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Autonomous learning: An essential skill for learners in the new normal

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global catastrophe which affects various aspects of human society. Governments are scrambling to impose various restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus and curb the death rate. As a result, various activities, including work and education, have gone online and people have to adapt to the new situation (new normal) by working remotely. Because of the closure of educational institutions and physical classrooms are restricted or closed altogether, most, if not all, learning and teaching activities have been conducted remotely through the internet or other traditional means such as radio and television broadcasting. Remote learning is vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet it is challenging because it does not have the level of interactions between teachers and students or between students and students, which is normal in physical classrooms. No doubt, students may feel neither concentrated during lectures nor motivated to do self-study. This showcases the need for students to develop autonomous learning as a skill in order to study effectively during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is autonomous learning?

Autonomous learning is an approach in which students are able to undertake self-driven learning and to motivate themselves to overcome the temptation of distracted, but entertaining activities such as browsing social media or playing video games (Moore, 1973). "Autonomous learning" has been used interchangeably with "independent learning." However, Moore indicated a slight difference between the two terms. Independent learning refers to the system or situation, while autonomous learning refers to the ability and will

to exercise self-directed learning (Moore, 1973). In this article, the definition of autonomous learning as self-driven or self-directed learning is adopted.

Why is autonomous learning essential during COVID-19?

The ability to develop autonomous learning is necessary for coping with the abrupt changes caused by the pandemic. A study on undergraduate and postgraduate students showed that during online classes, students usually felt less motivated to study (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). A majority of students in the study believed that the traditional class was more motivating than the distance learning. Although the study did not explain why it was the case, it is perhaps due to the lack of classroom interaction as most students in the study believed that face-to-face contact with the instructor was important. Thus, if students are well-equipped with the ability to be self-driven, they might be better prepared for such challenges. In addition, having students who are prepared for the class makes online learning more interactive and enjoyable.

Why is autonomous learning essential after COVID-19?

Being autonomous in learning is essential during the pandemic, but is it still essential or relevant in the post-COVID-19 world? The answer is yes. First of all, autonomous learning is a soft skill everyone should possess no matter what the circumstances are. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has just intensified the need for this important skill. Being autonomous in learning and knowing how to learn allow us to acquire the skills which are required at the workplace but might not be taught at school. Thus, having this skill improves the chance of being employed after graduation. Second, autonomous learners are more likely to develop other essential soft skills. For instance, they are usually good at time management, more aware of their own limitations (i.e., they have metacognitive awareness), and always seeking improvements (Meyer et al., 2008). Third, in this digital era where various opportunities are abundant and just one click away, we must be proactive enough to take advantage of the available opportunities. Self-driven learners are usually proactive individuals who always want to get ahead. As such, they are usually the ones who see the opportunity and grab it, be it research training or internship opportunities or free online courses on Coursera and other platforms.

Conclusion

In short, being autonomous allows us to attend our academic life proactively and to grab opportunities along the way. I believe Cambodian students need to shift away from a lecture-is-learning mindset and embrace a more rigorous approach toward education. At the same time, teachers should act as consultants who provide guidance when appropriate. In that way, learner autonomy and a lifelong learning culture can be developed.

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