness of self, peer and co-assessment.

Proposition 7: *Self, peer and co-assessment should be introduced at secondary education to prepare Georgian students mentally for such types of assessment to meet a qualification standard*

Figure 7. The importance of early (in secondary education) introduction of self, peer and co-assessment
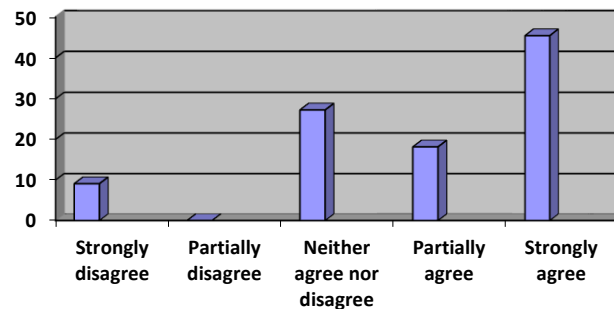
It is promising that only one student disagrees strongly with the idea of the early introduction of self, peer and co-assessment. The majority (64%) agree that implementing self, peer and co-assessment in secondary education is a good idea. However, 27% of the students are not sure either way.

Section 2: Express your opinion about the impact of self, peer and co-assessment on your studying process:

This was an open-ended question inviting students to freely express their own ideas about the impact of self, peer and co-assessment on their studying process. The majority of the answers, like in the previous questions, expressed positive views on the application of self-, peer- and co-assessment, however, some criticisms were expresses by 2 students (18%). Here are some of the answers:

- The impact of self-, peer and co-assessment is mostly positive. It helps to make the assessment more objective, as the teacher sometimes may not be aware why a student could not demonstrate fully the knowledge she/he had.

- I have become more self-confident, as I can forecast how the teacher will assess me/ I know how to find my errors. And I have some impact on my assessment. That's great.

- It was difficult initially, but finally it was definitely useful. Teachers learned to understand us better, as well as we learned to understand that their assessment is fair and rather objective and based on certain criteria.

- My motivation to learn has increased. I can reflect critically on my and my friends' mistakes, which is very beneficial for developing my judgment skills. An active involvement in this process increases my responsibility and self-esteem.

- It is unusual and almost not used in Georgian HE institutions. I don't think it can be used in schools, as schoolchildren in Georgia are not conscious enough to be able to do self-, peer and co-assessment objectively, they care more about grades than about knowledge, about pleasing the friend and not eventually benefitting him/her, so this approach may be introduced carefully, with due explanations, and only in higher education.

Conclusion

So long as autonomous learning remains a central point of concern for the higher education sector in Europe and beyond, the implementation of self-, peer- and co-assessment in Georgia will be of great importance, as students in the contemporary world must be able to analyze information, to improve their problem-solving, teamwork and communication skills, reflect on their own role in the learning process, and develop the understanding of their own subjectivity and decision making processes. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties of incorporating self- and peer-assessment in the learning process as it raises questions concerning the objectivity and reliability in student assessment. But, in order to overcome these challenges and to meet students' needs and the requirements of the contemporary world, some deliberate and strategic consideration at programme, university and national levels will be required.

The study held confirmed the theoretical ideas expressed in the literature review:

- Although few (18 %) deny the role of assessment in reflecting the students' qualification, most of them (64%) only partially agree with the statement, realizing that assessment does not always reveal the real picture. Just 18% of the participants believe that assessment fully reflects the student's qualification.

- The majority of the respondents (74%) agree that self-, peer and co-assessment is not widely applied in Georgian higher education institutions. This answer is important, as these students answered based on both their bachelor and master studies.

- One of the problems of applying self-, peer and co-assessment in Georgia is the traditional educational (teacher-centered) culture. The respondents' answers (45% 'partially agree' and 42% 'completely agree) confirm this. Time is needed to bring it to both teachers' and students' minds to realize that students should be involved in the assessment process. This will not happen automatically, but will need a substantial effort – research, trainings, and workshops.

- Only one respondent (9%) disagreed that self-, peer and co-assessment is useful, which means that attitudes might change after the students (or teachers) gain practical experience of self-, peer and co-assessment. The respondents express their general views and experiences, based on the courses where these forms of assessment were applied.

- Nine percent are not sure, while 27% neither agree, nor disagree that self-, peer and co-assessment should be introduced in secondary education. Georgian schools, the respondents think, are not ready for this student-centered approach. The students need to become more conscious, responsible for their learning and not so much caring just about the grades.

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