

Academic Self-Organised Learning Environment – the lessons to be learned and taught

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Abstract: In this paper the author describes an exploratory practice-based research study on Academic Self-Organised Learning Environments, conducted *with* and also *by* student teachers of science in their course of English. The students took part in an experimental ASOLE class and subsequently described and evaluated this experience in essays and class discussions. Results show that future teachers view the concept of self-organised learning environments as potentially very beneficial in terms of developing specific skills and competences such as critical thinking and autonomy, however, they also highlight specific risks or problematic issues associated with the method, e.g. the effect of this type of learning on different personalities of children. Implementing ASOLE into a course for future teachers was a transformative experience especially when combined with the exploratory study and will hopefully help the students become reflective teachers.

Key words: Academic Self-Organised Learning Environment, learning autonomy, teacher training, exploratory practice

Introduction

Regardless of subject matter, teaching future teachers is a great privilege but also an immense responsibility. Teacher trainers' methods and attitudes are likely to be scrutinised, assessed, sometimes even condemned by teaching apprentices but what is more daunting is that their approaches and overall teaching style might be emulated and passed on to countless future pupils and students. In this particular case we will be discussing a scenario in which future teachers of science together with their teacher of English experimented with and evaluated the unfamiliar ASOLE approach, i.e. the method of Academic Self-Organised Learning Environment, a form of Self-organised Learning Environment (SOLE) adopted for higher education purposes.

The present research study is grounded in the principles of exploratory practice which attempts to integrate pedagogy and research *for* and *by* learners and teachers, thus positioning teachers and learners as co-researchers (Allwright, 2003). The idea of applying this paradigm in the context of teacher training is not new as most future teachers are to some extent involved in pedagogical research during their teacher training. What was new and surprising to the student teachers of science though was the fact that they were testing a method and reflecting on it in their English classes as a part of their coursework. In this article we aim to describe the principles of (A)SOLE as the concept under study, the design of our study conducted in teacher and student collaboration and its results.

ASOLE

ASOLE, i.e. Academic Self- Organised Learning Environments are a form of SOLE (Self-Organised Learning Environments) transplanted into academic setting. The original SOLE is a concept based on now a famous experiment by Sugata Mitra 'The Hole in the Wall' (Mitra, 2006, conducted in India between 1999 and 2006), which explored the capacity of young children in a remote Indian village to learn without subject teachers, only with a public computer facility. The experiment has since caused great controversy gaining both ardent proponents and critics. It has also raised a number of questions about fundamental educational issues and given rise to many research studies and dissertations. One of the prominent questions asked by those charmed by the educational experiment is whether (or with what modifications) the principle of teaching/learning with minimal teacher input can be applied in classroom instruction (Dolan et al, 2013). Inspired by the original Mitra's experiment, institutionalised self-organised learning environments are sessions in which the teacher's supervision and support is minimal to the extent that they only set the "big question" the learners are supposed to research and answer and subsequently leave the learners to explore and prepare their presentation for a lesson lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. The question that is to be researched needs to be open-ended, clearly formulated and related to the subject area. The learners are typically free to organise themselves into groups of approximately three members and they can use computers or any other sources of information in their research. Following their independent study, the learners present their findings related to the research question in front of other members of the group or submit a report. Overall, there are only a few rules described in literature, which means the concept is open to modifications to cater for different learners' and teachers' needs, goals, preferences (Mitra, 2012).

The organisation of a lesson in which the teacher's supervision is significantly reduced and their role has shifted from that of a 'knowledge holder' to a humble guide or counsellor is not a brand new concept. It can remind us of Socratic questioning as a form of cooperative dialogue, Freire's training in small groups and problem-posing education (in Taylor, 1993), Giroux's theories of radical education with the strong association between learning and social transformation (Giroux, 2003), or recent calls of the advocates of autonomous learning for harnessing the agency of students to regulate and evaluate their own learning (Little, 2020). The relatively loose framework and brave concept of (A)SOLE allows the teacher and students to maximise this agency and give more space to independent exploration of learners – in our case, we explored the concept itself.

The study context and design

The study was carried out in an optional course of English for teachers of science at the Faculty of Science Masaryk University. The 15 students enrolled into the

course were all on minimum starting B1 level of CEFR in English, all of them studying for their bachelor or master degree in teaching of two of the following subjects: physics, mathematics, geography, biology or chemistry. Only some of them have had previous teaching experience at the time being.

The ASOLE sessions were imbedded into a pre-existing syllabus of the course to align with its goals and content by the focus on topics related to education and the development of listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The ASOLE session took place in the third lesson of the course, shortly after the topic called “The future of school” was introduced. The students watched and discussed the famous “Hole in the wall” experiment as described in a TED talk given by Sugata Mitra. The emergent theme was the role and extent of autonomy that students of the future will / should enjoy and the benefits and drawbacks it brings.

In the ASOLE lesson itself, the concept of Self-organised Learning Environments was briefly introduced by the teacher as a method inspired by Mitra’s experiment. The teacher complied with the basic principles of a SOLE class described above, i.e. she only gave basic instructions, set the “big question” and left the room for 30 minutes. The rules to be followed by the students were as follows:

- You will have 30 minutes to work on a question.
- The question is *What/ How should we teach to prepare our students for the future?*
- You can work in groups of min. 2 people.
- You can use any information sources available to you (dictionaries, laptops or phones).
- You will be asked to present your findings at the end of the class, either as a group or via a spokesperson, you can prepare a poster presentation or slides.

The students asked an additional question concerning the rules. They were wondering whether it was allowed to use their mother tongue or whether they were supposed to use only English. The teacher’s response was that naturally they should do their best to use English in their discussions and research as much as possible to practise their language skills, however, they can resort to Czech whenever they consider it necessary or relevant (e.g. helping each other with translation of difficult expressions).

The students were then left alone in the room and the teacher came back after the allotted time to watch their presentations, participate in the final discussion and give feedback. As a follow-up on the lesson, the students were asked to write a short essay of approx. 800 words in which they summarise their ASOLE experience, what they see as its benefits and drawbacks and also the potential (or lack of it) of the method in their future teaching. In addition, the students were asked to specify the questions or issues that come to their mind when considering the application of SOLE as engaging learners in the role of researchers is one of

the characteristics of exploratory practice (Hanks, 2015). The submitted essays were evaluated by the teacher and used as a springboard for the discussion in the following lesson.

The research questions asked by the teacher researcher were as follows:

1. How do student teachers describe their ASOLE experience in view of their future practice?
2. What are the main benefits and risks of implementing ASOLE method in a tertiary education course?

The data used in the study were collected from the students' essays and discussions that took place immediately in the ASOLE class as well as in the following lesson.

Results

In their essays and classroom discussions, the student teachers participating in the study commented on four main areas related to SOLE, namely the issue of *control over the activity* of the students, the *specific purposes* for which they would use a SOLE format, the relevance of the method as regards different *ages and personalities* of learners and finally the *competences and skills* that are acquired and developed by SOLE learning.

First, the Czech students, who had never encountered such a high degree of autonomy in their learning, were struck by the freedom they could enjoy but at the same time conveyed a feeling of caution or concern about using it in classes where there is not a relationship of trust between the teacher and their learners:

"This method is, in my opinion, super risky. I would recommend it only to class teachers who have faith in their kids. Otherwise, this can end up being super counter-productive".

Nevertheless, they could envision SOLE lessons or SOLE "moments" in their teaching, mainly for two different purposes: either when introducing a new topic to get students to brainstorm ideas related to that topic or on the contrary, to broaden the knowledge of a subject they are already familiar with:

"I would probably use SOLE in cases when I want students to work with the knowledge they already have and then spice it up with some interesting question or topic to "wow" them or make them think about it a bit more, for example, use some real life examples of things that everyone knows and let students wonder where chemistry plays a role in them".

Apart from specific purposes, individual students also view SOLE as specifically appropriate for subjects such as geography, biology or chemistry, that is natural sciences where they see space for exploration of topics in context:

"In geography and biology SOLE is good for teaching students understand facts in context. For example, I can use a SOLE question 'Why do flowers grow and bloom in different season of year?' Students will learn about complex ecosystem and do not just memorize artificial systems of plants".

It seems that most students agree there are certain limitations to using the method in terms of age – they have little trust in primary or even secondary students' abilities to take control and regulate their learning as demonstrated in this quote:

"...using this at elementary school would be a bad idea because children of this age aren't able to organize themselves like we did today. And I also think that in high school when the teacher leaves the class, it means for students that they have free time and there always will be some students who don't do anything if the teacher doesn't watch them."

Similarly, the students expressed their doubts about the benefits of this type of learning for learners with different personal characteristics, specifically those who feel constrained in various collaborative activities due to their shyness or those who tend to rely on others:

"When it comes to minuses, I would say maybe "isolation" of shy, quieter children. What I meant is that kids that aren't very confident with talking or aren't as assertive as others in their group can have a hard time finding a moment to express themselves. Another minus could be that some student will be doing nothing and let others in the group do the work."

"...if the child is a big loner and is afraid of talking to anyone, then it can be very frustrating for him or her."

Despite these objections, having experienced a SOLE lesson first-hand, the vast majority of the students proclaim that they strongly believe in the potential of the method when it comes to the development of skills such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking, autonomous learning, etc.:

"The biggest advantage of SOLE is that children learn to be independent. They rely on themselves, or alternatively they can talk to their classmates about the topic. Positive is that children can talk to classmates who are not as close to them as their friends. They lose the inhibition of talking to someone new. This definitely creates a better atmosphere in the classroom and no one needs to feel lonely."

"...by letting students work in groups they can slowly learn how to cooperate with each other, listen to someone else's opinions and arguments for their believes. This can help to improve their critical thinking, which is a very important skill to know in today's modern society."

"I feel that SOLE can improve student's ability to organize, their communication skills, such as argumentation, formulation of own ideas or giving a presentation. They learn how to work in groups, think critically and work with sources as well. I think that all of these skills are really important for students' future life."

Another emergent category were observations on how in SOLE the questions that are asked can not be answered by a simple internet search but instead involve critical work with different sources of information:

"We really had to think for ourselves and put information together which is very similar to what you have to do in real life."

When asked which issues they find worth further investigation, the subjects that students raised as problematic or controversial were generally related to the assessment of autonomous work and the effect of autonomous learning, especially as compared to other forms of instruction.

"I think that the question we need to address is how as a teacher I can grade pupils if I cannot see their continuous work or contribution to group work."

"I would like to know if SOLE leads students to better remember information than if they studied the topic in a 'normal' class. It seems more engaging but we don't really know if they have learned more because they also spend much more time organising things."

Conclusion

In this paper we attempted to give an account of an experimental session of ASOLE with student teachers. An analysis of their observations and reflections on the method suggests that the session was inspiring for their future practice in that they can see the way (A)SOLE fosters specific authentic skills important in life, often neglected or underrated in Czech classes. In their reflections, several students highlighted the fact that the Czech educational system does not foster creativity, critical thinking skills, collaboration and media literacy. SOLE lessons are considered by them as a sort of remedy which, if used wisely, could alleviate that problem. More importantly, most students also point out the fact that SOLE does not stand in conflict to other pedagogies or teaching styles that they have so far encountered. Rather than that, it is now a part of their 'teaching repertoire'. Most of them see SOLE as a teaching/learning tool that could be deployed whenever seen as appropriate, mainly when introducing a new topic to stir the learners' curiosity or as a form of broadening the learners' knowledge. There are, however, still many questions that need to be dealt with, such as the effect of the approach on children with different personalities and social skills as well as the potential of the method in different subjects or assessment of autonomous work.

Based on the students' reflections we agree with Mitra et al. (2015) that (A)SOLE mindset is transformative and supportive of current demands on the development of the skills to collaborate, critically consider different sources of information, be creative, present findings or engage in discussions. Last but not least, ASOLE as a form of teacher training also enables students' agency and by putting the students in charge we not only educate the future teachers to be independent, critical teachers but also teach them to reflect on their practices and become explorers of their own learning and teaching.

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