

**STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS'
PERCEPTIONS OF
AUTONOMOUS LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF
A VOCATIONAL INSTITUTION IN
HONG KONG**

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Doctor of Education
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by

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Abstract

The research was undertaken at a time when the New Senior Secondary educational reform was underway in Hong Kong with the implementation of the new academic structure together with the introduction of the Qualifications Framework (QF). In line with such development, the Vocational Training Bureau and so the case institute, as one of the members, aim to produce autonomous learners who value and also be able to take up lifelong learning. One of the pillars of the QF is concerned with students' autonomy. But the guidelines, written in terms of learning outcomes, are so vaguely defined that teachers do not know what they should do in order to facilitate the achievement of these outcomes in relation to the development of autonomy. The aim of this research is to explore how students and teachers perceive autonomous learning and relate their own perceptions to their practice at a vocational institute in Hong Kong. A group of 20 students and 4 teachers from the Business Administration Discipline were invited to participate in the study to minimise the influence of the subject area on the perceptions of the participants which was intended to make comparison and contrast of the findings more accurate. The qualitative research approach adopted was informed by the interpretive paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with both the student and the teacher groups, which were subsequently analysed using inductive methods. The findings indicated that all the students and teachers perceived autonomous learning as classroom processes leading to different outcomes. However, these processes were of different nature depending on individual students and teachers. The variations in the processes were, in turn, shaped by their different epistemological positions. The students and the teachers also placed different value upon autonomous learning, recognising different value of the construct of autonomy. The students' and the teachers' perceptions were found to be closely related to their educational engagement and pedagogical practice respectively. The researcher came to a conclusion that the autonomous learning processes construed by individual students and teachers could be interpreted as one-way, two-way or a loop. The different nature of the autonomous learning processes and their associated outcomes provided a basis for curriculum designers and syllabus writers to evaluate the QF-related guidelines on autonomous learning and hence helped teachers and students to interpret them in terms of what they could do in the classroom and how they could engage their tasks to produce more desirable outcomes. The study also suggested that students who were more ready for autonomous learning showed hesitation and reservation about a critical type of autonomy, suggesting a 'cultural resistance' to autonomous learning in the wider context of Hong Kong which embodies the Chinese culture.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter outlines the research problem that inspires the researcher to undertake the present study in the vocational context in Hong Kong. The research questions are framed with specific reference to the aims and objectives of this study following a discussion of the local context. This is followed by a discussion of the contribution of the study and the standpoint of the researcher in relation to the research problem. This chapter ends with a description of how the rest of the thesis is structured.

1.2 Outline of the research problem

The case institute is called the Youth Institute, YI in short. It is one of the members of the Vocational Training Bureau (VTB) which is the largest provider of vocational education and training in Hong Kong. To tie in with VTB's brand strategies and positioning, the YI has taken up the position of offering vocationally-oriented programme mainly at diploma and sub-diploma levels, catering for Secondary 3 and Secondary 5 school leavers who are not interested in or who do not adapt well to

mainstream education in Hong Kong. As one of the member institutes of the VTB, the YI inherits VTB's mission i.e. to provide a valued choice to school leavers and working adults to acquire values, knowledge and skills for lifelong learning and enhanced employability. The case institute has subsequently interpreted the idea of lifelong learning as synonymous with the ability to learn autonomously. Students are expected to learn beyond the classroom without the presence of their teachers. Likewise, teachers are expected to tailor-make 'extended tasks', collectively known as 'guided learning' materials, for this purpose. However, it is not clear whether the expectations of the two parties are convergent or divergent with respect to autonomous learning. It is also not clear whether this mission of producing autonomous learners, who are able to engage in lifelong learning, can be carried out or how it can be achieved as there is simply a lack of knowledge about perceptions and experiences of both teachers and students in relation to autonomous learning.

Institutional policies of the VTB and the YI have largely been affected by the recent introduction of the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (QF) which is a 7-level outcome-based hierarchy. Education providers in Hong Kong are expected to design their learning programmes in accordance with the guidelines prescribed by the QF authority. One of the pillars of the QF is concerned with students' development of

autonomy which is perceived as a general goal of education and training, interpreted as learning outcomes students are expected to achieve at the end of any learning programmes. The problem is: what are teachers supposed to do in order to facilitate students' achievement of the learning outcomes in relation to autonomy? The poorly defined guidelines simply do not help both teachers and students to understand the nature of autonomy and what they can do to produce the desired outcomes. Such gap of knowledge needs to be filled if the management and teachers are to design and deliver learning programmes that aim to engage students in autonomous learning.

The research problem discussed above is translated into the purpose of this study which aims to examine how these students and teachers perceive autonomous learning and relate their perceptions to their practice at the case institute.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the research

The aims of this research project are to explore students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and how their perceptions are related to their practice at the YI, a local vocational institute. The researcher intends to address the specific

research questions through the perspectives of a sample of participants from the teacher group and the student group. The specific research questions attempt to find out how these students and teachers construe autonomous learning and the value they attach to autonomous learning in a particular period of time at the case institute. Another objective of the study is to investigate how the views of these students and teachers are related to their learning and teaching practice respectively. To what extent are their perceptions reflected in their own practice? It is also imminent to discover whether the perspectives and experiences of the two groups coincide. Is there any gap between students' views and teachers' views in relation to autonomous learning? It is hoped that answers to these questions can help inform policies and practice that align with the mission of the institute.

1.4 Context of the study and some indicative literature

The wider context of Hong Kong is characterised by a reform culture in the domain of education. Amidst the changes, the local government has introduced the new 3+3+4 academic structure. As the name implies, students will undergo three years of junior secondary education and then another three years of senior secondary education. Upon completion of a total of six years of secondary education in the

mainstream system, students will sit for a territory-wide public examination – Diploma in Secondary Education. High achievers will have a chance of continuing with another four years of tertiary education in local universities. The 3+3+4 education system has replaced the current system consisting of three years and two years of junior secondary and senior secondary schooling respectively, which is followed by another two years of post-secondary education (the sixth and seventh forms) before moving on to three more years of university education.

Such overhaul in the local education system has in fact been driven by considerable conceptual changes in relation to how policy makers and educational practitioners perceive learning and teaching. These changes signal a paradigmatic shift from viewing learning as the transmission of knowledge to the construction of knowledge. Accompanied by this shift is a change of the teacher's role from acting as a gatekeeper of knowledge and the one who directs learning to a facilitator who helps students access and process information. Another massive shift is witnessed in the use of criterion-referenced examination system to replace the norm-referenced examination system which has served the local community for a number of years.

Parallel to the above changes is the launch of the Qualifications Framework, QF in

short, by the Hong Kong government recently. The QF is described as:

a cross-sectoral hierarchy covering both academic and vocational qualifications required by various industries. With well-defined standards of qualifications and clear indication of articulation ladder between them, the QF enables people to set clear goals and directions for obtaining quality-assured qualifications. (<http://www.hkqf.gov.hk>)

The purpose of introducing the QF by the Hong Kong government is to encourage and promote lifelong learning, a buzz term in the local educational context. It is envisaged that the framework will enable mobility and recognition of qualifications both within the territory and outside Hong Kong. It is expected that the initiative of fostering 'lifelong learning' will help produce autonomous learners in the next generation. In this climate, all member institutes operating under the VTB echo the government's attempt to promote lifelong learning. This goal of forging lifelong partnership with students and graduates of the member institutes is clearly stated in VTB's 8-year strategic plan launched recently. Such development is again being interpreted in the VTB context as an attempt to promote autonomous learning with the ultimate goal of producing autonomous learners.

In the case institute, the Bureau's directive has been taken seriously in the design of the curriculum for students hoping to receive basic vocational training in a diploma programme. Instead of providing 'curriculum hours', students are provided with 'notional hours' of learning which embrace all types of learning activities such as face-to-face lectures, self-learning, seminars, workshops, tutorials, web search, visits, community service, etc. Students are therefore expected to learn beyond the classroom. This development is in line with the QF where one QF credit is equivalent to ten notional hours of learning. By accumulating certain number of QF credits, students will be able to move up the articulation ladder and obtain qualifications recognised by the government and overseas institutions. Here in the immediate context of the case institute, autonomous learning is closely related to the development of students' competence in achieving tasks with a degree of autonomy. To put it simply, the institute holds the view that if students are given more support out of class, a wider variety of modes of delivery, more self-access and specifically more internet facilities, autonomous learning is achieved. Apart from institutionalising the concept of notional hours in the programmes offered by the case institute, the teaching staff are also required to develop 'guided learning packages' in order to develop or promote autonomous learning. This perception can actually be interpreted as Ecclestone's 'procedural autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002).

The idea that there are different dimensions in relation to the concept of autonomy can be identified in Ecclestone's studies on the effects of formative assessment on motivation, autonomy and achievement in the advanced level vocational qualifications for 16-19 years old in the UK (Ecclestone, 2002). These different forms of autonomy are, in turn, related to different views of learning and teaching, namely transmission, transactional and transformational models. This is congruent with Askew and Lodge's discussion of how the different models of teaching are related to different epistemological views held by people and how this relationship, in turn, shapes the different patterns of feedback in the teaching and learning process (Askew and Lodge, 2000).

The more desirable or advanced forms of autonomy are built on the premise of the constructivist model of learning and teaching. In this sense, autonomous learning can be seen not just as a goal, but it can also be depicted as a process. This description is synchronised with the perspectives of the social constructivists which involve interaction and negotiation among students themselves and between students and teachers. The concepts of the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, in Wertsch, 1985) and 'the psychology of assisted growth' (Bruner 1966) vividly depict the interdependence between the teachers and the students. Following

this line of argument, Barnes (1991) and Cooper and McIntyre (1996) further illustrate the transactional nature of learning and teaching in their works.

Returning to the discussion of changes induced by the 3+3+4 education reform in Hong Kong, the design of the new curriculum of the senior secondary education calls for a shift from the ‘teacher dominated (environment) to autonomous learning’ (<http://www.edb.gov.hk>). This apparently points to a link between autonomous learning and student-centred learning. In fact, all the syllabuses of the programmes offered by the case institute contain a description of the adoption of a student-centred approach in the ‘teaching and learning strategies’ section. The question is: is this view shared by the students and teachers engaged in programmes? Kinchin suggests that if there is a match between students’ and teachers’ epistemological positions, students’ learning can be maximised (Kinchin, 2004).

It is also noted in the Education Bureau’s official documents concerning curriculum design and implementation of gifted education that there is a close link between gifted education and autonomous learning as perceived by the government officials. In the guidelines prepared for mainstream schools in relation to assisting school administrators and teachers in catering for the needs of high-achievers, the

relationship between the two is explicitly stated:

Orientation – This section is an introduction to the model and the definition of "gifted". It assists students in self-recognition, team building and autonomous learning, and provides an overview of the programme and the students' responsibilities. (<http://www.edb.gov.hk>)

It is obvious that there is a relationship between autonomous learning and students' disposition and motivation. This idea is reinforced by Ecclestone's empirical studies on the relationship between motivation, autonomy and assessment (Ecclestone, 2002). Reference can also be drawn from Biggs' research on students' approaches to learning conducted in the local context. In his discussion of student autonomy, Benson states that 'SAL research also provides some evidence that a predisposition to deep, holistic approaches to learning will be more conducive to autonomous learning than a predisposition towards surface, atomistic approaches' (Benson, 1998, p.8). Here, the point is if there is a connection between the approaches adopted by those high-achievers and autonomous learning, do students who are perceived as less academically-oriented and competent, the students studying in the case institute, view autonomous learning in the same or different way? Are they capable of becoming autonomous learners?

With a view to answering these questions and gain a deeper understanding of autonomous learning, the research questions aim to solicit students' and teachers' views and experiences in relation to autonomous learning in a non-mainstream vocational institution in Hong Kong.

1.5 Research questions

In order to deal with the complex nature of the phenomenon under investigation, the aims and objectives of the research are translated into the following specific research questions which facilitate collection of data with a view to addressing the problem in the context in which the researcher functions as a part:

1. In what ways do students construe autonomous learning?
2. In what ways do teachers construe autonomous learning?
3. What value do students place upon autonomous learning?
4. What value do teachers place upon autonomous learning?
5. How do students' views on autonomous learning relate to their manner of educational engagement?
6. How do teachers' views on autonomous learning relate to their pedagogical

practice?

7. What are the similarities and differences between the students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning?

1.6 Significance and outcomes of the study

Research on perceptions of autonomous learning and student autonomy has been done with university students who receive mainstream education in the Hong Kong context. However, not much has been explored among students who are less academically-oriented opting for vocational education and training at a foundation level. This group of students is generally perceived as lacking in academic ability, unmotivated and less competent in managing their own studies for most of them have experienced repeated failures in both school and public examinations in the mainstream educational system. There is certainly a lack of research in the non-mainstream vocational context in the Hong Kong setting with regard to autonomous learning. Equally lacking in the literature is teachers' perspectives on this notion in the non-mainstream educational setting. Such a gap in knowledge and understanding has to be filled if the teachers are to tailor learning and teaching to meet the needs of the students of the case institute and, more importantly, to reflect

on their own practice and promote autonomous learning.

1.7 Standpoint of the researcher

The researcher has been working in VTB for more than 10 years. Being an insider allows the researcher to develop an acute awareness of the mission, values, culture and practice of the Bureau and the case institute. Notwithstanding this understanding, the researcher was not working as a teacher at the case institute but deployed as a Project Officer responsible for a programme accreditation project in another campus when she conducted this study. The participants were therefore not personally acquainted with the researcher. This helped to emphasise and project the non-judgmental role of the researcher aiming to answer the specific research questions with regard to the autonomous learning from the point of views of the participants.

It has come to the researcher's attention that the institute and its management team have adopted a very instrumental definition of autonomous learning. That is to say, if students are given additional learning hours and physical resources in their educational engagement, they will become autonomous learners. Is this view shared

by the teachers and students themselves? Contrary to what the institute administrators think, the researcher believes that the notion of autonomous learning is a lot more complicated than it looks. A deeper understanding is necessary if the institute aims to promote autonomous learning without a waste of efforts and resources. Given that the researcher is engaged professionally in the institution in which the study is conducted, the pros and cons of insider research will be addressed in the methodology chapter in this thesis.

1.8 Chapter outlines for the rest of the thesis

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature which discusses and examines major findings of research relevant to the present study. The wider context prevalent in Hong Kong will also be considered. Chapter 3 presents a justification for the choice of the interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology with the use of semi-structured interviews for the present study. This chapter also describes the sampling method and how the interviews were conducted as well as how the interview data were analysed subsequently. It continues with a discussion of the problems associated with validity and reliability arising from this study and how they were dealt with by the researcher. This is followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations

pertaining to the participants and limitations of the research method.

Chapters 4 and 5 present, analyse and synthesise the major findings of this study in relation to students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning respectively and the value they place upon autonomous learning and autonomy specifically. The two chapters also examine the relationship between their perceptions and their classroom practices. The findings are organised into sections which reveal the themes and patterns emerging from the analysis of the areas of convergence and divergence from the interview data. Chapter 6 presents an interpretation of the major findings, discussed in chapters 4 and 5, in relation to the body of literature identified in chapter 2, as an attempt to address all the specific research questions of the present study. Such interpretation leads on to the final concluding chapter which includes a discussion of the significance and contribution of this research and the implications of the research findings in the context of the YI. This is followed by some recommendations for the senior management of the institute. It ends with an evaluation of the research in the form of a reflective account of the researcher and suggestions for further research in related areas or contexts.

1.9 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has conceptualised the research problem based on her understanding and knowledge of the specific vocational context in which she identifies herself with and the wider context of Hong Kong experiencing a reform culture at the time when the present study was conducted. The researcher has also set the parameters for this research project by introducing the specific research questions which reflect its aims and objectives and issues found in the literature which are considered relevant. This body of literature will be discussed in depth in the next chapter of the thesis.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview

This chapter reviews the literature in three areas, namely learning theories, social psychology and student-teacher interaction, which are considered most relevant to the present study. In relation to the learning theories, the close relationship between processes and outcomes of learning is echoed in Biggs' discussion of the 3P model of classroom learning (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). The presage factors including students' and teachers' perceptions, their value, motivation, learning environment, etc. will have an impact on the process component resulting in different outcomes. These outcomes defined in terms of student achievement depend heavily on how students approach the task, the process of which refers to the teaching and learning mix that goes on during classroom interaction. In relation to the social psychological theories, Ecclestone (2002) and Benson (1887, 1998 & 2000) theorise different forms / levels of autonomy which are related to different models of teaching and learning. They are, in turn, underpinned by different conceptions of learning. This relationship is also emphasised by Askew and Lodge (2000) i.e. people have different perceptions of feedback, its function and process based on

different conceptions of learning. These different levels of autonomy imply different types of interaction between students and teachers in the classroom. Ecclestone (2002) has pointed out that autonomy should not be seen simply as a goal of learning but it should also be recognised as processes promoting different types of autonomy. In relation to the theories on student-teacher interaction, the dynamic nature of interaction in the classroom is captured in Cooper and McIntyre's bi-directional influence of students' and teachers' classroom thinking and strategies (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996). This is congruent with Kinchin's hypothesis that a match of students' and teachers' epistemological position is likely to maximise learning effectiveness (Kinchin, 2004).

The discussion draws a boundary around the issues to be explored and identifies themes related to autonomous learning in the literature. This, in turn, helps the researcher to develop a conceptual framework which informs the data collection and data analysis processes with an ultimate aim of contributing to the existing body of knowledge in relation to autonomous learning.

2.2 Introduction

This study was undertaken at a time when there was an overhaul of the educational system in Hong Kong. Under the new '3+3+4' academic structure, all students would have the opportunity to complete a 3-year senior secondary course. There would be a single public examination at the end of the 3-year senior secondary course, instead of two examinations within four years under the current 3+2+2+3 academic structure. Higher education institutions will then complement the system, by offering 4-year undergraduate degree programmes, for more balanced and all-round development of our students.

In the mainstream education system, there would be the first cohort of senior secondary students in 2009. These students would need to take four core subjects, namely Chinese, English, Mathematics and Liberal Studies, and a few elective subjects. The diversified curriculum aimed to broaden students' knowledge base and enhance their language and mathematical abilities. Together with the 4-year tertiary education, the new '3+3+4' academic system would align Hong Kong's academic system with the mainstream international systems. It would lead to multiple progression pathways and facilitate smoother articulation to higher levels of studies

in academic, vocational and professional fields.

These changes were the backbone of the government's initiative in promoting lifelong learning in the local community with the vision of developing Hong Kong as a regional education hub. The importance of lifelong learning as recognised by the government and the wider public was the primary goal of her education system. This was highlighted in a speech delivered by the then Secretary for Education and Manpower at the opening ceremony of the International Conference on 'Internationalisation of Lifelong Education: Policy and Issues' in 2004:

The philosophy of lifelong education is that learning is an un-ending process crucial both to self-actualisation and social development..... We hope children coming through our education system will not only be effective learners at school, but will remain as critical, reflective and independent thinkers after they leave school.

According to Ecclestone (2002), these goals of 'independence' and 'self-actualisation' are integral to 'procedural autonomy' and 'personal (practical) autonomy' proposed in an empirical study about the relationship between

motivation and autonomy and their links to assessment practices in the context of post-16 vocational education in the UK. In the local vocational context in which this study was undertaken, lifelong learners was taken as synonymous with autonomous learners. To align with the reform proposed in the mainstream education system, vocational education and training programmes offered by the Vocational Training Bureau (VTB) had to be restructured and made flexible in order to cater for students with different entry qualifications, i.e. Secondary 4 to 6. Likewise, students could choose to exit at different levels of the system with awards ranging from certificate to higher diploma levels depending on their own interests and aspirations.

Changes in the context of the Bureau accelerated with the advent of the Qualifications Framework (QF) launched in May 2008 by the local government with a view to helping students draw up their roadmaps to upgrade themselves and acquire higher qualifications, thereby facilitating everyone in the pursuit of lifelong education. Technically, the QF is a seven-level cross-sectoral hierarchy that orders and supports qualifications of academic, vocational and continuing education (HKQF website). The introduction of the QF speeds up the process of change in the context in which this study was conducted. Programmes offered by all the member institutes of the Council had to be pegged at matching QF levels and they were

striving to establish a system through which credits attained by students could be appropriately transferred vertically and / or horizontally, so that students could enter and exit at different points and different times of their learning pathways.

Under this climate of change, the Bureau echoed the government's advocacy of lifelong learning. The initiative of forging 'lifelong partnership with students' presented in the Bureau's second 8-year strategic plan (released in 2008) was given a lot of attention. This theme resonated with the government's understanding of lifelong learning as it was considered as synonymous with the quality and competence of being able to learn autonomously, suggesting a strong association with the concept of 'independence'. In the case of the member institute, the Youth Institute (YI), in which this study was conducted, it was envisaged that if students were provided with informed choices about their learning and equipped with necessary skills, they could learn autonomously and hence climb up the 'QF ladder'. This, in turn, served to fulfil the social expectation of enhancing mobility in the lifelong education system, a pre-requisite for transforming Hong Kong into a knowledge-based society and maintaining Hong Kong's overall competitiveness in a globalised economy.

The researcher has no reservation in recognising autonomous learning as the ultimate goal of education in both the mainstream and vocational settings. But what exactly is autonomous learning? There is no clue as to how the two main stakeholders in the vocational education and training context, namely students and teachers, perceive autonomous learning. In what ways are their perceptions similar to or different from each other's? More specifically, what value do they place on autonomous learning? Nor is the relationship between their perceptions and practices well understood. It is therefore necessary to recognise these issues before autonomous learning can be promoted in the YI context. It is also hoped that this study could inform policy and practice associated with autonomous learning so that the institute could meet the challenges ahead and adapt itself comfortably to the changes prevalent in the wider context.

A review of relevant literature pertaining to autonomous learning helps the researcher define and subsequently refine interview questions through which the data are obtained in this qualitative case study. It also informs the researcher throughout the data analysis process. Finally, it forms the basis on which the findings of this study can be compared and contrasted with. The following review is divided into three parts. Sections 2.3 and 2.4, concerning specific research questions

1 and 2, explore the meanings of autonomous learning in studies conducted in different contexts. Sections 2.5 and 2.6 examine the value associated with autonomous learning and the construct of autonomy which relates to specific research questions 3 and 4. Section 2.7, pertaining to specific research questions 5 and 6, focuses on how students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning are related to what actually happens in the classrooms. Discussions in these sections will shed light on the question which explores how similar or different their perceptions are.

2.3 Views of learning and knowledge of teachers and students

Askew and Lodge (2000) describe the relationship between the views of teaching and the epistemological positions held by different people which are described as 'theories of knowledge and how it is acquired' (Askew and Lodge, 2000, p.15). These positions also influence their perceptions of feedback. In the 'transmission-receptive model', learning is regarded as an individual responsibility. Teachers and learners assume distinctive roles of transmitters of knowledge and passive recipients of knowledge respectively. The direction of communication is seen as one-way, from teachers to students.

The above pattern is contrasted with a different model of teaching which is in line with a constructivist view of learning, as suggested by Askew and Lodge.

In the constructivist model knowledge is constructed by the learner, including through activities such as participatory learning, open-ended questioning, discussion and discovery learning. Knowledge is related to the learner's everyday life and experiences. (Askew and Lodge, 2000, p.9)

The 'co-constructive' model of teaching posited by Askew and Lodge (2000) is underpinned by a different epistemological position which involves a more equal and dynamic relationship between the students and the teachers.

Learning, in this model, involves reflective processes, critical investigation, analysis, interpretation and reorganisation of knowledge...

Students produce work or solve problems that have meaning in the real world so that their work is intrinsically significant, not just proof that they can do well in school. (Askew and Lodge, 2000, p.11)

It is important to explore students' and teachers' views of learning and knowledge if

the researcher is to answer the questions pertaining to their perceptions of autonomous learning.

2.4 Learning as a process and a product

The epistemological positions held by students and teachers are also recognised by Biggs as the ‘presage’ component which feeds into the ‘process’ stage. The ‘process’ component describes how students will engage a task which leads to the ‘product’ component in terms of learning outcomes (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). Students holding a constructivist view of learning are likely to use a ‘deep approach’ which ‘involves processes of a higher cognitive level than rote learning: searching for analogies, relating to previous knowledge, theorising about what is learned, and deriving extensions and exceptions, involving both convergent and divergent processes’ (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.153). The quality that marks them off from other students is their endeavour to reflect metacognitively on what is to be done. According to Biggs, metacognition is closely related to autonomy which ‘includes those processes that imply self-determination, or autonomy, in learning and problem solving’ (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.149). By implication, autonomous learners can be interpreted as ‘metacognitive learners’ and ‘deep learners’ who thrive in a

constructivist classroom environment.

2.5 Typologies of autonomy

Central to the discussion of autonomous learning is the concept of autonomy.

Autonomy is a multi-faceted and encompassing concept, which is often used interchangeably with self-directed learning (Candy, 1991), self-access learning (Gardner & Miller, 1994), self-regulated learning (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001) and even teacher autonomy (Aoki claims that teacher autonomy is a necessary condition for the development of learner autonomy (Aoki in Benson & Toogoo, 2002)). Studies in this area suggest that autonomy is mostly interpreted as both a goal and a process; although, it is implied that the term can mean different things to different learners and it can also be manifested differently in different cultures (Watkins and Biggs, 1996).

2.5.1 Ecclestone's typology of autonomy in relation to motivation and formative assessment

Ecclestone distinguishes autonomy as a general 'educational and social goal' from

being ‘the processes and conditions that enable people to act autonomously’ (2002, p.35) in a framework that relates three types of autonomy to different models of learning and teaching, different types of motivation as well as different practices of formative assessment. In her words,

Following Carr and Kemmis, the typology proposes that autonomy can be procedural (technical); personal (practical – as in one’s own ‘practices’); critical and, ultimately, emancipatory. It relates autonomy to three different models of teaching and learning: transmission, transaction or transformation (see Haywood, 1997). Each type of autonomy suggests a different underlying motive (or motives). The typology also suggests that there is overlap and fluctuation between different motives and forms of autonomy during a learning programme. In addition, different formative assessment practices may encourage one type of autonomy more than another. (Ecclestone, 2002, p. 35)

In this light, autonomy can be interpreted in terms of classroom processes and student learning outcomes. Different types of autonomy depict different types of relationship and interaction between teachers and students in the classrooms. They

can also be associated with different types of learning outcomes on the part of the students. These different forms of autonomy are underpinned by different types of motivation and assessment practices.

With regard to what occurs in the classroom, ‘procedural autonomy’ (Ecclestone, 2002) relates to a transmission style of teaching and learning whereby the teacher transmits knowledge to the students. Knowledge in such a framework is seen as static and unquestionable. It is pre-defined by the teacher and can be passed onto the students. Despite this one-way communication from teachers to students, students may negotiate with their teachers over types of, pace and timing of learning activities and assessment tasks. It involves some degree of transaction between teachers and students over their learning.

The types of learning outcomes associated with ‘procedural autonomy’ are ‘proactivity, independence, self-reliance and confidence with language’ (Ecclestone, 2002, p. 36). ‘Procedural autonomy’ is largely driven by an outcomes-based assessment system whereby students are very familiar with the technical language, i.e. the criteria for marking. The job of the teachers is therefore to check closely whether these criteria have been passed onto the students and also whether they can

meet these criteria over the process of learning and assessment. Despite having initiative, an awareness of responsibility and ‘confidence of language’, there is a lack of critical engagement with the subject and the criteria. As learners, they are aware of what to do but not why they have to do it.

‘Procedural autonomy’ (Ecclestone, 2002) is underpinned by a behaviourist view of learning and therefore ‘external’ and ‘introjected’ types of motivation (Prenzel et al, in Ecclestone, 2002). Students come to terms with the learning outcomes and assessment criteria prescribed by their teachers or the schools. Though this type of autonomy and motivation may not be a desirable goal, it can be argued that ‘procedural autonomy may actually be a pre-requisite or a co-requisite for more sophisticated forms of personal and critical autonomy’ (Bates, in Ecclestone, 2002, p.37).

Ecclestone (2002) posits that there is also ‘personal autonomy’ in post-compulsory education. As the term ‘personal’ implies, the drive is from within the learners themselves, underpinned by ‘identified’ and ‘intrinsic’ motivation (Prenzel et al, in Ecclestone, 2002). It thus involves self-regulation, self-direction, self-actualisation and self-knowledge. Its development relates to a transactional style of teaching and

learning building on interaction and good relationship between teachers and students. There is a shift of focus from the teachers, as in 'procedural autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002), to the students in terms of classroom processes. Students are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and also choices available to them such that they can negotiate with their teachers over learning outcomes intended for them. Peer assessment and teachers' individualised feedback foster the development of 'personal autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002).

In this light, 'personal autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002) has its ground on a social constructivist view about learning. In such a learning and teaching environment, students and teachers and students themselves work together in problem-solving tasks, trying to internalise the rules and procedures and turn them into their self-knowledge which directs their own learning. This social process is captured in Vygotsky's famous concept of 'Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)' in relation to the development of autonomy.

Ecclestone proposes a third type of autonomy – 'critical autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002). 'Critical autonomy' is integral to critical thinking, reflection and engagement with the subject a student is pursuing. It is underpinned by both the transactional

and transformational types of teaching and learning, the environment of which encourages free exchanges of views and ideas between teachers and students. Teachers in this context should be prepared to be challenged intellectually and, likewise, students themselves should also be willing to challenge each other's ideas. They are able to internalise assessment requirements and teachers' feedback to create new knowledge and improve performance. Students approach their studies with an awareness of ethical values specific to the subject as well as social and cultural considerations specific to the context.

Autonomous learning, in Ecclestone's sense, could be portrayed as a continuum with overlapping and fluctuating qualities/features. Its development is context-specific and subject-specific. Students may move back and forth on the continuum displaying various kinds of autonomy. They may progress from the more basic form of 'procedural autonomy' to the deeper kind of autonomy, i.e. 'critical autonomy', depending on the subjects they are studying and the context in which they pursue their studies. Students having developed 'critical autonomy' in one subject or under a particular context may retreat to a shallower form of autonomy if unfavourable climate sets in.

In the case of the present study, how can the researcher translate the specific research questions into interview questions which allow her to gain insight into students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning? Interview questions directed to the participants should be focusing on exploring their views on the nature of learning and knowledge, meanings of autonomous learning and value of autonomy, their experiences of learning and teaching in the classroom, motivation behind learning, and their relationships with the development of autonomous learning in the vocational context.

In the local context, with the advent of the QF, learners' achievements in the academic and vocational settings are prescribed as learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and application. In relation to autonomy, the concept is reflected as an outcome in terms of competency:

QF Level	Autonomy
7	High degree of autonomy
6	Practise significant autonomy
5	Work under the mentoring of senior qualified practitioners
4	Operate within broad general guidelines or functions

3	Self-directed with guidance
2	Directed with a degree of autonomy
1	Under close supervision, prompting or mentoring

(Extracted from ‘Guidelines on Moderation’ in the website of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications at <http://www.hkcaavq.edu.hk>)

The above prescriptions recognise autonomy as a general goal of education, interpreted as learning outcomes students are expected to achieve. Students and teachers are therefore required to present evidence of achievement of these outcomes to the accrediting bodies for qualifications assessment or formal recognition. Such transparency can help to convey clear messages to various stakeholders (academic staff, students, industry, government, parents, employment, etc.) on what a learning programme can lead to. There is, however, a lack of distinction between viewing autonomy simply as an outcome and a complex process which involves interaction between students and teachers. As Ecclestone (2002) recognises, such differentiation is necessary if the aim is to promote autonomy of its deepest form. The QF specifications on the concept of autonomy, as the wording implies, do suggest some kind of relationship and interdependence between teachers

and students in the learning and teaching process. This idea is captured in the concept of 'bi-directionality' which is essentially 'the ways in which teachers' strategies and behaviours influence their pupils, and pupils' strategies and behaviours influence their teachers' (Shavelson et al in Cooper and McIntyre, 1996) and further explored by Cooper and McIntyre (1996) in their study about teachers' and students' perceptions of effective learning in the UK context.

2.5.2 Benson's version of autonomy in relation to language learning

Benson (1997, 1998 & 2001) explores students' views of autonomy in the tertiary educational setting in Hong Kong. He interprets autonomy as students having control and responsibility by reiterating that:

The crux of autonomy is understood as student control over learning, which comprises active involvement in the learning process, responsibility for its content, control over factors such as the time, frequency, pace, settings and methods of learning, and critical awareness of purposes and goals. (Benson, 1998, p.3)

Like Ecclestone (2002), autonomy can further be located at three different levels in the context of language education:

At the technical level, it is concerned with management, strategies and techniques of learning. At the psychological level, it is concerned with the inner capacity for self-direction or self-regulation of learning. At the political level, it is concerned with control over situational contexts of learning. (Benson, 1998, p.3)

The technical dimension of autonomy is associated with the development of learning skills and strategies. These include an awareness of the purpose and outcomes of learning a student is pursuing. Having such awareness enables the student to plan his / her learning paths, monitor his / her progress and subsequently evaluate his / her success. An autonomous learner should also be able to modify the course of his / her actions if the situation changes or if he / she detects problem during the learning process.

At the technical level, autonomy deals with how a learner approaches his / her learning in terms of the strategies he/she is going to employ. Here, reference can be

drawn from Biggs' research on students' approaches to learning conducted in the local context. Replicating his studies in Australia, Biggs identifies three approaches to learning among students studying at the tertiary and secondary levels in Hong Kong, namely the surface, deep and achieving approaches (Biggs, 1992). There is also evidence suggesting that students who adopt a deep approach to learning are more autonomous (Benson, 1998). The link between mastery of strategies and development of autonomy is also echoed in Barnes' discussion of classroom communication. In his words, 'the more a learner controls his own learning strategies, and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can take responsibility for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them' (Barnes, 1991, p.29).

At the psychological level, autonomy is connected to the idea of whether a learner has an inner capacity for directing himself / herself in the learning process. This is essentially Candy's concept of 'personal autonomy' (Candy, 1991). This aspect of autonomy is also captured in Little's definition of the term (Little, 1991).

Essentially, autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails,

that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts. (Little, 1991, p.4)

The ability to guide one's learning can thus be interpreted as one's control over motivational factors and his / her self concept. It is posited that if the driving force or motive behind learning is from within the learner, this learner has a higher level of autonomy. As a learner's level of motivation is linked up with how he / she perceives himself / herself, it can also be argued that autonomous learners have a more positive self-concept (Ushioda, 1996).

At the political level, autonomy is concerned with control over situational factors such as content and process of learning. This is essentially the sense of ownership of issues like time, frequency, pace, physical settings, learning resources, etc. It also suggests whether students have the right to negotiate with their teachers or the institutions what they are going to learn, how they are going to learn as well as how they are going to be assessed during the process. Here, a lot of issues seem relevant to the concept of political autonomy which has not been captured in related

literature. Are teachers ready to share their power over the content and process of learning with their students? Are they ready to involve their students in the decision-making process? From the point of view of the students, are they willing to take up those rights over what and how they are going to learn? Will they regard such empowerment as an advantage or a threat to their learning? In this regard, it is worthwhile exploring the concept of accountability, or responsibility as referred to by a number of researchers researching on the notion of autonomy. The critical issue here is: To whom are our students accountable? Do they think they should be accountable to themselves, which is basically the prevalent culture in the western world? Or should they be accountable to their parents, teachers or the society as a whole, a situation which is not uncommon in Chinese communities?

Benson's categorisation of attitudes to autonomy in language learning (Benson, 1997, 1998 & 2001) is resonant with Ecclestone's analysis of relationship between autonomy and the nature of knowledge (Ecclestone, 2002). From the positivist perspective, knowledge is a representation of objective reality. This view provides a rationale for explicit teaching. Positivists are typically concerned with enabling students to manage non-traditional learning environments e.g. self-access centres which enhance technical autonomy. From the constructivist perspective, knowledge

is the social construction of learners, who use the opportunity provided in the learning situations to construct their own learning. This develops psychological autonomy. From the critical theory perspective, knowledge is an ideological construction. The resulting pedagogy aims to empower students to develop a critical awareness of the social context of their learning and to seek control over the content and processes of their learning. Such political autonomy allows students to use language to challenge existing beliefs and rewrite the way people learn to construct new sets of beliefs. It is therefore emancipatory in nature.

2.6 Value of autonomous learning

If the researcher follows the perspectives of the social constructivists that a child's cognitive development and learning is closely tied with his/her culture which can be defined as the attitudes, values and beliefs of a group of people hold, it seems reasonable to think that cultural differences with regard to the value of autonomous learning can possibly be identified.

Relationship between thought and culture is very clearly spelt out in Vygotsky's cultural line of development, made possible by a child's use of language, originates

from his/her natural line of development (in Wertsch, 1985, p. 72). The essence is that a child develops along the natural line at the beginning stage. As s/he is starting to use language, s/he is then being 'diverted' or 'transcended' to the cultural line of development as language is a social and cultural entity. Such change or transformation enables the child to acquire those higher mental functions which facilitate learning. Hence, the development of autonomy ('volition' in Vygotsky's term), being one of these higher functions, is social in origin. It follows that autonomy has a distinctive form or shape varying from one culture to another.

Coining different terminology, Bruner (1987), Barnes (1991) and Wood (1998) are indeed continuing the same line of arguments as Vygotsky's in terms of the relationship between thought and culture. They also place emphasis on social interaction between experienced members and inexperienced members in a society as well as the role of communication and instruction in providing people with a framework to act, think and learn. Likewise, differentiated by different systems of languages, symbols and signs, people from different cultures act upon the world and hence structure, shape or formulate meaning and knowledge about the world in very different ways. When it comes to the conception of learning and, more specifically, autonomous learning, it might be very important and highly valued in one culture

but not so in another one.

To reiterate the argument here, if the position that culture, thought and learning are inseparable stands, it seems logical to think that Chinese students and teachers might place different value on autonomous learning or value autonomous learning in different ways. As discussed in the previous section, the concept of autonomous learning as explored in various research studies in different contexts suggests that it is associated with such ideas as independence, choice and control, responsibility, decision making, etc. Pertaining to the present study is the core question: are these valued by students and teachers in the case institute? If the answer to this question is affirmative, how do the students perceive their own role and their teachers' in autonomous learning? Likewise, how do the teachers perceive their own role and their students' in autonomous learning? Or could it be the case that students and teachers in the context of this case study see no value at all in autonomous learning?

In Chan's study investigating students' perceptions of autonomous learning in English language learning in the context of a local tertiary institution, the results indicated that a majority of students acknowledged autonomous learning as important and they evaluated it positively in the survey (Chan, 2001). The teachers

were still perceived as authority figures. But there was evidence that there was an 'important shift in the teacher and learner roles in the autonomous classroom' and that 'students showed certain readiness and preparedness to learn autonomously' (Chan, 2001, p.289). In the open-ended responses given by the students, autonomous learning was perceived to be associated with independence, choice, decision making, learner-centred activities, motivation, and space and freedom (Chan, 2001). This echoed what has been found in studies conducted in the western cultures. But the results in Chan's study suggested that students placed a great deal of emphasis on the ideas of interdependence, cooperation and interaction with their teachers in relation to autonomous learning.

Cultural differences in relation to any concepts about learning are also acknowledged by Biggs and his colleagues (Watkins and Biggs, 1996). Given its distinctive historical development, languages, values and social practices of the Chinese culture, it can be claimed that there seems to be major differences between the western and the Chinese cultures, or Confucian-heritage cultures, more specifically (Watkins and Biggs, 1996). Such differences, namely education policies and curricula, conceptions of teaching and learning held by both teachers and students, motivation, teaching methods, learning strategies, achievement or

attainment levels in terms of grades or marks, class size, etc. are so great that the researcher can almost jump to the conclusion that when it comes to autonomous learning, cultural differences are inevitable. But, as Biggs and his colleagues propose, if these issues are studied from the perspectives adopted by western educationalists, researchers, theorists and the like, the Chinese learners are bound to be misunderstood. Biggs and his colleagues posit that given the harsh conditions judging from the western educational standards, Chinese students show a high level of understanding despite the perception that they are passive rote learners (Watkins and Biggs, 2001).

Chinese students are never perceived as active learners enjoying autonomy in their learning given their passive role, which could be a product of expository or didactic teaching method, in a highly teacher-centred environment. Despite these unsatisfactory conditions, Chinese students thrive in public examinations. Why is it the case? The clue might be found in the conceptions of learning depicted in the vast amount of traditional Chinese literature which exhibits ancient values about education. These values have been passed on from one generation to the next. Such values are still influencing the perception and thinking of the Chinese.

Chinese learners are still, to a great extent, affected by the Confucian idea of ‘書中自有黃金屋，書中自有顏如玉’ meaning ‘knowledge gained from books will bring about all kinds of materialistic desires such as a good fortune, grand houses and beautiful wives’. To put it simply, the act of learning is to be associated with extrinsic rewards like fame, success and a prosperous future. Such ancient thinking was supported by a Civil Service examination with a long history in China which aimed to test candidates’ ability to reproduce classical works (Kennedy, 2002). The purpose of examining students was thus to select those who could then join the upper class in ancient Chinese society and be rewarded with official titles. The Chinese society definitely changes with the passage of time. The above description is still a true reflection of the education and examination systems in the local community which are still operating for the purpose of selecting elites and rewarding them with a chance of continuing their studies in a more prestigious and resourceful institution.

The sense of extrinsic motivation is pre-dominant in the minds of parents, teachers and students themselves in the local community. This is particularly so in the context of the present study where students are given an alternative route or a second chance of furthering their education in order to help them secure their living

in the future. In the YI context, teachers and students are engaged in a so-called apprenticeship relationship. Students are perceived as passive and dependent on their teachers who have dominating influence in the classrooms as they are the source of authority in such relationship. These conditions are considered unfavourable to the development of autonomous learning discussed in the previous section of this chapter. It is clear that the value teachers and students place upon autonomous learning could have an impact on the respective roles played by the teachers and the students in such a context.

Cultural differences are also evident in Lee's account of the conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition, of which there is always an emphasis on effort and will power (Watkins and Biggs, 1996). The latter notion is also held in high regard in Vygotsky's argument of the development of volition in a child's learning. However, it seems that in the western educational context, will power is never associated with effort. In the Confucian tradition, 'self-determination or will power is the driving force of effort' (Watkins and Biggs, 1996), which is, in turn, very much related to education and learning to the Confucianists. This association may seem illogical in the eyes of western educationalists and psychologists. In fact, as Lee mentioned, 'will power' is defined as 'steadfastness of purpose' in the Confucian tradition

(Watkins and Biggs, 1996). If one feels that what one is doing is right and will eventually lead to the goal, one will certainly put in effort. In the western context, however, will power is associated with autonomy and self-regulation over one's thinking and learning. Here, it seems that there are two different senses of autonomy held in the beliefs of the eastern and the western cultures.

Equally important, there is also an emphasis on 'reflective thinking' and 'questioning' in the learning process in Lee's argument (Watkins and Biggs, 1996) in the Confucian tradition. This stress is in line with Barnes' proposal of the importance of allowing students' the opportunity to reflect upon their own actions and thoughts for learning to take place (Barnes, 1991). However, in the Chinese context, these functions of reflecting and questioning are to be associated with memorising. Memorising is to be equated with rote learning and held in low regard with respect to learning in the west. In the Confucian tradition, however, the condition for these three, memorising, reflecting and questioning, has to be met to bring about effective learning, a topic which has been explored extensively by Biggs and his colleagues in the Hong Kong context.

The main concern of teachers and students in the Chinese culture is, undeniably, the

end-product of learning – autonomy. In the western context, however, it seems to be more important to define and therefore facilitate the process itself. That is to say, students should be given autonomy for effective learning to take place, a position advocated by various researchers researching on autonomous learning and the notion of autonomy discussed in the previous section. Perhaps, the difference between the two cultures is just a matter of focus.

Pertaining to the discussion here, both the eastern and the western cultures are concerned with ‘individualism’ in education. Lee highlights the notion of ‘learning for the sake of oneself’ (Watkins and Biggs, 1996) which is implied in the Chinese translation of the term ‘autonomy’ – *zi chu*. In Yu’s analysis (1985), learning is for the sake of the self which is an end to itself rather than a means to an end. In this sense, autonomy can be seen as both the end and the means to effective learning in the western context but the end only in the Confucian tradition.

In Bigg’s discussion of approaches to learning employed by students to handle their school tasks, autonomy can be interpreted as students’ engagement in the learning process which varies according to the different strategies used and motives displayed by the students (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). In Bigg’s term, those

achieving learners use a strategy that ‘involves optimal engagement in the task (like the deep strategy), such engagement is the means, not the ends (unlike the deep strategy)’ (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.153). The implication is that students adopting a deep approach to learning are likely to see autonomy as both the means and the ends of their learning, a view that is contrary to the writers’ described in the previous paragraph.

2.7 Autonomous learning in relation to interaction between students and teachers in the classrooms

2.7.1 Constructivist position

Greatly influenced by biological and genetic studies of his time, Piaget attempted to bridge the gap left by the behaviourists by filling it with a philosophy of the mind framed by action and logic. His theory sheds light on what is going on in a child’s mind as he develops. With regard to the role of autonomy in a child’s development and learning, no theorists or psychologists gave it a paramount status as Piaget did. He depicted a child as a little scientist working all by himself actively in the construction of meaning and thereby making sense of what is happening around him

without being told what to see and how to see things in the world. This sense of solidarity and autonomy is very obvious and thus important in structuring a child's cognitive development. 'Piaget's theory places action and self-directed problem-solving at the heart of learning and development. By acting on the world, the learner comes to discover how to control it' (Wood, 1998, p.5). This picture of a child engaging himself actively in everyday common tasks demanded by his immediate environment and subsequently tasks demanded by his teachers in the school environment and his determination to direct himself towards fulfilling his goal of constructing his own world is clearly presented in Piaget's theory.

According to Piaget, on his road to reaching the final stage of development i.e. formal operation level, which is also the ultimate goal of education, a child needs autonomy in a way that facilitates 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' (Wood, 1998). These two processes enable a child to acquire knowledge and organise his own thinking. The essence lies in a child's experience of a condition of imbalance in his mind, 'disequilibrium' in Piaget's term, which permits him to advance cognitively (Wood, 1998). The emphasis here is that the child himself experiences conflicting concepts brought about by his own actions. Ultimately, it is also the child himself who struggles to take in new concepts and at the same time fits into

the existing structure of his mind. This process or struggle will then give rise to a new structure resulting in evolution of the mind. His learning and development is thus made possible only by the child himself, not by any external agents or forces.

The importance of autonomy in a child's learning and development is evident in Piaget's stages of development. At the beginning of his life, a child is seen as egocentric. This egocentrism can be interpreted as being unable to take someone else's perspective. Developmentally, this child will become intellectually mature if he is able to free himself from his own views, engaging himself in social dialogues and thus taking in others' points of views. This sense of freedom and autonomy will also enable him to think in an abstract way and achieve 'hypothetico-deductive' thinking eventually (Wood, 1998).

Vygotsky embarked on the journey of theorising the development of the mind of a child. In his theoretical framework, reference to the issue of autonomy is very explicit.

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological

plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. (Vygotsky, in Wertsch, 1985, p. 164)

It is clear that the development of volition, which can be interpreted as a child's ability of exercising his will and making his own decisions, is one of the higher mental functions forming part of his learning. It follows that if an adult can help a child on his road to achieving autonomy, this child can actually be assisted in constructing his meaning of the world arriving at a state of mental maturation. It is equally clear that its transition from an interpsychological entity to become an intrapsychological one signifies a kind of transformation of the child's mind. Such a process of internalisation is made feasible, not by the realisation of logic as proposed in Piaget's framework, but by the use of language according to Vygotsky. Language and communication are given an unprecedented load in a child's cognitive development and his knowledge about the world. Autonomy can be achieved by his use of language, first as external speech in social activities involving other people and subsequently as inner speech which guides, directs and

regulates a child's thinking and learning when the external form gets internalised. The child is then able to plan and carry out sensible actions as a result of the evolution of inner speech. Wood's interpretation of Vygotsky's argument makes the relationship between autonomy and learning even more explicit.

Vygotsky argues that such external and social activities are gradually internalised by the child as he comes to regulate his own intellectual activity. Such encounters are the source of experiences which eventually create the "inner dialogues" that form the process of self-regulation. Viewed in this way, learning is taking place on at least two levels: the child is learning about the task, developing "local expertise"; and he is also learning how to structure his own learning and reasoning. (Wood, 1998, p.98)

It follows that if language used in social activities plays such an important role in the development of self-regulation, and in turn, such autonomy will enable the child to learn and think reasonably, perhaps, as teachers, something can be done about the language and environment in which students interact to prompt them on their way to reaching autonomy.

Bruner has taken one step further in demonstrating the value of autonomy in a child's learning by re-interpreting Vygotsky's famous concept of 'zone of proximal development' which can be seen as 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, in Wertsch, 1985, p. 24). The role of an experienced adult, who is most likely to be perceived as a teacher or tutor, is highly evident in supporting a child's or a student's learning. According to Bruner, effective learning will take place if a learner is able to achieve 'consciousness and control' which underpin autonomous learning. For a teacher to facilitate learning, i.e. to acquire conscious control over the learner's actions and thinking, he/she will have to 'serve the learner as a vicarious form of consciousness until such a time as the learner is able to master his own action through his own consciousness and control' (Bruner, in Wertsch, 1985, p.24). The job of a teacher is to set the goal for the learner at the initial stage of learning and then 'scaffold' the tasks in such a way that they enable the learner to advance and accomplish beyond his /her present level of cognitive development. It is evident that for a learner to achieve autonomy, he/she needs to rely on the teacher at the beginning stage of the learning process.

Even though the learner has to move around the scaffolds built by the teacher, it does not imply that this learner is expected to copy the teacher or do what is told, a perspective which has been taken by the behaviourists. On the contrary, the learner is given all the freedom and flexibility to explore within the zone. The success, good learning and therefore advancement in intellectual development, still lies in the learner himself, i.e. whether he is willing to take the trouble to engage himself actively in the tasks in collaboration with his teacher. Considering language acquisition as a paradigm to illustrate the broader picture of how a child learns other higher mental functions, Bruner maintains that ‘anything the child masters is his to use and there is no question about whether, how, or why it should be used in speech. All such decisions are left to the learner’ (Bruner, in Wertsch, 1985, p.28). The teacher is given the job to offer assistance when the learner cannot manage the task in hand and eventually let go of the learner when he achieves full autonomy over his actions and thinking.

Synthesising arguments initiated by social constructivists, Barnes proposes a curriculum which takes into consideration the dual role of language, first ‘as the communication system of classroom and school’ and second, ‘as a means of learning’ (Barnes, 1991, p. 31). The first role of language is concerned with the

interaction between both the teacher and the students in a classroom during which social learning is taking place. Each party in the classroom has certain knowledge to contribute to the organisation of reality as each one of them can be viewed as a living representation of that particular culture. The second role of language is about how students use their language in a way which enables them to structure and transform their thinking. This dual function of language or speech is actually the essence of Vygotsky's argument which frames his theory of a child's cognitive and cultural development.

As these two functions of language are inseparable, the job of a teacher is not to pass on knowledge to students in shaping their expectations and the social reality in a broader sense. The teacher concerned should be obliged to allow opportunity for students to explore and interpret freely what is said in the classroom. Such exchange or negotiation of meaning between the teacher and students as well as among students themselves will serve to transform students' thinking helping them to acquire concepts and develop intellectually as a result.

Language is not the same as thought, but it allows us to reflect upon our thoughts. The metaphor contained in 'reflect' is here highly appropriate:

what we say and write mirrors our thought processes, and enables us to take responsibility for them. Thus children and adults alike are not only receiving knowledge but remaking it for themselves. (Barnes, 1991, p.20)

Language, both its spoken and written forms, should serve as a means for students to reflect upon the exchanges made in the classroom. The task of constructing their knowledge and trying to make sense of it in line with their purpose or goal is to be carried out by students themselves.

In Barnes' studies of classroom communication, if students are given opportunities for doing 'exploratory talk', they are capable of directing themselves in formulating hypotheses and explanations and most importantly, in the construction of meaning about our world. This could only be made possible if the teacher involved is willing to empower students and sacrifice his or her position as an authoritative figure in exchange for an atmosphere which is conducive to open discussions and ultimately for learning to take place. In his words, 'the more a learner controls his own learning strategies, and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can take responsibility for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them' (Barnes, 1991, p.29).

2.7.2 Teacher-student influence in the classroom

Building on the concept of 'bi-directionality', Cooper and McIntyre (1996) dig deeper into teacher-student influence on each other's behaviour and thinking by looking into different strategies employed by teachers in response to their perceptions of students' interests and abilities. Such adaptation, manifested in 'interactive teaching' and 'reactive teaching' (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996), supports a transactional theory of learning proposed by Bruner (1987). They describe the key patterns of these two modes of teaching in this way:

When engaged in interactive teaching, the teacher integrated knowledge of students with preactive plans, in a way that placed the main emphasis on preset learning goals and the demands of the curriculum. When engaged in reactive teaching, teachers evolved plans more directly from their knowledge of students. Reactive teaching was characterised by the teacher's willingness to adjust learning objectives in order to accommodate student interests and intentions. (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996, p.119)

Bruner's ideas of 'students' scripts', 'scaffolding' and 'calibration' (1987) are manifested differently in the interactive mode and the reactive mode of teaching strategies. Despite their different manifestations, both types of teaching strategies suggest interdependence between teachers' and students' inputs in the classroom process. Cooper and McIntyre (1996) also posit that these two types of teaching strategies can be embedded into a wider continuum of teaching strategies, with transmission style on the one end and approaches promoting self-directed learning on the other. This suggests that autonomous learning is related to how teachers approach teaching which, in turn, is influenced by students' behaviour. As a result, teachers can be seen to move back and forth along the continuum accommodating students' response and their own classroom thinking during their interaction.

Along the argument for a transactional theory of learning, Cooper and McIntyre (1996) recognise the importance of 'affect' and 'the individual's self-image' which have a part to play in shaping the teacher's decision of an appropriate form of interaction. The two elements entail a supportive and trust-filled classroom environment where 'the learner feels valued and respected by the significant others with whom he or she is expected to interact in the learning process' (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996, p.118) .

2.7.3 Roles of students and teachers

Kinchin (2004) also recognises the dynamic nature of the interaction between students and teachers in the learning and teaching process. Its effectiveness is largely affected by students' perception of their role as learners. The role they choose or prefer is, in turn, affected by their understanding of their teachers' beliefs and expectations. In other words, both students and teachers have their own epistemological views on the learning and teaching process and their views will exert influence on each other. According to Kinchin (2004), congruence between students' and teachers' epistemological position in relation to classroom philosophy and practice is likely to maximise students' learning. In his study, a majority of students preferred to study in a 'constructivist classroom' where the learning and teaching process is essentially transactional in nature. Both students and teachers work together to find out each other's expectation, a starting point for 'active building of understanding' (Kinchin, 2004). For this to work, teachers must be willing to adopt a teaching strategy that is truly constructivist in order to match with students' epistemological position. This requires the teachers to engage students in meaningful dialogue to find out their learning needs. Another point relevant to the present study is that, in Kinchin's study (2004), many students associated the

constructivist learning environments with independence and greater ownership of their learning, themes picked up by Ecclestone (2002) and Benson (1997, 1998 & 2001) in their research on autonomy.

2.8 Conclusions

A number of researchers explore the relationship between students' and teachers' perceptions and their conceptions of learning. Askew and Lodge (2000) examine different views of teaching and roles of teachers and how these are related to people's views of learning. Such understanding is further extended to describe people's perceptions of feedback which is broadly defined by Askew and Lodge as 'all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations' (Askew and Lodge, 2000, p.1). This is supported by Biggs' discussion on the approaches to learning adopted by different students which, in turn, are influenced by their conceptions of learning and knowledge. Kinchin (2004) suggests that the effectiveness of learning and teaching is largely influenced by students' and teachers' epistemological positions. The alignment between people's perceptions and their epistemological positions sheds light on the present study. This provides a framework which guides and facilitates the data collection process and the

subsequent task of data analysis pertaining to students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and the value they place on autonomous learning.

This framework has been captured in Ecclestone's (2002) and Benson's (1997, 1998 & 2001) discussion of the different forms of autonomy which are built upon different conceptions of learning and teaching. These different levels of autonomy imply different types of interaction between the students and the teachers in the classroom which can further be interpreted as classroom processes. Ecclestone has pointed out that autonomy should not be seen simply as a goal of learning but it should also be recognised as processes promoting different types of autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002). The close relationship between processes and outcomes of learning is echoed in Bigg's discussion of the '3P model of classroom learning' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). The learning outcomes defined in terms of student achievement depend heavily on how students approach the tasks, the process of which refers to 'the teaching-learning mix that goes on during classroom interaction' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.155). The dynamic nature of interaction in the classroom is emphasised in Cooper and McIntyre's bi-directional influence of students' and teachers' classroom thinking and strategies (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996), a theme that is congruent with Kinchin's ideas (2004).

A thread that connects all the relevant research studies discussed in this chapter is that a desirable type of processes and outcomes is to be built on a constructivist view of learning and teaching which is transactional and collaborative in nature requiring both the students and the teachers to engage in the tasks.

2.9 Summary

In this chapter, a number of empirical studies relevant to autonomous learning has been examined which supports the claim that autonomous learning can be interpreted not just as students' learning outcomes but also classroom processes experienced by both teachers and students. It is evident that there are different forms of autonomy which are closely related to different models of teaching and learning. This relationship is, in turn, underpinned by students' and teachers' conceptions of learning and knowledge, motivations and their perceptions of their roles in the learning process. The researcher also notes that the value of autonomous learning can be culturally specific as virtues highly respected by one cultural group may not gain the same status in another cultural group.

3 Research Design and Method

3.1 Overview

This chapter discusses the paradigmatic underpinnings in relation to the research aims and objectives of the present study. This comes with a justification of the choice of an appropriate method of enquiry in the tradition of the interpretive paradigm. This is followed by a discussion of the data collection instrument and data analysis method. These methodological issues prompt the researcher to consider critically the validity and reliability of the research findings in terms of its challenges and, more importantly, the ways to overcome them. This chapter ends with an examination of the ethical considerations concerning the student and the teacher participants and the limitations of the method used by the researcher.

3.2 Aims of the study

The aims of this case study are to explore both students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and how they relate such perceptions to their experiences and practice within the context of a vocational institute in Hong Kong. More

specifically, the researcher attempts to find out how these students and teachers construe autonomous learning and the value they attach to autonomous learning in a particular period of time at the case institute. Another objective of the study is to investigate how the views of these students and teachers are related to their learning and teaching practice respectively. It is also important to find out whether the perspectives and experiences of the two groups coincide. It is hoped that answers to these questions can help inform policies and practice that align with the mission of the institute.

The above research aims and objectives are embedded in the specific research questions which are restated below:

1. In what ways do students construe autonomous learning?
2. In what ways do teachers construe autonomous learning?
3. What value do students place upon autonomous learning?
4. What value do teachers place upon autonomous learning?
5. How do students' views on autonomous learning relate to their manner of educational engagement?
6. How do teachers' views on autonomous learning relate to their pedagogical

practice?

7. What are the similarities and differences between the students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning?

3.3 Research method

3.3.1 Paradigmatic underpinnings

The choice of an appropriate mode of enquiry is largely dependent on the purpose of the study and the context in which it is to be done. This is echoed in Kim's argument:

... both the circumstances and questions of study to be addressed should be viewed as factors in deciding which approach should be applied. (Kim, 2003, p.16)

Returning to the discussion here about where the researcher should locate the present study on the paradigmatic dimension, the researcher will first consider the two research paradigms dominating social inquiry, namely the positivist paradigm

and the interpretive paradigm. A paradigm is fundamentally ‘the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques shared by a given scientific community’ (Kuhn, 1970, p.75). This concise definition denotes two basic ideas. Firstly, a paradigm represents a set of basic beliefs about the world and how people, as occupants of the earth, see their ‘world’. Gubba and Lincoln’s definition encapsulates this view by saying that a paradigm ‘defines for its holder the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place within it and the range of possible relationships to that world’ (1998, p.200). Secondly, a paradigm has something to do with how people measure or evaluate their beliefs and behaviours in a systematic way. This view is captured by Usher in his definition of paradigms as ‘frameworks that function as maps or guides for scientific communities, determining important problems or issues for its members to address and defining acceptable theories or explanations, methods and techniques to solve defined problems’ (1996, p.15).

The nature of paradigms can be explored by studying four related questions, namely the ontological question, the epistemological question, the methodological question and the methods associated with each paradigm. The first question deals with ‘what does the researcher believe exists?’ The answer to this question represents one’s view of the nature of the social world and how an individual is related to it. This

fundamental question brings about the second question ‘what constitutes knowledge?’ That is to say, how can the researcher possibly study the social world and how can the researcher claim that what she is studying is proved to be reliable and valid knowledge? These questions are very much important in the sense that the epistemological stance shapes the overall approach and conceptual framework on which the researcher is going to base and evaluate the research. The second question, in turn, leads to the third one ‘how can the researcher produce reliable and valid knowledge?’ This is essentially the methodological implications of the researcher’s epistemological position as to how she can construct theoretical knowledge about the social world she is studying. The last question takes care of the practical issue as to what data collection tools the researcher is going to use for the research purpose; should they be questionnaires, interviews, experiments, observations or any other tools.

3.3.2 The positivist paradigm

The term ‘positivism’ is closely associated with the scientist, Auguste Comte, who is seen, arguably, as the founder or merely a populariser of positivism (Crotty, 1998). Ontologically, the positivists argue that there exists an objective reality that

is independent of human consciousness. They posit that the social world resembles the natural world and there are laws and facts about both worlds 'out there' that can be discovered. This is fundamentally important to the positivists if they look at what makes up knowledge which is the epistemology inherent in this theoretical perspective. In this sense, reliable and valid knowledge about the social world can be discovered in the same way that natural scientists strive to find out regularities and patterns about the physical world. The nature of knowledge, to the positivists, is thus factual, unambiguous and accurate.

By the same token, methods employed to study the natural world can therefore be applied to study social behaviour. This is exactly what Comte tried to advocate at his time – 'a universality of method that can unify the practice of science' (Crotty, 1998). This entails that the knowledge of the social world is to be based upon the evidence of our senses, i.e. the nature of knowledge is empirical which can be tested, verified and falsified in a scientific way (Popper, 1959). Empirical and scientific knowledge means that evidence of the reality has to be observable in order to be counted as valid knowledge of social phenomena. The fact that there exist universal laws and facts about the social world, the task of the positivist researchers is

therefore to discover causal relationships between observable phenomena which enable them to explain such human actions and behaviour.

The ontology and epistemology of positivism discussed above have substantial implications on the methodological question it attempts to answer. The way to construct reliable and valid knowledge is to follow the hypothetical-deductive model in such a way that knowledge can be generated by developing hypotheses which can then be tested against empirical observations. It is also possible for researchers to measure and quantify human behaviour objectively and statistically by breaking down the world into segments, categories and smaller units, i.e. those variables which can be isolated and controlled. This suggests a strong sense of manipulation and value-freedom on the part of the researchers who can distance themselves from the researched and the contexts. The kind of data valued by positivism is thus quantitative and empirical. When it comes to the methods question, any tools that are not influenced by the researchers' values can be used including questionnaires, structured interviews, experiments, non-participant observations, etc.

In a nutshell, what characterise the positivist paradigm are its objectivity, universality, replicability, predictability and its aim of generalising and explaining social phenomena. Kim (2003) makes this claim explicit in his argument for adopting the positivist tradition in conducting organisational research, saying:

One of the major goals of using positivism in OL research settings is to obtain valid and reliable knowledge as a set of universal principles that can explain, predict, and control human behaviour across individuals and organisations. (Kim, 2003, p.12)

3.3.3 The interpretive paradigm

There are different ways of viewing the world given the diversity and complexity of its nature. This awareness is highly important to social researchers as ‘different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world’ (Crotty, 1998). Within social sciences, there is another group of researchers who go about studying the social world in a way that is highly distinctive from the positivists because they hold very different views and assumptions about the world they are exploring. These researchers follow what is called the interpretive paradigm which

is rooted in the works of Max Weber, Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. Despite the fact that interpretivism has developed into various forms and positions, the basic theoretical perspectives and assumptions underpinning the paradigm are still intact, which answer the four fundamental questions in a way that runs in direct contrast to those posited by the positivists.

From the point of view of the interpretivists, the answer to the ontological question is that there does not exist an objective reality and that the social world is experienced subjectively and has no objective existence that is independent of people's everyday experience. The epistemology built upon this premise is highly evident – knowledge about the social world is based upon people's ability to experience the world as others experience it. Reality, in this sense, is created by people experiencing and interpreting the world subjectively. The task of science is not to try to establish causal relationships or laws which explain social behaviour. Rather, it is to understand how and why people interpret the world in various ways. The main objective of the interpretivist researchers is thus to understand the meanings of human actions and the ways in which people create and experience the social world subjectively. Schwandt describes this fundamental difference in the epistemological stance vividly:

At the heart of the dispute was the claim that the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) were fundamentally different in nature and purpose from the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). Defenders of interpretivism argued that the human sciences aim to understand human action. Defenders of positivism and proponents of the unity of the sciences held the view that the purpose of any science (if it is indeed to be called a science) is to offer causal explanations of social, behavioural, and physical phenomena. (Schwandt in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.191)

Considering the methodological question, the strong sense of subjective and interpretive nature of knowledge suggests that it is not possible to make objective statements about the social world since observable phenomena are simply the products of human meaning and interpretation. The job of the social scientists is not to identify the frequency of certain patterns, but to appreciate the different interpretations and meanings people place upon their experience. Since knowledge is represented in people's interpretations and intentions, it will not be possible to produce knowledge in a way that is value-free and 'hence has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices' (Usher, 1996, p.18). Instead of seeing themselves as 'outsiders', researchers following the interpretivist approach

have to be personally involved in the context being studied and at the same time be very open to different interpretations and understanding of the researched in view of the complexity of the social world where they witness an interplay of political, economic, social and cultural factors. When researchers come to term with the nuts and bolts of data collection, given the great value of personal, subjective and qualitative kind of data, methods such as face-to-face interviews, participant observations, diaries, journals and life histories are favoured. With these, it is hoped that a picture of the social reality can be constructed.

The starting point of this curiosity-driven investigation is that there is no measurable truth or neatly defined attributes like ‘the number of hours students spent in the library’ or ‘the number of hours they spent on learning-related activities outside of class’ which are quantifiable and receptive to statistical manipulation. Rather, the researcher is concerned with how individual students and teachers interpret autonomous learning and the meaning and value they place on autonomous learning. The issues under scrutiny in this study are regarded as being bound up in the personal feelings and interpretations of individuals within a particular context. This sense of social reality does not exist ‘out there’, being independent of the mind of the individuals. The research focus is thus highly compatible with the basic

assumptions and theoretical perspectives underlying the interpretive paradigm which stresses subjectivity and that meaning of a particular social action, being autonomous learning in this case, is represented in the subjective interpretation of the individuals. The claim here can be linked to Kim's discussion of interpretivism:

Knowledge is thus seen to be comprised of multiple sets of interpretations that are part of the social and cultural context in which it occurs. Interpretive researchers hold, consequently, that there should be an openness to the understanding of people whom researchers study and tentativeness in the way researchers hold or apply their conceptions of those being studied. (Kim, 2003, p.13)

The same point is evident when Blaikie contrasts positivism with interpretivism in terms of the subject matters of the natural and social sciences in his discussion of the approaches to social enquiry:

The study of social phenomena, on the other hand, requires an understanding of the social world which people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities. However, people

are constantly involved in interpreting their world – social situations, other people's behaviour, their own behaviour, and natural and humanly created objects. They develop meanings for their activities together, and they have ideas about what is relevant for making sense of these activities. In short, the social world is already interpreted before the social scientist arrives. (Blaikie, 1993, p.36)

From the outset, the researcher is interested in understanding the meanings, intentions and interpretations of autonomous learning from the perspectives of the participants. To put it in another way, the researcher is concerned with how they make sense of the concept and how it is going to be represented in their practice. It is also relevant to know how much value they attach to it in the context in which they are functioning. The primary goal of fostering understanding in the topic is in line with the epistemology built around the interpretive paradigm which runs in direct contrast to the aim of generalising from a wider population and attempting to establish causal relationships among observable and measurable attributes in the hope of explaining social behaviour as posited by the positivist tradition. In his discussion of the two traditions, Von Wright has illustrated this dichotomy clearly:

Many of them (defenders of antipositivist philosophy) emphasise a contrast between those sciences which, like physics or chemistry or physiology, aim at generalisations about reproducible and predictable phenomena, and those which, like history, want to grasp the individual and unique features of their objects... The aim of the natural sciences, he (Droysen) said, is to explain; the aim of history is to understand the phenomena which fall within its domain. (Von Wright, 1971, p.13)

It is this sense of uniqueness and idiosyncrasy which characterises this study in the vocational context as opposed to the mainstream academic education. Hence, it does not make much sense if the researcher is going about replicating and reproducing others' studies and transferring them to the YI context which definitely deserves studying in its own light.

The researcher is also interested in understanding how the YI culture shapes the participants' interpretations of autonomous learning. The interpretive approach allows the researcher to look at the issue through the 'cultural glasses'. As Crotty (1998) puts it, 'the interpretivist approach, to the contrary, looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world.' What the

researcher is trying to understand, from the perspective of interpretivism, are those culturally derived meanings of autonomous learning. The theoretical assumptions underlying positivism, on the contrary, does not warrant an investigation of 'culture' which mediates between people's beliefs and behaviour, guiding their action in the social world. It is not 'something' that is external to the issue the researcher is concerned with. Rather, it derives its meaning from people's past experiences, intentions and interaction with both the physical and the social worlds in which people claim their existence. Both 'culture' and 'autonomous learning' cannot be studied as isolated entities in experimentally controlled situations associated with the positivist tradition. On the contrary, these issues will have to be studied in natural settings in order to understand how the participants interpret autonomous learning in relation to the context in which they are functioning. The researcher therefore needs to listen to their accounts of past and present experiences, in other words, their stories. It is necessary to engage the participants in conversations in order to grasp the meanings of the issues under investigation. The fact that the researcher is involved with the thinking of the researched as the conversation develops is again compatible with obtaining an insider understanding and identifying empathically with the researched, a central concept posited in the

epistemology of interpretivism. Schwandt identifies this tenet of interpretivism clearly in his interpretation of the notion of interpretive understanding:

Dilthey argued that to understand the meaning of human action requires grasping the subjective consciousness or intent of the actor from the inside. Verstehen thus entails a kind of empathic identification with the actor. It is an act of psychological reenactment – getting inside the head of an actor to understand what he or she is up to in terms of motives, beliefs, desires, thoughts, and so on. (Schwandt in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.192)

It can therefore be argued that the use of face-to-face interviews is the most appropriate data collection tool if the purpose of this study is to explore multiple interpretations of autonomous learning from the perspectives of the students and the teachers.

Careful consideration was given to whether the research should introduce observations as a research instrument in the study to find out what students and teachers did in the classroom, i.e. what really happened in the classroom, as another

source of data to validate against the interview data. The reason for not including non-participant observations was that the researcher found it very intrusive if the researcher attempted to sit in and observe a class. Both teachers and students at the case institute were not used to having another 'teacher' in the classroom except for situations when a newly-recruited teacher was to be assessed by a more senior staff member of the institute aiming to provide feedback on his/her teaching and classroom management skills. To introduce participant observations was not a good idea either because there was no practice of co-teaching or peer teaching in the case institute. If two 'teachers' were present in the classroom, it was likely that both students and teachers would behave quite differently and that might distort the data. Alternatively, the researcher could place a video recorder in the classroom to tape the interaction between the teacher and students. They might find it intrusive at the beginning but they would soon get used to it and ignore it. All these considerations prompted the researcher to consider using a single method, i.e. face-to-face interviews, as the research instrument for the present study which created an opportunity for the researcher to explore students' and teachers' recollections and thinking in depth with regard to autonomous learning.

3.4 Data collection instrument and sampling method

3.4.1 Use of semi-structured interviews

With the purpose of the study and the research questions in mind, the researcher has ruled out the possibility of conducting ‘respondent interviews’ (Powney and Watts, 1987) which take the form of highly-structured interviews mostly associated with the quantitative approach to research. Interviews of this kind leaves the researcher very little room to steer the paths of questioning and answering which may not fit the purpose of this study.

Turning to the other side of the coin, the researcher would argue that it would be inappropriate to conduct ‘informant interviews’ in which ‘the agenda might be tightly or loosely structure, but in this case it is primarily the interviewee who imposes it’ (Powney and Watts, 1987) or ‘non-directive interviews’ in which ‘the respondent is responsible for initiating and directing the course of the encounter and for the attitudes he expresses it’ (Cohen and Manion, 1994) in this study. At a practical level, it would be more effective if some degree of ‘control’ could be introduced during the interview process in the form of some guiding questions

together with the use of prompts and probes, another salient feature of semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995). A structure, though not a formal one, helps the researcher and the participants who may not have the experience of acting as interviewees engaged in a piece of educational research. A focus is needed to direct the attention of both the researcher and the participants to the issue in such a way that they can learn to take up their respective roles in the interview process which is essentially a kind of social interaction (Powney and Watts, 1987).

It is argued that the use of semi-structured interviews is the most appropriate in this case for the interviewees are given a fair degree of freedom as to what to talk about, how much to say and how to express it (Drever, 1995). The researcher is able to probe into the participants' perceptions and understanding of autonomous learning in greater depth. In the absence of such rigidity imposed by a structure, it will be more fruitful if they are allowed to express themselves freely, going back and forth in their memories, reflecting on their practices in relation to autonomous learning so that themes and categories will emerge which contribute to an in-depth understanding of the meanings and value of autonomous learning from the perspectives of the participants.

3.4.2 Sampling method

Criterion sampling (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996), one of the strategies of purposeful sampling, was used in selecting the participants to be interviewed. All participants were selected from the Business Administration Discipline as an initiative to minimise the influence of the subject area on the perceptions of the participants, which was intended to make comparison and contrast of findings more accurate. Accordingly, this criterion applied to both the student and teacher participants in the sampling process.

Apart from setting a criterion for selection purpose, the strategy of snowball sampling (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996) was also adopted. The Principal of the Youth Institute was approached in the first instance in the hope of identifying 4 colleagues within the Department who were likely to agree to participate in the study and be committed in their role as a teacher. Each of the four teachers selected was then requested to recommend 5 of their students who were considered to be more articulate and interested in their studies. This was to ensure sufficient data could be gathered to enable the researcher to answer the research questions identified.

3.5 The interview and its conduct

Following the line of arguments discussed above, data was collected by using one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Repeated interviews with both students and teachers were conducted. 20 students studying for a Diploma in Vocational Studies in the Business Stream offered by the Youth Institute were interviewed twice. At the same time, individual interviews were also arranged with 4 teachers who taught the Business Course and were familiar with these 20 students. The researcher would consider the possibility of arranging a third interview with individual participants in case there was a need to follow up any issues that were not dealt with in the first two interviews.

The reason for conducting repeated interviews was to build rapport in the course of interviewing such that enough data could be generated for in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. Once a friendly relationship had been built between the researcher and the participants, it was easier for the researcher to solicit the views of the participants. Another advantage of conducting a second interview was that the researcher could validate the responses of the interviewees by asking them to recall or recap what they talked about or more specifically the answers they

gave in the first interviews. This second chance enabled the researcher to check whether the interviewees had given consistent answers. Also, by asking the interviewees to recap what they said about the issue, the researcher could relate the first interview to the second one which became more focused. It thus allowed the researcher to probe more deeply into the responses of the interviewees by asking more follow-up questions and clarifying with them interesting and relevant points picked up during the first encounter. The researcher was interested in motivating the participants to produce authentic accounts aiming for a higher quality of the data grounded in their personal recollection. It was not the intention of the researcher to track changes of participants' perceptions of autonomous learning over time.

3.6 Data analysis

Data analysis should not be considered as a separate process independent of the development of this study. On the contrary, it should be considered together with the formulation of research problem, research questions and the overall research design which aims to answer the research questions. The fact that this research does not come with any hypothesis pertaining to how students and teachers of a vocational institute construe autonomous learning suggests the choice of analytic

induction, which 'is often used to refer to the systematic examination of similarities between cases to develop concepts or ideas' (Punch, 1998, p.201-202). By grounding the interview data, it is hoped that propositions relating to their perceptions on autonomous learning can be developed.

More specifically, the Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative data analysis was employed to make sense of the data collected by means of individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with both the student and teacher participants of this study. The reason for choosing this particular data analysis framework was that it allowed the researcher to interact with the large quantity of interview data in a systematic way, considering the fact that the researcher had no pre-determined categories of data. This analysis was 'directed at tracing out lawful and stable relationships among social phenomena, based on the regularities and sequences that link these phenomena' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.4). This process involved three components, data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions, which 'are interwoven and concurrent throughout the data analysis' (Punch, 1998, p. 204).

In order to reduce the data, the researcher performed coding and memoing. Coding

referred to the process of attaching meaning to the pieces of data which may be words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs. These labels enabled the researcher to discover regularities in the data by identifying themes and patterns relating to autonomous learning. An extract of coded transcripts of Student 20 is given below as an illustration of the coding process which enabled the researcher to condense and hence attach meanings to the interview data.

An extract of coded transcript of Student 20

I: Interviewer; R: Respondent

I/R	Transcript	Code
I:	Basically they are the same types. Some are listening and some are practical. For the types you have mentioned, are there any related to autonomous learning? What is autonomous learning to you? What is the meaning of it?	
R:	Autonomous learning ... taking the initiative to learn. If I take the initiative to learn, it will be helpful. I will then learn a lot more and do not need someone to teach me all the times. I will discover new knowledge actively. That is what autonomous learning means to me.	IOAL ALAT INDEP DOK

I:	What is your point of view towards this?	
R:	<p>Actually I think autonomous learning is something good.</p> <p>Autonomous learning can enable someone to learn more, more new knowledge.</p>	<p>VOAL</p> <p>ALAT</p>
I:	How can it enable someone to learn a lot more new knowledge?	
R:	<p>Because it is based on the fact that someone can take the initiative to learn, he will then continue to explore new knowledge and skills. That means autonomous learning can make someone make progress and raise his competitiveness. Autonomous learning can affect individuals deeply. If one is not involved in autonomous learning, he will learn less than others. That is, the gap will become bigger and he may not know the knowledge most people have.</p>	<p>DOK</p> <p>ALAD</p> <p>ALO</p> <p>VOAL</p> <p>ALO</p>

Code	Meaning
ALAD	Autonomous Learning As Drive
ALAT	Autonomous Learning As Tool
ALO	Autonomous Learning Outcome

DOK	Discovery Of Knowledge
INDEP	Independence
IOAL	Image Of Autonomous Learning
VOAL	Value Of Autonomous Learning

A more detailed example of the coded transcript of Student 20 is given in Appendix

1. A start list of codes for teachers' data is attached in Appendix 2.

The coding process was aided by the operation of memoing. A memo was actually the researcher's reflective account of the coding process. It was also a record of the researcher's thinking and conceptualising process illustrating her mental interaction with the data. Examples of memoing are given in Appendix 3. These two operations were important because they allowed the researcher to develop abstract concepts based on the raw data. With all the themes and patterns identified, the researcher then displayed them by means of tables and diagrams. Examples of data display are illustrated in the next two chapters where the findings are presented and analysed. By organising and summarising the data in this way, the researcher could then move the analysis forward to the highest level of abstraction, i.e., developing propositions linking the concepts together.

3.7 Validity and reliability

Apart from positioning the research in relation to paradigmatic issues discussed above, careful and thorough consideration has to be given to methodological challenges. These are mostly concerned with the establishment of research findings or data which are more useful and worthwhile than common sense or intuition. The core issues to consider here are the notions of validity and reliability of the research instrument used by the researcher in this study.

3.7.1 Challenges to validity and measures to overcome them

Hammersley defines validity as ‘an account (that) is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena, that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise’ (Hammersley, 1987, p.69). The fact that repeated interviews with the participants of this study were conducted served to improve validity. This allowed the researcher a chance to check, follow up and so validate their responses given in the previous sessions. Prompts and probes were used to follow up the questions the researcher intended to direct to the participants. Having a second chance also enabled the researcher to ask the participants the same questions in the second

interviews to check whether they had given consistent responses. In addition, measures had to be taken to enable the researcher to reproduce every statement made by each respondent during the interview. This was done by recording each and every interview digitally, thus allowing the researcher to track down the thoughts of each of the respondents. To capture the richness of the data, the researcher also needed to make field notes after each interview to supplement the oral records which were turned into written records after transcribing the utterances. Descriptions of respondents' expressions, emotions and body language helped the researcher to infer the meaning of their responses, adding to the completeness of the picture.

Another threat to validity is associated with the need for the researcher to translate the raw data from one language to another. Maxwell (1992) cites the problem of translating cultural or subject oriented terms to other languages where classifications in the native language may connote subtly or wholly different meanings. In this study, all the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the local vernacular. As an attempt to enhance validity, 10 of these interviews were transcribed into the written form of Chinese, which were then translated into English. A colleague of the researcher was invited to translate the English scripts

back into Chinese. The transcribed and back-translated versions could thus be compared. It was found that the two versions bore a moderate degree of similarity in terms of meaning. The researcher was able to demonstrate that the translations were valid. The researcher then translated the rest of the interview scripts from Cantonese into English directly for the purpose of data analysis.

The third challenge to validity is related to the concept of 'face' prevalent in the Chinese culture. Being on one's own and able to solve one's problem without relying on another person is associated with positive meaning or value in terms of 'face' among the Chinese. To put it simply, becoming an autonomous learner is a highly desirable virtue in the Chinese culture. The conduct of interviews can bring about all kinds of bias, the most obvious ones being 'interviewer bias' and 'respondent bias' (Wragg in Bell et al, 1984). Wragg suggests that 'an interviewer's question can lead the respondent in a certain consciously or subconsciously desired direction' (Wragg in Bell et al, 1984). This is also documented in Cohen and Manion's discussion of the interview for there exists 'a tendency for the interviewer to see the respondent in his own image; a tendency for the interviewer to seek answers that support his preconceived notions' (Cohen and Manion, 1994). On the part of the respondent, the source of bias comes from the situation where

‘respondents frequently give the interviewer an answer which is more public relations for their own group than an accurate response’ (Wragg in Bell et al, 1984).

This probably comes up for the participants may give a higher rating when asked about how autonomous they are and what value they place on autonomous learning if the researcher considers the positive value associated with the ability to perform autonomous learning in the Chinese culture. Such methodological challenge tends to be intensified if the researcher takes into account the imbalance of power between the researcher and the student participants in particular. It seems natural for students to predict what is expected of them so as to please the researcher and gain goodwill.

Tuckman summarises the above problem neatly by saying:

... when formulating his questions an interviewer has to consider the extent to which a question might influence the respondent to show himself in a good light; or the extent to which a question might influence the respondent to be unduly helpful by attempting to anticipate what the interviewer wants to hear; or the extent to which a question might be asking for information about the respondent that he is not certain or likely to know himself. (Tuckman in Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 318)

It was therefore vitally important that the participants be informed of the purpose of this research study at the very beginning of the encounters in order to elicit responses that were true to the participants themselves. It also helped if the researcher arranged to interview students and teachers who were not personally acquainted to the researcher so that it became easier for the researcher to project a neutral and professional image as a researcher instead of a teacher / colleague. Apart from presenting herself in a different role, it was imperative for the researcher to pilot the interview schedule to identify potential areas of misinterpretation or confusion. This is to make sure that meaning of the questions was crystal clear to the respondents.

3.7.2 Challenges to reliability and measures to overcome them

Reliability is concerned with the accuracy and consistency of the research tool used by the researcher, in this case, the conduct of individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews. What confidence does the researcher have that the research tool did not influence the results that vary each time the tool is used? This question can partly be answered because the researcher was the only interviewer. Inconsistency arising from different interviews could also be minimised by relying on an interview

schedule designed well beforehand. Guided by an interview schedule with a mixture of open and closed questions, another feature of a semi-structured interview (Drever, 1995), the researcher attempted to ask the same set of questions in each of the interviews.

The researcher had also given careful thought to the setting in which the interviews were carried out so that the research process itself did not distort the findings. What kind of environment would put the participants, the students in particular, at ease? Inviting students to the staff room for the interviews might sound convenient. However, this act would suggest to the students that they were going to be interrogated by their teacher because something had gone wrong or some problems needed to be fixed between them and their teacher. This would tend to widen the gap between the student participants and the researcher, intensifying the ‘interviewer bias’ and the ‘respondent bias’ (Wragg in Bell et al, 1984) in a way. Alternatively, interviews could be conducted outside the school setting such as cafeterias and local libraries. Such environments would bring about a relaxing atmosphere. But they would not help to focus the mind of the participants on a dialogue that was not supposed to be some kind of a casual chat arranged for the purpose of course evaluation. This interview should be purposefully arranged with

an expectation or a goal to achieve such that the conversations would contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education. So what would be the best place to conduct the interviews with the participants? In this connection, the researcher decided to arrange the interviews in the Learning Resources Centre at the case institution. As the title of the room suggests, it is specifically designed for students to do their own studies with materials and facilities recommended by their teachers. This is also a place where students can discuss freely among themselves on school projects and, occasionally, tutorials between teachers and students will be arranged there. But care had been taken by the researcher to remind participants of the purpose of the present study that this project was not about self-learning.

According to Gall, Borg and Gall, 'Triangulation helps to eliminate biases that might result from relying exclusively on any one data-collection method, source, analyst, or theory' (1996, p.574). In order to overcome the problem of using interviews solely as a data collection tool, the researcher aimed to triangulate the data by interviewing two main stakeholders of the institution, i.e., the students and the teachers, who were heavily involved in the learning and teaching activities. The different data sources helped the researcher to examine whether the views of these two groups of participants coincided, one of the objectives of this study.

In relation to the data source, the researcher had also considered interviewing the other stakeholders in this case, namely the school administrators and the parents. The researcher did not involve them in the data collection process because the former group was perceived to be supporters of the bureau-wide initiatives of promoting autonomous learning. Their views may not reflect the ‘realities’ in terms of the meanings of autonomous learning in this context. The researcher did not include the parents either. Unlike parents of the secondary school students who were very much involved in school events, the parents in this case were not playing an active role in the institute’s activities. After careful consideration, the researcher decided to focus on the perceptions of the two main stakeholders, namely the students and the teachers of the case institute in this study.

3.8 Pros and cons of insider research

Attempting to conduct any piece of research within the organisation in which the researcher works, the so called insider research, tends to generate issues or problems which deserve careful consideration in order to enhance credibility of the study. It is also acknowledged that the role played by the researcher of this study in the case institute adds value to it and, at the same time, brings about problems relating to its

validity.

The fact that the researcher has been working in the organization for 13 years enabled the researcher to develop a good network with both the senior management and the frontline staff. This, in turn, enabled the researcher to gain access to the participants of the study more readily. The researcher also considered that this background benefited the study for she possessed good knowledge and thorough understanding of its mission and vision, history, organisational structure and culture, strategic development and, most importantly, its recent development in response to the changes initiated by the education reform in the local community. On top of that, having worked in the case institute for the past two years allowed the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the work culture and practice prevalent in the case institute. The position of the researcher allowed her to interpret views of the participants more accurately and understand their thoughts and actions for there was a common language between the interviewer and the interviewees involved in this study. This advantage is echoed in Hammersley's discussion of the role of a teacher-researcher:

... the teacher-researcher will usually have long-term experience of the

setting being studied, and will therefore know its history first hand, as well as other information that may be required to understand what is going on. It would take an outsider for a long time to acquire such knowledge; indeed, this may never be possible. (Hammersley, 1993, p.218)

Turning to the other side of a coin, having a close relationship with the participants, the teachers, in particular, might make them feel uneasy if they were requested to talk about their feelings, views, experiences and classroom practice during the interviews. As for the student participants, even though the researcher did not know them personally, they might still be unwilling to reveal their true feelings and opinions about their learning experience to a person perceived as a teacher. To overcome this problem, the researcher tried to clarify her current position and job in the organisation. Instead of performing the role of a teacher in the case institute, the researcher had been deployed to various operational units as a Project Officer for the past few years. This helped to reinforce her role as a researcher who strived to adopt a neutral stance toward the views expressed by the participants. They had also been reassured that their identities were anonymised.

The fact that the researcher of this study was the only person responsible for collecting and analysing the data might generate bias throughout the process. When framing the questions for the interviews and generating codes and categories for the analysis, undue bias and subjectivity might set in as the researcher held a certain view about the case institute. To avoid this pitfall commonly reported for insider research, the interview schedule guiding the conduct of the interviews and the subsequent data analysis tools, including the codes and categories used by the researcher, were presented to a colleague who is also an educational practitioner in Hong Kong but has no relationship with the case institute or the organisation as a whole. The researcher's colleague served as a critical friend reflecting on the questions and labels used. Besides, all the analyses and interpretations were based on the interview data, i.e. wordings and expressions used by individual participants during the interviews. This was to substantiate the researcher's claim of representing the views of the participants in relation to the concept of autonomous learning in a vocational context.

3.9 Ethical considerations

To conduct the research in an ethical manner, it was necessary for the researcher to

take into consideration both the costs and benefits of the study. While recognising the maximisation of benefits of the study, the researcher should be cautious of the costs induced on the participants. These included time costs, invasion of participants' privacy and also unrealistic expectations from the participants who were interviewed by the researcher.

In order to minimise time costs of the students, the researcher scheduled the interviews in between their free lessons. This enabled the researcher to fit into their schedules. As for the teacher participants, interviews were scheduled during the examination period and semester break. That is to say, the interviews were conducted at times when they were less occupied with their teaching. All these interviews were done on campus to reduce the time spent on traveling.

As honest responses are essential in a study that gathers data through interviews, students and teachers who agreed to participate in this study were guaranteed anonymity, including their names and the institute's name. They were also reassured that their responses would not be revealed publicly and that their views would not be identified and communicated to their peers or supervisors. The researcher was very alert to their reactions and emotional changes. In case any sign

of distress was picked up, the researcher had to bring the interview to an end before the situation got worse. Throughout the period of data collection, they were free to withdraw from attending the interviews if they wished to do so due to some unexpected circumstances. All participants agreed to conduct the interviews in a small meeting room located in the Learning Resources Centre on campus, which they found cozy and private.

The researcher briefed all the participants on the objectives of the study before engaging them in the data collection process. Their expectations in relation to such aims and objectives, in particular, were solicited. The researcher stressed the importance of the study and its possible outcomes without making any claims or promises during the interviews. Unrealistic expectations from the participants, presumably, policy or programme changes, were addressed so as to avoid giving false hopes to the participants.

3.10 Limitations of the method

As mentioned in the previous section, subjectivity has been built into different stages of the research, from the interview process through to data analysis, in the

context of this study where the researcher functions as a part. This weakens the claim of examining the perceptions of the participants for the researcher's personal views may permeate into the process of interacting with the participants during the interviews, translating the scripts as well as coding and categorising the data.

The study has also been limited by the sampling method adopted for it did not aim to obtain the maximum variation in the data. The selection of participants confined to both the students and teachers involved in Business studies in the case institute. This choice may not represent the whole range of perceptions within the institute as there are more than ten streams of studies operated by the institute, including information technology, hospitality, engineering, and design disciplines. As stated in the above discussion, the rationale behind reflects the researcher's intention of delineating and minimising the influence of the subject matter. It is argued that the findings are closer to the true picture in relation to an understanding of autonomous learning in this particular context.

There is another problem concerning translation of the raw data from Cantonese, the vernacular used in the local context, to English for the purpose of analysing the data and discussion of findings. The face-to-face interviews with both the student and

teacher participants were conducted in Cantonese, the spoken form of the Chinese language. On the choice of the language for the conduct of interviews in this study, the researcher has considered the use of Cantonese as necessary and useful as Cantonese is the native language of all the parties involved. This tool can help to build rapport between the researcher and the interviewees, particularly the students. The use of a foreign language, English in this case, as a means of communication can be threatening to the students, making the situation too formal for them to express themselves freely and willingly. This will again weaken the claim of soliciting participants' true feeling and thoughts about autonomous learning. To overcome the translation problem, the researcher has taken measures which aim to produce a credible account of the students' and teachers' perceptions as stated in the previous section.

Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) discuss the difficulty of generalising the findings of case study research as a major disadvantage of the method. However, it is not the intention of the researcher to generalise the findings of this case study to a broader context of similar vocational institutions given the unique features of the case institute and its stakeholders. Notwithstanding this, the methodology developed is applicable to other similar research. Given the description of the institute and the

participants, other researchers or readers of this thesis can make inferences about the replicability of the methods used and the applicability of the findings to their own contexts.

3.11 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has addressed the ontological, epistemological and methodological questions before arriving at the decision of locating the present study in the interpretive paradigm. The qualitative research approach underpinned by the interpretive paradigm fits the purpose of this case study in a vocational setting. Despite this, the researcher has noted the limitations of the research method and made a point about the advantages and drawbacks in relation to being one of the participants of the case institute. The discussion on how the data collected were analysed provides a framework for reducing, displaying and exploring relationship between the data, the detail of which will be examined in the next two chapters.

4 Findings and Analysis – Students’ Responses

4.1 Overview

This chapter starts with a review of the research method employed by the researcher to collect data from the student participants which has been discussed in the previous chapter. This is followed by a description of their backgrounds and the kind of studies they pursued in the case institute. The researcher then restates the specific research questions relating to students’ perceptions. The rest of the chapter is structured around the themes and sub-themes and their relationships identified which are based on an analysis of the students’ responses.

4.2 Introduction

4.2.1 Students’ profiles

All the students participated in this case study studied the Diploma in Vocational Studies (DVS) programme at the Youth Institute, a member institution of the VTB Group. The programme was operated in two modes, a 3-year programme and a

1-year intensive version, aiming to cater for students with different backgrounds and entry qualifications. Half of the group (Students 1, 2, 13-20) completed their secondary education (Secondary 5) in the mainstream system and sat for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. As places for senior secondary education were limited, normally students who obtained good grades in the Examination could progress to Secondary 6. Those students who failed the Examination would opt for vocational training and education, studying for the 1-year intensive Diploma in a specific trade, the DVS programme in Business Administration in this case.

Another half of the group (Students 3-12) was in their final year of the 3-year DVS programme. These students left the mainstream education system at various stages of their secondary education, ranging from Secondary 2 to 4. Some students (Students 5-8 and 10) dropped out after completing Secondary 3 and studied for a Certificate in Vocational Studies (CVS) programme in other member institutions under the VTB group, a pass of which would enable them to proceed to the next level of studies i.e. the DVS programme. Others did not commit themselves in any meaningful engagement after quitting their secondary education but managed to resume their studies in the YI one or two years later. This explained the variation in

the age range in the student sample. Student 20 was a recent immigrant from the Mainland China who spent his childhood in the Guang Dong province. Table 1 below shows the profiles of these students.

Table 1: Students' profiles

Student	Gender	Age	Year at YI	Background
1	F	19	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
2	F	18	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
3	F	21	3	Completed Secondary 4
4	F	19	3	Completed Secondary 4
5	M	17	1	Completed Secondary 3; graduate of Certificate in Vocational Studies
6	F	18	1	Completed Secondary 3; graduate of Certificate in Vocational Studies
7	F	17	1	Completed Secondary 3; graduate of Certificate in Vocational Studies
8	F	20	1	Completed Secondary 3; graduate of Certificate in Vocational Studies; some work experience
9	M	16	3	Completed Secondary 2
10	M	18	1	Completed Secondary 3; graduate of Certificate in Vocational Studies
11	F	19	3	Completed Secondary 4
12	F	18	3	Completed Secondary 4
13	F	17	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
14	F	17	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong

				Kong Certificate of Education Examination
15	M	17	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
16	M	20	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
17	F	20	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
18	F	18	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
19	M	17	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination
20	M	19	1	Completed Secondary 5; attempted Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination; recent immigrant from Mainland China

4.2.2 Research questions relating to students' perceptions

Students' interview data were compared and contrasted. Since 20 respondents were interviewed, the researcher considered it significant if half of the students had the same or similar views and comments on the questions raised by the researcher. At the same time, comments which were distinct from the other students would also be identified. It was found that such outlier examples could be very illuminating which helped the researcher to analyse and reflect on the relationship between the patterns.

In the process, five themes and their related sub-themes were identified. They enabled the researcher to answer the three specific research questions (SRQ) relating to students' perceptions listed below:

SRQ1: In what ways do students construe autonomous learning?

SRQ3: What value do students place upon autonomous learning?

SRQ5: How do students' views on autonomous learning relate to their manner of educational engagement?

4.3 Students' Responses

4.3.1 Views of learning and knowledge

Students' views of learning and knowledge could mainly be classified into three groups. Half of the student respondents (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) fell into the first group who viewed learning as acquisition of new knowledge and mastery of skills. This was purely a receptive process and the sources of knowledge and skills were from the teachers, the 'masters' in the Youth Institute (YI) context, and the textbooks or reference books. Student 4 responded:

Learn some knowledge. Our teachers would teach us what we don't know.

Student 15 commented:

Learning is studying books and learning words. In fact, I have been asked to learn since childhood and I don't like it much.

Student 17 had similar views, saying:

I think for learning, I learn something new and acquire some new knowledge in the process, from young to old, instilled by parents.

Knowledge, in this case, was viewed as an object which is remote and external to the students themselves. It could therefore be 'acquired', 'stored' and 'accumulated'.

Student 3 described her view this way:

Learning enables me to store some information in my brain.

Two of the students in this group made an analogy between knowledge and wealth.

Knowledge was viewed as a tool for making money and hence a passport to wealth.

Student 13 said:

It is for future use when I grow up. What I learn now is the tool that I use to make money in the future. How much you know means how much you can earn.

Student 19 shared Student 13's view, adding:

You have to learn a skill to maintain your own living. In this society, without a skill, you can't survive. No one will help you.

Their view of learning could be interpreted as instrumental in nature. Their views of the relationship between learning and knowledge share many of the qualities of the transmission-receptive model of teaching and learning (Askew and Lodge, 2000).

Another half of the student respondents (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16 and 20) in this study had very different views towards learning and knowledge. They

considered learning as a process of discovery of new knowledge. They also related such process to their daily experiences so as to make sense of the knowledge discovered. They are therefore concerned with the application of knowledge and skills in simulated environments created by the institute and, ultimately, in the workplace upon graduation. Student 1 described:

I use what I've learnt. It all depends on myself. Misses and Sirs simply can't feed me.

This view was shared by Student 12, saying:

Say when you go to school and attend lessons, the teacher will teach us knowledge. But we cannot just listen and go away after school. If we are to learn something, we have to understand it. If we don't, we have to clarify with our teachers. It is not right to just listen to the teacher. We have to make sense of what the teacher said.

Knowledge, in their words, was not static but something that was transferrable and could be applied in different situations. They also made it explicit that knowledge

had to be ‘absorbed’, ‘understood’ and ‘digested’ to become one’s own to enable them to explain it to other people using their own words. According to these students, the goals of learning could be seen as an increase in knowledge, intelligence, capabilities and competence, i.e. becoming ‘smarter’. Like the students in the first group, they identified knowledge with wealth. But apart from being a tool for making money, knowledge also had value in itself which enabled them to experience a richer life. When asked by the researcher what learning and knowledge meant to him, Student 9 replied:

For making money and for a quicker mind. When you study more, you will be smarter than people in general.

Not only did they see learning as a tool for knowing more and making money, but they also saw it as a tool for communication.

Student 11 explained his stance with the following detail:

Learning can help me to make money. When I know more and see more, my circle of friends can become bigger.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

It is quite useful to me. As I learn more, I become more knowledgeable.

Therefore I won't be confined to a certain class. Also I can meet more people outside. Say I learn English to communicate with foreigners and I learn more Chinese words to read more books to learn many different things, filling me up.

The views of this second group of students are consistent with the views advocated by the constructivists with respect to teaching and learning. Learners and teachers are not 'locked' in their respective roles as in the transmission-receptive model. They have a more dynamic relationship in the learning process.

Within the second group, two of the student respondents (Students 16 and 20) exhibited a third type of views towards learning and knowledge. Both students reflected on their own learning throughout the interviews. They shared the perspectives of the second group of students but demonstrated some additional qualities that warranted the researcher to attach a different label to these two students to differentiate them from the second group. Student 16 perceived learning as a discovery process and that knowledge has to be discovered not acquired.

Learning symbolised personal development and involved changes and transformation. Learning therefore had a very deep meaning and long lasting implications and was a never-ending process. Student 16 commented:

There is no highest level, because knowledge awaits us to discover and there is never an ending day. We can still learn till we die. That's it.

Student 20 described the changes in the learning process in the following way,

Sometimes knowledge has different levels. For example, you gain experience during the process of learning and you can transform the knowledge and experience into wisdom.

Student 20 continued to explain what he meant by 'wisdom',

Wisdom to me is a kind of predictive ability. That is, I can accurately predict how a phenomenon develops and have a thorough understanding of the root of the phenomenon. You can apply what you have learnt and you can use it as you wish.

Student 20 was of the view that learning was a reflective process that involved generation or development of hypotheses, understanding of the underlying principles and application of such underpinning knowledge to predict development of phenomena they encountered and consequences of their actions. This perception was shared by Student 16, saying

Yes. And we can apply the concept in daily life. Say in economics, for demand and supply, we can understand why all the bread made can be sold with nothing left. And this is what I mean.

Unlike their peers, these two students also showed a genuine desire for learning and strong quest for knowledge. Student 16 added:

Learning to me is to enhance my knowledge and to apply it in daily life.

Interviewer: Anything else?

I have a thirst for knowledge. I have strong interest in something I don't know

The above views of learning, which are developmental and transformational in

nature, are congruent with the co-constructivist views of teaching and learning (Askew and Lodge, 2000).

4.3.2 Perceptions of autonomous learning

4.3.2.1 Images of autonomous learning

When asked by the researcher what they associated with autonomous learning, the responses given by the students were divided into two main categories. Students 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14 immediately identified autonomous learning with the image of 'being on one's own'. The rest of the respondents (Students 5, 6, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 20) also gave a quick response by telling the researcher the literal translation of 'autonomous learning', i.e. 'taking the initiative to learn'. As the students went further in the dialogues with the researcher, some of them shared the view that these two images of 'being on one's own' and 'taking the initiative to learn' denoted a literal or surface meaning of the notion of autonomous learning only. It was quite a different story when these students were prompted by the researcher to explain what they interpreted as autonomous learning, the analysis of which is discussed in the next section. Student 12 admitted that her immediate

response to the researcher's inquiry represented a literal sense of the construct.

When the researcher probed for deeper understanding in the student's perception of autonomous learning, Student 12 explained this way:

There seems to be a conflict. But I think autonomous learning means literally you have to rely on yourself to learn it and through communicating with teachers and classmates, we will have the motivation to learn. In other words, we may not be able to think of the questions without them.

Some of the students further elaborated their interpretations by explaining what they saw as the opposites of autonomous learning - most of the students referred to the 'chalk-and-talk' scenario. The following quotes are illuminating as they shed light on the heart of the issue under investigation.

It's not autonomous learning. All (assessment tools and criteria) are fixed by them (the teachers). (S8)

Anyway, it is not from the textbooks and teachers and I will regard it as

autonomous learning. (S9)

However, the tasks are assessed by our Miss or Sir and marks given by them, so I don't think it's autonomous learning. (S11)

It is apparent that if the agenda of activities is controlled by the teacher, it is not considered as autonomous learning.

4.3.2.2 Typical examples of autonomous learning

Nearly all the student respondents associated autonomous learning with activities such as projects, role-plays, group discussions and problem-solving games. The following table shows a list of perceived activities associated with autonomous learning.

Table 2: Students' perceptions of activities associated with autonomous learning

Student	Activities associated with autonomous learning
1	Project; negotiation
2	Role-play
3	Project
4	Project
5	Problem-solving task
6	Visit
7	Project

8	Project
9	Problem-solving task
10	Project; role-play
11	Project
12	Project
13	Reading task
14	Project
15	Nil
16	Project; extra-curricular activity
17	Group discussion without the presence of the teacher
18	Problem-solving game; role-play
19	Project
20	Project; role-play

4.3.2.3 Autonomous learning as processes

Students holding different views of learning and knowledge discussed in the previous section construed autonomous learning as ‘processes’ they encountered in the classroom. Student 9 was very explicit about his perception of autonomous learning, saying:

It is mainly a process. What we’re doing is a process.

The interview data shows that autonomous learning could be interpreted as processes which involved goal setting, questioning, monitoring of progress and drawing conclusion, the detail of which will be elaborated in the subsequent paragraphs.

Notwithstanding this commonality among the three types of students discussed, these classroom processes operated in different manners. Students having an instrumental view of learning (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) depended very much on their teacher in the goal setting stage at the beginning of the process. In the case of a group project, they took in whatever topics the teacher assigned or suggested to them. Student 13 showed her appreciation for the teacher's effort in suggesting to her group the topic of the project without which she found it a daunting task. She put it this way:

Sometimes, the teacher gives us a topic for discussion to allow us to find out the meaning and theme by ourselves. Sometimes I will find it quite difficult as there is not a clear topic in it. He will ask us to think of it by ourselves. If you can't think of the topic clearly, you will fool around and finally still can't find it.

As they proceeded, they would monitor their own progress by checking to see whether they were able to meet the deadlines set by the teacher. Student 6 was most concerned about whether she would miss the submission deadline as she planned her way forward. She said:

We always checked with our Miss about the time and date!

Despite the nature of the project which demanded team work, there was minimal communication among the group members as each of them took up a part working on their own. Questioning was evident in the data where the students asked their teacher what they were doing was 'right' or 'wrong'. Student13 explicated this point with the following example:

For example, in a big group, when the teacher gives you a task, there won't be a fixed answer. You can choose to do or not to do it. Some will choose not to do it and if you do it, the teacher will teach you and tell you whether it is right or wrong. If you don't work on it, that's your business. If you do, the teacher will teach you and you learn more.

Since the purpose of the activity was 'to get things done', the conclusion was reached in the form of putting together disjointed pieces of work prepared by individual students for submission purpose.

The image of 'being on one's own' resided with this group of students who

maintained a mechanistic view of learning. They saw autonomous learning as a one-way process during which the teacher ‘gave’ students the knowledge and the students ‘took’ whatever imparted by the teacher without questioning. One of the respondents in this group went to the extremes by excluding the teacher in the process. When sharing her experience in a group discussion, Student 17 made the following comment:

But the teacher is a bit superior in class. I may have a bit of the class concept here, maybe. Since I was young, I have always thought that I have to respect the teachers. For classmates and friends it is peer feeling and we can share with each other. I won’t discuss with the teacher in the activity. It’s like that indeed.

Students in the second group (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) construed autonomous learning as a process in a very different way even though they went through the same stages discussed in the previous paragraph i.e. goal setting, questioning, monitoring of progress and concluding. These students started off by setting the goal of the project. They negotiated with the teacher what they intended to do by making a connection to what had been learnt previously in the course.

Student 10 tried to make known to his teacher what he intended to learn at the beginning of the process. In his words:

I will tell the teacher I am interested in learning this.

Student 9 emphasised the importance of making connection between knowledge and skills previously learnt and what he was required to do in the present task. As he put it:

I will revise the words taught by the teacher and may use them in the next exercise.

Questioning was also evident in the process but it followed a different pattern. Exchanges of personal views and experiences between the teacher and the group members and between the members themselves were frequent as they considered that each one of them had a different way of seeing things. Student 1 commented:

The more the people I know, the more we discuss, the more we understand.

She then added:

The more people I know, the more opinions I can hear! Moreover, other things can be learnt, such as getting along with people! Classmates from the 3-year course have their own experience. They're out of school after Secondary 3. I would like to hear their stories!

When they came to drawing conclusions in the process, it is more appropriate to interpret it as 'self-reflection'. The students came to know their own strengths and weaknesses. The reflection also resulted in task improvement and, more importantly, 'extended thinking', knowledge that may be related to the task they were doing but could be applied in other subjects or areas of study. Student 10 described his experience as follows:

For example, the project in commercial studies requires us to set up a shop. The capital is \$500,000. Six of us form a group. At the beginning, there is a lot of time to discuss – where, what and the name of it. We discuss and exchange our views and I think it is a much better way. It is not boring. Everyone is going to share and contribute a part. We can also

apply the knowledge learnt in other modules.

Student 11 shared a similar view. The following exchanges between this student and the researcher illustrated the argument further.

S11: Sometimes in class we have group activities and we have to discuss what to do and then prepare the materials we are responsible for. After the preparation, we will combine everything to discuss what to do next. I think this process is also one kind of autonomous learning.

Interviewer: Can you talk a bit more about this process?

S11: Sometimes we have to do questionnaires or projects. Several of you will form a group. The leader will be responsible for allocating duties. Some will design the questionnaire and others doing the others. We prepare the things at home and think over it. Then we will come together again and discuss how to improve it.

Interviewer: What sort of discussion is going on here?

S11: Which questions are more appealing? Which are more

interesting? Should we avoid asking someone's age or give a range for people to choose from?

Interviewer: What questions will you ask? During the process, what will you ask yourself?

S11: I will think like this. If I were the interviewee, how would I answer the questions? I may not like some questions or I may feel embarrassed so I won't answer. Perhaps I will think when telephoning someone, he will cut the line and avoid it, like those people who run away when someone selling flags approach him ...

The teacher was not there to confirm whether the students were 'doing the right thing'. The teacher engaged himself/herself in the discussion with the students by asking open-ended questions that prompted further discussion and sharing with the students his/her experiences. Student 11 contrasted her classroom experience in the past with that in the YI this way:

In the past, we sat and listen to the teacher and soon we would fall asleep.

The teacher would stand alone talking and sometimes asking questions

and we answered them. It was boring. Now, there are only twenty something students and the lessons are not that rigid. There are breaks and the teachers are willing to communicate with us, asking us questions, allowing us to speak more. They won't scold us and ask us not to talk.

Apart from the element of reflection, other elements could be identified in their interpretation of autonomous learning as a process with this group of student respondents. There was a psychological aspect to the process as interpreted by this group of students. Their interpretation of 'taking the initiative to learn' referring only to the literal meaning of autonomous learning suggested that there was another layer of meaning of the construct. When prompted by the researcher to explore further, the students interpreted such initiative as 'active engagement' in the process.

Say if you want to set up a new business, first you have to see if you have enough capital, find a shop, and do it like you really set up a shop. Buy the things that you need, like packaging. It is then easier to learn something by doing it instead of just listening to it. (S8)

As we put our heart and soul into it (the project), we learnt many things.

(S10)

Their (classmates) heart wasn't in it (the project). They are just wasting their time. (S12)

Adding to the above psychological element, there is also a social aspect to the process. A few of the respondents interpreted their exchanges or communication with their peers as 'being in someone's shoes'. This strategy was also used when they reflected on how they could improve the project and how they could benefit from each other's views and experience. Student 10 described how he would empathise with his classmate in the discussion this way:

To be in his shoes! If I were him, what would I do? And then I will let him know my opinions.

Students having a different interpretation of autonomous learning as a process discussed above were those who saw learning and teaching from a constructivist point of view. The process they construed was 2-way. Both students and the teacher

contributed to the process by exchanging their views and prior experiences. The communication between the teacher and the students and also between the students themselves facilitated reflection. This enabled the students to build on what had been discussed or exchanged and eventually internalise the knowledge to become 'their own' which could then be applied in different contexts. S1 elaborated this way:

Besides remembering the things (in the process), I can obtain other experience or other results. I can extend my thinking to other areas. I don't need to tell somebody what it is, but I can have it in my mind. I can use it whenever I have to do so.

Interviewer: Why exactly have you learnt?

That is becoming my reaction!

Elements such as active engagement and empathy identified in the process suggested that these students, apart from the cognitive aspect, considered the psychological and social aspects in the process as well.

The findings of the study revealed that there was some variation in the process in

relation to autonomous learning as interpreted by the two students (Students 16 and 20) who shared the co-constructivist views on learning and teaching. The operation of the process shared many of the qualities of the 2-way process discussed above. The two students placed substantial value on the type of communication and interaction with the teacher and their peers. This was achieved through extensive sharing by relating to and connecting different experiences and perspectives which enabled them to make improvement on the end-products of the project, ranging from business proposals, presentations, business models, etc. However, the reflection did not stop here. The reflection went further towards the way learning was done and how it could facilitate future learning. Student 20 elaborated what he did in the following way:

I would question myself what skills I learnt and what methods I used.

Then I would list them out one by one, if found necessary, to facilitate my reflection. If it's not necessary, I wouldn't. I made myself think through the points I listed. This is important to me. If I was given another project in the next semester, I could see whether I could approach the task in the same or different way.

In this case, the 2-way process turned into a cycle. The reflection on learning how to learn fed back to the initial stage where students were involved in setting goals and planning their pathways as to how they could tackle the tasks. To present this cycle of learning in a visual way, it could be interpreted as a 'loop'.

Table 3 below displays the relationship between students' views of learning and knowledge and their perceptions of autonomous learning. Table 4 shows the variation in the autonomous learning processes construed by the three groups of students holding different epistemological views.

Table 3: Relationship between students' views of learning and knowledge and their perceptions of autonomous learning

Student	View of learning	View of knowledge	Perception of autonomous learning
3,4,5,6, 13,14, 15,17, 18,19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acquisition of new knowledge and mastery of skills ● A receptive process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sources of knowledge from teachers and books ● A commodity ● A passport to wealth ● To be acquired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A one-way process ● Cognitive dimension
1,2,7,8, 9,10,11, 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Application of knowledge and skills learnt ● A discovery process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dynamic and transferrable ● A tool for making money and communication ● Valuable in itself ● To be internalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A two-way process ● Cognitive dimension ● Psychological dimension ● Social dimension
16,20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A discovery and reflective process ● Symbolises personal development and change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitates conceptual understanding and application in real life ● A tool for solving problem ● To be discovered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A loop

Table 4: Variation in the autonomous learning processes

Student	Autonomous learning processes			
	Goal setting	Questioning	Monitoring of progress	Drawing conclusions
3,4,5,6, 13,14, 15,17, 18,19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provided by teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Confirming answers with teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Checking against deadlines set by teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minimal interaction between students and teachers and within groups ● Assembling individual products together
1,2,7,8, 9,10,11, 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Negotiated goals with teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sharing between students and teachers and among students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitoring process against goals set and teachers' comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflecting ● Internalising knowledge
16,20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Negotiated goals with teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extensive sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitoring process against goals set and teachers' comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflecting ● Feedback to goal setting stage

4.3.3 Value of autonomous learning

4.3.3.1 Autonomous learning as outcomes

The value of autonomous learning is closely related to the ‘outcomes’ of autonomous learning. Most of the student respondents attached a positive value towards autonomous learning. A feeling of contentment was experienced by these students, despite the fact that they had different interpretations of the autonomous learning processes discussed in the previous section. The typical response of the students interviewed was ‘I feel happy during the process’. However, when prompted further by the researcher to elaborate on their views, this feeling of contentment was associated with different outcomes they expected as a result of their engagement in the process. Resembling the pattern of variations in the autonomous learning processes, it could also be argued that the different interpretations of the outcomes, like the processes themselves, are shaped by students’ perceptions of learning and knowledge.

Students who construed autonomous learning as a one-way process interpreted the outcomes it led to as an increase in knowledge and strengthening of foundation.

This was congruent with their perceptions of learning as transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student. Autonomous learning was valued as a tool for acquiring more knowledge, leading to an accumulation of knowledge like building blocks and hence laying the foundation for higher diploma programmes, the next level of their studies in other institutes of the VTB. Student 6 was very explicit about the outcome, saying:

The outcome is to build a better foundation.

Student 15 pointed out clearly:

I think autonomous learning is for acquiring knowledge.

Students also valued autonomous learning as a diagnostic tool, the outcome of which would be increased knowledge and skills. Student 4 described the outcome this way:

(I will be) Able to learn some knowledge. Able to know all things of the subjects, I mean, the knowledge in the textbooks... Able to see what I

don't know.

Student 13 commented:

We did it by ourselves and we checked to see if the answer was correct.

We learnt the things and that's autonomous learning.

The teacher was seen as a source of knowledge pointing to students' weaknesses and inadequacy so that they could achieve the desired level of competence demanded by their trade, business, in this case. Student 13 added:

She has to tell you whether what you are doing is right or wrong. When you have learned something, you still need to make sure it is right or wrong and that is the role of the teacher.

For those students who construed autonomous learning as a 2-way process, their interpretation of the outcomes was expressed in different terms. In the process, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for reflection, the outcome of which would be an extension of thinking, enabling them to see things from different

perspectives and apply the knowledge and skills learnt in different contexts. Student

1 explicated as follows:

It (autonomous learning process) enables us to relate to other themes, thinking of others, not relating to those found in the textbook, relating to other things.

Student 9 echoed this point, saying:

After all, what teachers teach are those things in the textbooks but autonomous learning allows you to learn different things, things that you may not be able to learn in textbooks, say, how you can apply what you've learnt in other areas

They also interpreted the outcomes of autonomous learning processes as 'independence' and 'an increased ownership of learning'. Student 11 elaborated this way:

There is more autonomous learning in YI. In secondary school, teachers

asked us to do this and that and here it is no longer the case. We are to participate in class activities and do revision. Notes will be given and it is your business whether you understand it or not. Although teachers will help you, you have to be responsible for what you are doing here. You learn to be more independent.

They relied less on the teacher to feed them with knowledge and considered themselves playing an active part in the process.

Apart from the cognitive aspect, students' interpretations of autonomous learning outcomes are extended to the social and psychological dimensions. Autonomous learning was also valued as a tool for communication with the teacher and their peers. This view was associated with social outcomes with labels such as 'improvements in social skills', 'improvement in teacher-student relationship', 'identification with peers' and 'becoming more cultivated'. Student 8 elaborated on the outcomes she associated with autonomous learning this way:

For the future. For knowing more.

Interviewer: For knowing more?

And self-cultivation.

Interviewer: You think when you learn more, you will become more cultivated?

Yes. When chatting with friends, I can talk more. Sometimes I may not know something my friends say.

Adding to this, these students also expressed autonomous learning outcomes in psychological terms such as ‘enhanced self-confidence’, ‘increased motivation’ and ‘active engagement’.

From the interview data, Student 16 and Student 20 shared most of the autonomous learning outcomes interpreted by the group of students discussed above. Notwithstanding this, two specific outcomes made them distinct from the group. Cognitively, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for making prediction, the outcomes related to this could be interpreted as ‘increased conceptual understanding’ and ‘solutions to problems’. Psychologically, these two students experienced a more intense feeling of ‘contentment’ as expressed by their peers in the interviews, which was described as ‘a sense of satisfaction’ by Student 20. Said Student 20:

At the end (of the process), I felt so free. After learning those things, I felt very comfortable.

Interviewer: In this way, you would feel very comfortable?

Yes. And I felt a sense of satisfaction. I found the feeling solid. If I do not study for one whole day, I will feel uneasy as I can't learn anything that day.

4.3.3.2 Value of autonomy

Students who held an instrumental view of learning and viewed autonomous learning as a one-way process placed a low value on autonomy with respect to their role as students. They appreciated their teacher's effort in telling them what to do so that they could simply follow the instructions and complete the task. They were satisfied with minimal autonomy granted by the teacher in terms of choice of topics.

Student 6 commented:

It's very exciting! Our Miss allowed us to decide our topic. Our Miss told us the topics should be drama, singing, story-telling but we could choose our own.

Instead, they put great emphasis on attributes such as ‘effort’, ‘perseverance’ and ‘concentration’. Student 14 said:

I was not sure about the outcome but I had tried my best.

Student 19 had similar view on this, saying:

Effectiveness? I am not clear about it. Whether it is autonomous learning or the learning I am doing now, everything is taught by the teacher. When I don’t know something, I will ask her. I think it’s more important for me to concentrate in my studies.

In contrast, there was another group of student respondents who had different interpretations of the value of autonomy as shown in the interview data. As discussed previously, in their views, learning was not an external entity and the autonomous learning process they interpreted was not a give-and-take process. Student 8 attached great importance to autonomy which could be interpreted as ‘not being told what to do by the teacher’. Unlike the first group of students who merely demanded choice of topics, these students demanded more autonomy over choice of

learning contents and methods as well as assessment tools. Student 1 explained:

Generally, the human resources allocation was the result of our own discussion! Hence, I think it's a bit similar to autonomous learning. It's more interesting as the business was negotiated by us all along. It's more fun as we don't just read notes.

Student 2 echoed this way:

If we can do discussion in the project, it'll be more objective, wider scope, deeper understanding. It makes me know those things. More specific, more realistic, more efficient. Drawing a better conclusion by reflecting on the opinions of others. In addition, it's the learning method that suits me.

These areas, however, were considered as 'the teacher's business' by the first group of students. Student 5 exclaimed:

No! It's because the matter of examination belongs to them. We can't

change it at will.

Student 15 uttered:

No. I think they are fixed by the school and I have to obey them.

Students 8 also attached value over the choice of commitment or engagement. She explained:

The teacher will give you examples and some opinions and usually classmates will follow but I will think of something else.

Interviewer: You will think of something else. What is it?

Something similar, but not exactly the same as the teacher's.

Interviewer: Why did you think like that?

Should I do whatever I am told?!

This was consistent with their interpretation of autonomy as 'not being told what to do' for they considered themselves having the ultimate right and decision of whether to commit to the task or not, even though it was assigned by the teacher.

Autonomy, in their views, could be interpreted as a sense of psychological commitment or willingness to commit.

Interview data of Student 20 again displayed a distinct pattern of thoughts with regard to the value of autonomy. This student valued autonomy as ‘being free from the teacher’s control in terms of thinking’ who demanded a ‘broadened curriculum’.

The researcher was really impressed by the student’s response since all the other students did not challenge the existing curriculum, a product created by the teachers, the institute and also the local society by and large in terms of inputs given by various industries. Despite such request for change, Student 20 admitted that collective interests should be valued over personal or individual interests in terms of what skills and knowledge were considered appropriate and useful to students heading for a vocational pathway. Said Student 20:

Freedom and students’ personal interest. In fact the subjects we are taking are those that we must know. If students focus too much on personal interest, they may neglect some fundamental subjects and may not study them. That kind of freedom is not desirable. It changes too easily depending on your feelings and personal interest. That kind of freedom is

too simplistic and not desirable.

Table 5 below captures the relationship between students' perceptions of the value of autonomous learning, its outcomes and the value of autonomy.

Table 5: Relationship between the value of autonomous learning, autonomy and the outcomes associated with autonomous learning perceived by student participants

Student	Value of autonomous learning	Outcome of autonomous learning	Meaning and value of autonomy
3,4,5,6, 13,14, 15,17, 18,19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for acquiring more knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase in knowledge ● Strengthening of foundation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low ● Choice of topics
1,2,7,8, 9,10,11, 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for reflection (cognitive dimension) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extension of thinking ● Application of skills in different contexts ● Independence ● Increased ownership of learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Choice of learning contents, learning methods and assessment tools ● Choice of commitment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for communication (social dimension) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improvement in social relationship 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase in self-confidence 	

	self-image (psychological dimension)		
16,20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for generating hypotheses and solving real life problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase in conceptual understanding ● Solutions to real life problems ● Increase in satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Choice of curriculum ● Emancipatory in nature

4.3.4 Motivation

4.3.4.1 Sources of Motivation

Resembling the patterns identified in the above analysis, the interview data showed that the sources of motivation of students viewing learning and knowledge as something external shared similar views in relation to motivation. These students (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) were motivated by extrinsic motivators such as ‘employment-related motivation’, ‘performance-oriented motivation’, ‘meeting parents’ expectations’, and ‘teacher’s praise and encouragement’. This is not surprising to the researcher considering the backgrounds of the students, the mission of the case institute as well as the aims of the training programme undertaken by the students. Students are excluded from the mainstream education

system which caters mainly for the academically-oriented students. Those who have failed in the mainstream system are given a 'second chance' of pursuing a vocational route with the goal of equipping students with trade-specific competencies so that they can find a 'well-paid' job, a symbol of success in the eyes of parents and students themselves. They believed that well-paid jobs enabled them to climb up the social ladder and gain a higher social status. Student 5 commented that he was motivated by a desire for moving out of a newly-developed suburban town in Hong Kong which was renowned for its high crime rates and social problems associated with an influx of immigrants from the south-eastern provinces of Mainland China. In his words:

Living in such a remote area, I find myself insignificantly small and isolated from the others. Thus, I always want to study well, find a good job and move to another place to live.

Students who viewed learning and knowledge as a discovery and internalisation process (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16), by contrast, had mixed motivation. Like the first group (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19), they were motivated by employment-related motivation and their desire for social mobility. Unlike

students in the first group, these students were also motivated by a desire for knowledge and interest in the subject they were pursuing, Business studies, in this case. Student 10 described:

I am interested in something useful to me, in my daily life. For example, learning commercial knowledge, setting up a shop and doing a project are all useful, so I will learn more...That is useful to my job in the future. It is also better to know more but it also depends on interest. Without interest, learning can't be done.

This intrinsic kind of motivation was clearly distinct from the first group of students.

From the interview data, Students 16 and 20 displayed a very strong desire for learning and a deep interest in the subject when compared to the second group of student respondents. Student 20 said:

My learning motivation is to learn more new things. That can enrich my knowledge in different areas. It is purely this and it is to quench my thirst

for knowledge.

What made them stand out was their contention that assessment results were not their source of motivation. Student 16 commented:

It is not whether marks can motivate us or not but whether the subject assessed is interesting or not. If so, it can greatly motivate us to learn the things in that aspect.

This view was remarkably different from that of the rest of students involved in the case study.

4.3.4.2 Directions

From the interview data, different patterns in the relationship between autonomous learning and motivation can be identified. Students in the first group (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) displaying extrinsic type of motivation did not relate any of their motivational forces to autonomous learning. When promoted by the researcher to explain his perception of the relationship between motivation and

autonomous learning, Student 19 said:

In fact, I did it just for handing in the homework... Yes, all for the marks.

It's got nothing to do with autonomous learning.

This was consistent with their having low regard for autonomous learning. They were content with their role as passive recipient of knowledge, listening to their teachers' teaching and following their instructions to get the jobs done.

Students having mixed motivation (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16) perceived that autonomous learning and motivation were closely related. The pattern of the influence was that the motivational factors they identified would lead to the autonomous learning processes. Student 16 explained:

I thought of how to make it better than others. Therefore I had to think and learn autonomously.

Student 16 continued:

That is, I am interested in a subject and I do research on it. I pursue autonomous learning. Only with interest can you be motivated to learn autonomously. Without interest, it is impossible to motivate you or you will avoid or resist that.

Interview data from Student 20, however, showed a different pattern of influence in relation to motivation which deviated from the views of the majority. Student 20 explained:

Of course, there is a close relationship. For someone who can learn autonomously, he can take the initiative to explore more knowledge and naturally more knowledge will be discovered. As a result, s/he can apply the knowledge learnt based on what s/he learnt more easily. Later, s/he can make use of the experiences and processes and turn them into wisdom.

Interviewer: What you have said about the process is in fact in line with how you see autonomous learning, right?

That means autonomous learning can help one increase his desire for learning and hence raise his drive and motivation.

This student considered that autonomous learning was a drive for learning leading to a higher level of motivation. Enhanced motivation, in turn, would result in deeper engagement in the autonomous learning processes. The pattern of influence or relationship between autonomous learning and motivation, by inference, could be seen as bi-directional, with the two constructs reinforcing each other in both directions. Table 6 below summarises the relationship between students' motivations and their perceptions of autonomous learning.

Table 6: Relationship between motivation and autonomous learning perceived by student participants

Student	Type of motivation	Relationship between autonomous learning and motivation	Direction of influence
3,4,5,6, 13,14, 15,17, 18,19	● Extrinsic	● Little	---
1,2,7,8, 9,10,11, 12, 16	● Mixed	● Close	● Desire for success in learning and interest in subject lead to autonomous learning
20	● Intrinsic	● Close	● Interest in subject leads to autonomous learning resulting in higher motivation ● Bi-directional influence

4.3.5 Manners of educational engagement

4.3.5.1 Learning strategies

Students who perceived autonomous learning as a one-way process (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) preferred ‘rote learning’ as a strategy to learn. Student 18 described this method as ‘simple and convenient’. They simply refused to take any risk by exploring other learning strategies. Student 17 claimed that she adopted a traditional way to learn this way:

Working hard. Working hard to compensate what I can’t do well. My way of learning is like that. I follow what others say and seldom think of new ideas. I am not creative, I think.

But then some of the students from this group admitted that rote learning only promoted surface learning and could not help them to adapt to changes they encountered in their learning. Student 15 explained:

Rote learning can only enable me to memorise the meaning literally but I

can't appreciate the essence of it.

Student 19 commented:

When the format changed, I didn't know what to do. Therefore I failed in Mathematics. The format of Mathematics changes a lot.

Students who interpreted autonomous learning as a two-way process (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) held a different view of their learning strategies. Like the first group of students, they managed their learning by adopting rote learning. However, they did not see this as the only strategy to learn. Rote learning, according to them, could be interpreted as a 'coping strategy' which was to be used right before assessment. When prompted by the researcher to elaborate on their learning strategies, they showed a preference for more 'interactive strategies' which involved discussion with peers/older peers, questioning, peer assessment, reflection and making connection to knowledge previously learnt. Student 12 contrasted her interaction with a former teacher and a current teacher showing appreciation and affection for the latter. She described her experience as follows:

The previous teacher was different. He would not ask us any questions. He taught according to the notes only. When he finished teaching, he would not give us a feeling that we could ask him either. As we have a combined class with those hairdressing students this year, the number of students of which dropped from 9 to 4 in year two. They don't like M. Sir (the previous teacher) either. We really like H. Sir (the current teacher).

4.3.5.2 Students' perceptions of the roles of teachers and students

From the interview data, students who interpreted autonomous learning as a one-way process (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) depended very much on their teacher in their learning. They were happy with their role as 'passive recipients of knowledge' and 'followers' with every step along their learning pathway directed by their teacher. The teacher, according to these students, played the role of a 'transmitter of knowledge', 'demonstrator of competencies', 'leader', 'instructor' and 'assessor'. Student 13 described this way:

She gave us comments preparing us for the coming assessment and teaching us how to correct our mistakes. Doing that exercise was for the

coming assessment. She let us do it and told us what was right and wrong.

Student 13 continued:

She taught us very clearly what to do first and then what to do next.

They also made it very explicit that they relied on their teacher to set their goals and plan the course of action when their teacher articulated the assessment criteria for specific tasks. Student 6 had the following view:

It's because our Miss wants us to know what other business affairs can be found in the market and the origins of the brands.

Student 15 said:

The teacher told us the criteria for a test before and told us the main points which need to be memorised.

In this case, both the students and the teacher interacted in a teacher-directed

environment. Student 13 made this clear, saying:

Because I go to find the teacher for help. It is not the teacher who comes to ask me if I need help. It is me who feels the need and go to ask the teacher. I ask the teacher what I don't understand.

Students who construed autonomous learning as a two-way process (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12), like the first group of students, looked to their teacher as a source of knowledge and help. Despite this, they did not take in whatever the teacher imparted to them. They could be labelled as 'explorers' and 'active participants' when they referred to their classroom experiences. The acts of questioning, enquiring, seeking clarifications and explanations in their learning activities were carried out within their framework or structure laid down by their teacher. Student 11 elaborated on the process:

During the process, I will try first to see if I can manage. If I don't know something, I will ask. After asking, I will be able to learn it. Then I will understand more about what I have learnt, I mean, a deeper understanding. It is not teacher-directed or else I won't ask any questions.

Correspondingly, the role of their teacher could be interpreted as a ‘facilitator’ signposting the way forward and guiding the students through every step along the pathway. Student 11 added:

That means the teacher will show you the direction and in the end you have to fathom it by yourself.

Notwithstanding that the framework or structure was built upon the assessment criteria of particular tasks announced by the teacher, students in this case did not simply attempt to meet their teacher’s expectations. They reflected on their practices by referring to their own needs and expectations. They also made sense of what they were doing by relating to their own prior experiences. Student 9 said:

Yes, I can remember something that I previously learnt. But I cannot remember all. I just found it useful recently. I remember I learnt it in primary school but at that time I was not that good.

Interviewer: How did you associate with something you learnt before?

Perhaps because I have to use the method I used before to learn the present things, like the formula I used in Mathematics.

Student 12 commented:

Sometimes the things we learn in our everyday lives can serve as examples which make us understand the concept.

Apart from the cognitive aspect, the teacher also played the role as a ‘supporter’ in terms of students’ emotional needs in the learning process. Student 7 described her relationship with her teacher this way:

I find we are friends. It is different from that between the teacher and the student. He will be like a friend supporting you.

Students 16 and 20 who construed the autonomous learning process as a loop depended less on their teacher as a source of knowledge, help, advice or guidance. They interacted with their teacher as a ‘friend’ or an ‘older peer’. Unlike the first and second groups of students who had no ownership of assessment, they negotiated assessment criteria with their teacher, assuming full responsibility of their own learning. Student 16 was very much concerned about the assessment criteria set by the teacher to which he objected. Said Student 16:

I had talked about them with the teacher. Sometimes it was about whether you concentrated in the homework and whether the words were beautiful or not. I reflected this before.

Interviewer: What did you say? I am very much interested in how you reflected this.

Everyone writes differently and whether it is beautiful or not is very subjective and personal. It is not from a computer. Therefore if there is an artist saying the student's writing is very artistic and beautiful, some teachers may think that it is very ugly. The marks given could be very different. And it is impossible to get full marks. It is hard to say your handwriting is beautiful or tidy or not.

They also exchanged with the teacher outside the arena of their academic engagement. The teacher in this case played the role of an 'enabler' empowering the students to free themselves from the traditional role of 'listeners' and 'followers'. They were encouraged to ask questions and share their views with the teacher freely.

4.3.5.3 Students' perceptions of teacher-student relationship

Students who interpreted autonomous learning as a one-way give-and-take process (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) resulting in outcomes such as an increase in knowledge and skills saw the teacher as an authority figure and a source of knowledge. Student 15 clarified this way:

I want to know the answer to the question and its detailed contents and the thing I want to get is knowledge. Therefore it is the same between asking the teacher and finding a book.

The teacher was regarded as superior and students themselves inferior in terms of knowledge, skills and experiences. Such imbalance of power could be conceptualised as a 'master-and-apprentice' relationship, which was quite common in the vocational context. In fact, in the past, it was not uncommon for masters to discipline and train up the apprentices by exercising corporal punishment.

On the contrary, students who construed autonomous learning as a two-way process and valued it as a tool for reflection and communication (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10,

11, 12) recognised a more dynamic relationship with the teacher. Student 10 commented:

It is necessary to get to know the teacher. Therefore the teacher should not give students a serious impression. If we get acquainted, we will cooperate more and concentrate in class.

The kind of teacher-student interaction could be conceptualised as a 'mentor-and-mentee' relationship. The give-and-take situations were replaced by sharing and discussion between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves in the process. Despite this reciprocal relationship, the power still resided with the teacher. The students still looked up to their teacher for his/her expertise, experience, care, support and guidance. In this case, the teacher was respected not as a figure of authority but a source of knowledge and help. Instead of instructing students what to do or demonstrating the necessary skills, the teacher made an effort to understand the individual needs of the students and prompt students' own reflection by asking more open-ended questions.

The two students (Students 16 and 20) who construed autonomous learning as a

loop considered their teacher as a ‘friend’ on a more equal standing. This kind of teacher-and-student relationship could be conceptualised as ‘learning partners’ who committed themselves fully to the learning process so that they could benefit from each other’s knowledge and experience. The sharing and discussion between the teacher and the students allowed ample opportunities for both parties to reflect on their teaching and learning practices respectively. This, in turn, advanced and perfected each other’s work. The influence was, again, bi-directional. Table 7 below displays the relationship between students’ perceptions of autonomous learning and their manners of educational engagement.

Table 7: Relationship between students’ perceptions of autonomous learning and their manners of educational engagement

Student	Learning strategies	Role of teachers and students	Teacher-student relationship
3,4,5,6, 13,14, 15,17, 18,19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rote learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dependent on teachers ● Teachers as leaders, transmitters of knowledge and assessors ● Students as followers and passive recipients of knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unequal ● Teacher-directed environment ● Master-and-apprentice relationship

1,2,7,8, 9,10,11, 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rote learning as coping strategy ● Preference for interactive strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teachers as facilitators and supporters (on emotional needs) ● Students as explorers and active participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Relatively equal; power stills resides with teachers ● Students explore freely in teacher's framework ● Mentor-mentee relationship
16,20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preference for interactive strategies ● Negotiation with teachers based on own needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Depend less on teachers ● Teachers as enablers empowering students to free themselves from traditional role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equal ● Student-centred environment ● Learning partners

4.4 Conclusions

The interview data show that the students construed autonomous learning as both classroom processes and learning outcomes. However, different students interpreted these processes and outcomes in different ways which are influenced by the differences in their epistemological positions and their motivations. They also attached different value to autonomous learning and the related concept of autonomy. Their different perceptions are found to be closely related to how they engaged their tasks at the case institute.

Ten students (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18 and 19) construed autonomous learning as a one-way process whose operation depended very much on the input from their teachers. This was underpinned by their instrumental and mechanistic views of learning and the extrinsic type of motivation. According to this group of students, knowledge was 'given' by their teachers which enabled them to secure a job with good salary upon their graduation. The outcomes leading from this one-way process were obviously an increase in knowledge. These students placed low value on autonomous learning and autonomy in their learning which were not perceived as the ultimate goal of their learning. Their perceptions were reflected in their educational engagement which could be described as shallow with minimal engagement with the subject and their teachers as well.

Eight students (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12), on the contrary, construed autonomous learning as a two-way process, whose perceptions were underpinned a constructivist view of learning. Knowledge was not to be given but they made sense of it by relating to what they learnt and experienced previously. Their perceptions were also related to a mixed type of motivation which was consistent with their view of knowledge as a passport to wealth and having value in itself. These students perceived very different outcomes, attaching high value to autonomous learning and

autonomy in the process. The classroom practices of these students were characterised by a deep level of engagement when compared with the first group of students discussed in the previous paragraph.

The interview data reveal a third pattern of the autonomous learning processes construed by two students (Students 16 and 20) holding a developmental view of learning and knowledge which was markedly different from that of the first group of students. The processes could be described as a loop when the conclusion and reflection fed back to the goal setting process. Their interpretation of the outcomes resulting from these processes was associated with change and development which, again, resonated with their epistemological beliefs. The two students had a high regard for autonomous learning and considered autonomy as an important means to achieve their goals. Their perceptions were represented in their deep engagement and interaction with the subject itself, the tasks, their peers and teachers.

4.5 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has begun with an evaluation of effectiveness of the instrument and strategies used to collect students' data. Having described the

students' backgrounds and restated the relevant research questions, the researcher then reports the major findings of this study in terms of the themes and patterns derived from a critical examination of the students' data. Such analysis forms the basis of the discussion chapter which aims to answer each of the specific research questions of this study.

5 Findings and Analysis – Teachers’ Responses

5.1 Overview

This chapter starts with a review of the research method employed by the researcher to collect data from the teacher participants which has been discussed in the methodology chapter. This is followed by a description of their backgrounds and the subjects they delivered in the case institute. The researcher then restates the specific research questions relating to teachers’ perceptions. The rest of the chapter is structured around the themes and sub-themes and their relationships identified which are based on an in-depth examination of the teachers’ responses.

5.2 Introduction

5.2.1 Teachers’ profiles

The four teachers involved in the study witnessed the establishment of the YI under the Bureau in the 2004/05 academic year and started teaching the Diploma in Vocational Studies (DVS) programme since then. They were familiar with the

mission of the YI in offering an alternative route to secondary school leavers who did not fit well into the mainstream education system in Hong Kong. They were also aware of the dual aim of the programme i.e. to equip students with vocational knowledge and skills for employment purpose upon graduation and, at the same time, strengthen students' foundation for further studies if they aspire to progress to the higher diploma level. They had extensive experience in delivering business modules to students who were considered less academically-inclined and experienced repeated failure in the mainstream system. The following table shows the profiles of the four teacher respondents.

Table 8: Teachers' profiles

Teacher	Gender	Year at YI	Background
1	F	19	Teaching staff member responsible for the Accounting modules of the DVS programme offered by the YI
2	M	18	Teaching staff member responsible for the Word Processing and IT Application modules of the DVS programme offered by the YI; class tutor and discipline master
3	F	23	Head of the Business Administration Section in the YI; leader of the Business stream of the DVS programme in charge of curriculum development and syllabus writing
4	F	10	Teaching staff member responsible for the Office Procedures, Office Machinery and Business Practice modules of the DVS programme; class tutor

5.2.2 Research questions relating to teachers' perceptions

In view of the small number of teacher participants interviewed, the researcher would examine the views of each of the teachers in depth in relation to autonomous learning and how such perceptions were related their pedagogical practice at the case institute.

At the same time, teachers' interview data were compared and contrasted. The researcher would comment on similarities in their perspectives. Comments or issues raised by individual teachers which were distinct from the other participants would also be identified. In the process, five themes and their related sub-themes were identified. They enabled the researcher to answer the three specific research questions (SRQ) relating to teachers' perceptions listed below:

SRQ 2: In what ways do teachers construe autonomous learning?

SRQ 4: What value do teachers place upon autonomous learning?

SRQ 6: How do teachers' views on autonomous learning relate to their pedagogical practice?

5.3 Teachers' Responses

5.3.1 Views of learning and knowledge

Resembling the patterns of the student participants, the teachers' views of learning and knowledge can also be categorised into three types. Teacher 1 maintained a traditional view of learning, saying:

Even though talking about autonomous learning, we teach those students who may have been Secondary 5 i.e. those attending the diploma. I think they just receive how much you tell them. Then, they're presumed to be very good students. Furthermore, they don't want to use their brain to think about whether there's any other route or explanation that you may tell them.

Learning was perceived as a one-way process during which the teacher transmitted his/her knowledge to the students who took in whatever the teacher passed to them passively without much thinking and interaction between the two parties.

According to Teacher 1, learning could therefore be interpreted as a process of transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students. Knowledge itself, though manifested in different forms, was seen as a tangible product which could be 'acquired' from the teachers or the older generation who had more life experiences. Knowledge, in her opinions, enhanced students' employability and enabled them to secure a relatively well-paid job in the related professions. This view of knowledge was consistent with that of the first group of students, i.e. knowledge generated wealth. Teacher 1 elaborated her view on knowledge this way:

It's (Knowledge's) versatile. Everything could be knowledge, whether it is something of a higher order, a lower order or anything that we come across in our daily lives. There are different ways of doing the same thing and for instance, old people can tell us what to do when we feel dizzy or have a fever. All these are knowledge. Knowledge will certainly bring about wealth. Our job is to equip students with more knowledge and skills and help them get a better job.

A second type of views of learning and knowledge was displayed by a teacher respondent, Teacher 4, who had a very different view from those of Teacher 1

discussed above. Teacher 4 interpreted learning very much as a discovery and exploration process which enabled students to grow and develop. Such development would result in a change of their mindset and attitudes. Teacher 4 explained:

Learning, at this moment to me, is a human instinct; to learn things. It is a born nature and it is a need. Gradually one will feel curious about many things or something fresh, or stimulating, so he would like to know more and he will start to explore, through the process of learning, and things like that.

Teacher 4 continued:

Going to school should be fun but having fun is not the only thing. Here in CVS (Certificate in Vocational Studies), we hope students can enjoy school life, adapting to the learning environment again. Now that they are older [in DVS (Diploma in Vocational Studies)], the objective is not the same and they have to develop themselves. The learning process can be hard which leads to a change in their mindset, their attitudes and their habit.

Knowledge, according to Teacher 4, had to be discovered and internalised. Teacher 4 added:

You (Students) can't just listen and copy in class. You need to discover it (knowledge). You also need to understand it. That is to say you need to absorb it.

Unlike the views held by Teacher 1, knowledge was not seen as static and external by this particular teacher. Learning and knowledge, from her perspective, was associated with development and change experienced by the students themselves as they went through the process.

Teachers 2 and 3 shared similar views towards learning and knowledge. Teacher 2 perceived learning as a process of 'finding answers to questions and problems'. These questions and problems could originate from life or work situations. Learning, in his views, could thus be interpreted as a problem-solving process. Like Teacher 1, Teacher 2 held the views that learning and knowledge could lead to certification and hence wealth, two prominent indicators of success. Teacher 2 articulated his views this way:

Everybody wants the certificate, even though they (students) may not know how useful it is. It is still a proof. First, they feel embarrassed if they can't get it. Whatever they say, still they need to get it if they want to get a job to support their living.

As the interview went further, Teacher 2 added another dimension to this perception of learning and knowledge. He commented:

I think everybody should set a direction and a goal. Then the sense of satisfaction will be high and they (students) will learn more. As they want to acquire more, they will become richer.

Apart from bringing wealth, knowledge was seen as having value in itself. Wealth in this sense could thus be equated with spiritual enrichment.

Teacher 3 had a less instrumental view on learning and knowledge when compared with Teachers 1 and 2. Learning was perceived as a process of applying knowledge learnt which could be valued as 'interest, valuable experiences and the truth about life'. Knowledge was also perceived as dynamic in nature which could be applied,

transferred, adapted and modified in different situations and on different groups of learners. Teacher 3 illustrated her perception this way:

Knowledge can allow me to know more things. That means I can have more experience that I have not had before. Even when I went to a training workshop on MIA (Management in Action) last Friday to learn to fold paper shirts, I found that it was also learning. I did poorly in the race as I am weak in doing spatial tasks. I saw one team doing that together and I regarded it as learning. I learnt that I can use it in the Youth Christian gathering as a game. It is like this. When we were young, we learnt something and we may not know how to apply it. Now when we learn something from kids, we can apply it and modify it for adults. Sometimes, when I learn something from adults, I can modify it for kids. To me, that is learning.

The above quote from Teacher 3 also suggested that her view of learning was developmental in nature, a view resonated with that of Teacher 4.

In respect of her epistemological position, Teacher 1 is highly instrumental. This

view is consistent with the mission of the case institute offering vocational education and training to secondary school leavers who are barred from the mainstream education system. This alternative pathway is considered appropriate for these students as long as it fits the purpose of providing them with pre-employment training to enable them to secure a job in related industries. The view of Teacher 4, however, can be identified with growth, development, transformation and change which are clearly not expected of the YI students upon completion of the learning programme. Neither are they the immediate goals of the institute. Teachers 2 and 3 are perceived by the researcher as following a middle course. Despite this, the view of the former can be identified more with Teacher 1 whereas that of the latter with Teacher 4.

5.3.2 Perceptions of autonomous learning

5.3.2.1 Teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning

When asked how they perceived autonomous learning, all the teachers posed an immediate question to the researcher to see whether the researcher would like to know their own views or their students' views towards autonomous learning.

Teacher 1 made it clear to the researcher by saying:

That's why I say there are two types. After I finish teaching something, they can go home and do some exercises. They may think it is autonomous learning. To me, it is a bit different...

Apparently, the teachers perceived that their own views were rather different from those of their students and they intended to bring this to the attention of the researcher.

The interview data show that all the teachers construed autonomous learning as a process. This view was congruent with that of the student respondents who also interpreted autonomous learning as classroom processes. Again, like their students, different teachers had different views on how these processes operated. According to Teacher 1, its operation involved mainly a goal setting stage during which the teacher set the goal for their students by emphasising the need of passing the examination so that they could obtain a certificate. When prompted to explain what she meant by autonomous learning processes, Teacher 1 elaborated as follows:

At the beginning of the process, I will analyse the whole situation for them. For example, I will tell them, the students, who study here do not have good CE (Certificate Examination) results, or they were promoted from S3 CVS (Certificate in Vocational Studies) to Found. Dip. (Foundation Diploma). Their language abilities are certainly low. I tell them clearly that if they want high marks and would like to continue their studies, they have to get good results.

Teacher 1 maintained that this was the only stage she involved herself in the process. She would then retreat from the process and let the students do the rest of it to achieve their goal, or more precisely, her goal. It was obvious that Teacher 1 did not see her role in the process as students themselves should be held responsible for its operation. Teacher 1 described her situation this way:

I try to encourage them to try to understand accounting more. If they understand, they may be more interested. And if after they understand more, they are still not interested, then, we have nothing to say. When you find it useless and cannot understand it at all, there is actually no way to encourage you. At the beginning, it is a matter of personal

responsibility...

Teacher 1 continued with her perception of autonomous learning this way:

Say in accounting, we will introduce to them the public exams. If you want to sit the public exams, our course cannot cover all the topics. So you have to use your own time to study all other topics. Of course, there are some who know that when you go out to work, you need to have more certificates to convince employers and they may want to sit the exams. Some studied the subject before in secondary school and they know about it. But in fact, the number of students willing to spend their own time to study more, like book-keeping, is very small.

Her view was consistent with that of the first group of student respondents who saw autonomous learning as taking the initiative to carry out self-learning.

Teachers 2, 3 and 4 also construed autonomous learning as a process. But, unlike Teacher 1's perception which could be interpreted as a one-way process, the autonomous learning processes construed by the other three teachers could be labelled as two-way as they involved both the teachers and the students. Teacher's

involvement in the processes, however, varied from teacher to teacher.

When invited to give his views on what he understood by autonomous learning,

Teacher 2 responded:

When I (students) think of a target and try to look for a direction to get to know the answer, I then plan to study it and that is autonomous learning.

Referring to this target, Teacher 2 continued:

They knew it. They had a target. Still, the teacher has to tell them what they are supposed to learn today; what they are going to do in the course. Otherwise, they may not know what they are going to do.

Teacher 2 went on to elaborate the process:

... They will ask me if they have done it correctly. In fact, they are monitoring their own progress that day to see whether they have done well in the process. We will look at whether they have done well to assess

their performance.

Apart from goal setting, the process also involved planning the study pathways and monitoring their own progress. It was apparent that both parties participated in the process. But then, the students were living under the shadow of this teacher who shaped the process to a large extent.

Teacher 3 described her version of autonomous learning processes by quoting an example of a project she did with her students. This illustration echoed students' views on the typical learning activity they associated with autonomous learning discussed in the previous chapter. Said Teacher 3:

Academically, there was the project 'Practice Enterprise' that required them (students) to set up their own company. Led by the teacher, they had to set up a company and had to decide everything. They had to decide what kind of company to set up and make the model. Then they had to plan, even it was a simple one and to estimate costing. This was autonomous learning, though it was guided. In other words, the teacher would tell them it didn't work, like you got too little capital and couldn't

even pay the rent... The teacher is to assist them in the process and they have the autonomy to set up whatever kind of company, even a night club. Once a group opened a night club, I asked if they had the money to buy enough stocks (wine). Then they learned about the reality and modified their plan and then came to a conclusion. They had absolute autonomy and could do whatever they liked.

The autonomous learning processes construed by Teacher 3 involved such stages described by Teachers 1 and 2, namely goal setting, planning and self-monitoring. What made the processes distinct from those of Teachers 1 and 2 was the presence of an additional element, self-reflection based upon the teacher's input, which enabled the students to draw realistic conclusion at the end of the process. Teacher 3's perception of the autonomous learning processes could also be interpreted as moving further away from that of Teachers 1 and 2 in terms of her students' engagement in the process. The interview data show that her students were given the opportunity to take up the tasks of setting their own goal, planning their way forward and monitoring their own progress and eventually reaching a practical conclusion from the beginning to the end of the process. When compared with Teachers 1 and 2, Teacher 3 herself also had more engagement in the process by

interacting with the students along the journey. This was quite different from Teacher 1's perception of her own role in the process as Teacher 1 basically excluded herself from the process.

When compared with Teacher 3, Teacher 4 moved one step further to engage both herself and her students in the autonomous learning process which started with goal setting. At this stage, her students were invited to inform the teacher what they intended to learn and achieve so that both the teacher and the institute could meet their needs and expectations to engage them in the processes. Teacher 4 commented,:

I think when a student tells you actively what s/he wants to achieve, then we teachers and the school could design and arrange those courses for them.

Teacher 4 continued:

When we meet the needs of them and design and organise something for them, they will be devoted to it. They will be devoted when they know

what they want. If they have a definite target, they want to complete what they want to do. During this process, they go and learn and upgrade themselves and achieve that target.

Students of Teacher 4 were empowered to set their own goal. Teacher also talked about the importance for students to arrange their schedule to monitor their own progress as well as explore and find their way through the process to achieve the goal they set. This suggested the other two elements that qualified the autonomous learning process, namely planning study pathways and monitoring progress.

Resembling Teacher 3's perception, Teacher 4's interpretation of the autonomous learning process was characterised by engaging students to reflect on what they did during the process in order to facilitate conclusion drawing. What made Teacher 4 different from Teacher 3 was that the former did not stop at this stage. Instead of putting an end to the process, Teacher 4 again invited her students to share their reflections with herself and their peers. This move closed the loop of the process such that the students enjoyed the opportunity to use their reflections to feedback to the goal setting stage, perfecting the process as it went on. Teacher 4 described such extension this way:

They (students) should be allowed to share with each other what they did in the process, what problems they have come across, how they attempted to resolve them, etc. They will be able to reach a more sensible conclusion. This kind of reflection is important as they will have a better idea of how to go about doing it in a better way when they start another project. This is of course an ideal situation.

The reflection and sharing led to 'fine-tuning' which could be interpreted as students' growth and development. This perception matched Teacher 4's views on learning and knowledge which symbolised personal development, transformation and change on the part of the students.

All the four teachers talked explicitly about what they did not consider as autonomous learning. In this respect, they had a rather unanimous view that 'transmission of knowledge' from the teachers to the students was clearly contrary to the processes associated with autonomous learning. Teacher 4 said:

In particular, those passive students. Especially, those CVS (Certificate in Vocational Studies) students, they will just copy what their teachers have

asked them to copy and download something and say they have done their part. That is not autonomous learning!

Teacher 2 and 3 had similar views on what autonomous learning was not. Teacher 2 explained what he meant by autonomous learning first (quoted previously) and then immediately contrasted this with what he thought the opposite was. Said Teacher 2:

When I (students) think of a target and try to look for a direction to get to know the answer, I then plan to study it and that is autonomous learning; not being fed by the teacher.

Teacher 3 explained her view this way:

It (Autonomous learning) is something that is not taught by someone. Who teaches them (students)? No one. Then it is autonomous learning and they can learn it well.

Teacher 1 explained her view on what was not counted as autonomous learning this way:

I (student) will study for you (teachers/parents). But you (teachers) need to tell me the scope of the examination. I (student) will then recite everything to you. But I think this is not autonomous learning.

According to Teacher 1, teacher-directed learning and rote learning are apparently not associated with autonomous learning. Her explanation of what was not regarded as autonomous learning surprised the researcher. When Teacher 1 reflected on the autonomous learning process, she asserted that the teacher should set the goal for the students by telling them what to do. The role of the students was to conform to the teacher's expectation. As the conversation went further, the researcher regarded that a lot of tension was going on between what this teacher thought she should be doing and what she actually did in the classroom. The researcher noticed that Teacher 1 was well aware that most of the students preferred a more interactive type of class activities which helped to motivate them to learn. Despite this understanding, Teacher 1 persisted on adhering to the traditional chalk-and-talk approach to teaching which she considered appropriate and effective in helping her students to acquire the accounting knowledge and skills. Another instance of tension was evident in Teacher 1's concern about her relationship with students. She recognised that a close and supportive relationship with her students would

maximise learning effectiveness. In practice, however, she was too preoccupied with her job of delivering all the curriculum and syllabus contents to prepare students for the examination. This discouraged her from spending more time with her students building a good and trustful relationship with them both in and out of class.

Table 9 below displays the relationship between teachers' epistemological views and their perceptions of autonomous learning.

Table 9: Relationship between teachers' epistemological views and their perceptions of autonomous learning

Teacher	View of learning	View of knowledge	Teacher's perception of autonomous learning
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Instrumental ● Transmission of knowledge from teachers to students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To be acquired ● To be passed from teachers or older generation ● Knowledge leads to wealth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A one-way process involving goal setting only ● Teacher provides students with 'her' goals ● Minimal engagement ● Synonymous with self-learning
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Instrumental and constructivist ● A problem-solving process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Knowledge leads to wealth ● Knowledge equals wealth which has value in itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A two-way process involving goal setting, planning and monitoring of progress ● Teacher shapes the whole process

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Constructivist ● An application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dynamic and transferrable ● Knowledge equals wealth which has value in itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A two-way process involving goal setting, planning, monitoring of progress and self-reflection ● More student and teacher engagement in the process
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developmental ● A discovery process ● Change in mindset and attitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To be discovered and internalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A loop ● Students empowered to set their own goals ● Also involves planning and monitoring of progress ● Reflection and sharing feedback to goal setting leading to development

5.3.2.2 Teachers' perceptions of students' perceptions of autonomous learning

As introduced in the beginning of the previous section, all the four teachers pointed out that there was a difference between their own perceptions and their students' perceptions of autonomous learning. This section reports what they thought their students' views on autonomous learning were.

The interview data shows that Teachers 1 and 2 had similar views on students' perceptions of autonomous learning that students studying at the YI had no idea about autonomous learning because they just cared about how they would be assessed in the course. When prompted to elaborate on her views of her students' interpretation of autonomous learning, Teacher 1 said firmly:

No. I'm sure they have no idea. They just want to know how you (the teacher) assess them.

She continued with an example of her student's thought:

Like today, a student asked me for the areas on which he would be tested and requested me to give him three topics and questions with standard answers so that he could memorise them. They claimed that it was autonomous learning.

The teacher's perception of her students' views on autonomous learning was apparently a one-way process during which the teacher gave out knowledge and the student accepted whatever passed to him/her without thinking through. Teacher 1's

perception of her students' idea of the distinctive roles played by the teacher and the students was also captured in the data from Teacher 2. He explained his perception in this way:

Some students think they need to study hard. They are traditional and they conscientiously learn what the teacher feeds them, the concept of spoon-feeding.

Teacher 2 concurred with the perception of Teacher 1 with respect to students' interpretation of autonomous learning. However, Teachers 3 and 4 did not seem to have such stereotypical image of YI students discussed above. Teacher 3 described her students' views as follows:

For something academic, like word processing, we have a software program that is free of charge, called Typing Pool. Some students could type fast and some okay as they knew it already. Then we asked them to open a typing pool to practise it. It can be done at home as we have got Webct (an e-learning platform) already. We encouraged them but I think hardly anyone could do it at home. Maybe there were only two to three

who could. And to them, that's autonomous learning, to train your speed.

Teacher 3's perception of her students' views on autonomous learning was evidently related to the image of students working on their own, independently from their teacher or simply without the presence of the teacher. This was facilitated by the use of an electronic platform institutionalised by the Council as an attempt to reduce class contact hours to promote students' independent learning skills.

5.3.2.3 Critical factors

The interview data shows that there are three critical factors leading to autonomous learning without which it is not going to work on students pursuing their education in the YI context. To allow autonomous learning to take place, all the four teachers interviewed commented that students needed to have the 'ability' to do so. Such cognitive dimension was also related to students' willingness to engage in autonomous learning which could be interpreted as having a psychological aspect.

Teacher 2 described this explicitly:

Yes. When you talk about autonomous learning, it requires the student to

have an ability of his own.

Interviewer: What exactly is this ability?

You have to have a desire for learning. You have something you really desire to know. Then you may have that ability.

Likewise, Teacher 3 described the relationship between the two dimensions as follows:

For autonomous learning, you have to have the ability first. In other words, not everyone can learn autonomously. You have to own some basics and the interest before you can. For university students, we can just talk and ask them to finish everything at home. Still they will make it. But for the students here, they won't care even after I teach them. If they can finish it earlier, they can leave earlier. But even if they can't, they will still leave when their friends leave. And when they can't finish it in class, they won't finish it at home. Therefore, I think there are several requirements before autonomous learning can be achieved. First, they need to have the ability. Second, they are interested in that thing. If we look at whether our students can learn autonomously or not, some can but not all. And what

will they learn? For example, there are 30% of students who can learn autonomously.

The above figure estimated by Teacher 3 referred to the whole student population at the YI. When commenting on the ability to perform autonomous learning of her class of students in particular, she was more optimistic about it. She said:

In fact for the class I am teaching now, there are 95%, as there are some SEN (students with special educational needs) students.

Teacher 4 made similar comments on the critical factors for autonomous learning to take place. She related these factors to a lack of ability, the cognitive dimension, and a willingness to commit themselves, the psychological dimension, on the part of the students. Said Teacher 4:

In other words, they don't have the ability to arrange their own schedules, to explore new things and to find out new things out of nothing. They think they are participating but they don't know how to get into it.

Throughout the interviews with the teachers, Teacher 1 constantly compared the performance of the YI students and that of the mainstream students with a strong stereotypical image that the former were unmotivated and not smart enough, especially in their academic endeavour. Teacher 1 gave the following example:

I got two cousins, one aged 8, and he is studying in a famous school.

There he is given lots of homework. Also, his parents also arrange a lot of extra-curricular activities for him. More, he has to attend tuition for Chinese and English. But he is very smart. He has this ability. He knows when to watch TV and when to finish his homework.

In relation to this, the researcher probed into the teachers' thinking as to whether the students' lack of cognitive ability and engagement in their learning process, as they perceived, could be changed or improved, only Teacher 4 gave an affirmative response. This was consistent with her view of learning and knowledge which was developmental in nature.

The third critical factor is associated with the teachers' views that for autonomous learning to take place, it depends very much on the nature of the subject or the

discipline. Teacher 2 explained his difficulty in facilitating autonomous learning processes in his subject this way:

It is difficult in my subject. Basically, I teach some practical skills and in level 2 (Qualifications Framework Level), they are not required to create an answer and I explain clearly what will be done every day. As far as a single subject is concerned, they will not actively look for answers.

Interviewer: What do you mean by a single subject?

I mean my subject. If you look at it the other way round, i.e., the whole course, then it may be different. It's quite simple. Some students know this course will involve a lot of English in the third year and they have planned to improve their English. That is then autonomous learning. In other words, they have plans to do something and to me it is autonomous learning...The subject I am teaching does not involve much. But as a whole, as a class teacher, sometimes I will include some elements like setting targets. Through these, they may do self-reflection when I remind them what they can do and achieve. Then they will start planning and begin to be more autonomous.

Teacher 3 associated autonomous learning with a particular module in the business course she was delivering. She explained:

They were the boss of the company. They had different duties and they had learnt organisation structure in another subject. For example, they got five members in a group and they wanted to buy a boutique.

Interviewer: When was it done?

It is a module. It is ninety hours a year, called Practice Enterprise. This module required students to integrate and apply knowledge and skills learnt in other modules of the business course.

Like Teacher 3, Teacher 4 also associated autonomous learning processes to an integrated module. She recalled her experience vividly:

I used to teach 'Integrated Studies', which is a diploma course. Those courses will include some whole person development. They require students to be creative and to be volunteers, serving the community and having some creativity. And third, ... I can't remember it. Within this scope, they have to choose something to learn. Say, some learn how to

drive and when they get the license, it means they have handed in the homework. Some may do voluntary work and they can prove they have done some with proof of chops. At the end of the term, they have to do a project and present it, telling us what area they have selected, what they have learnt, what they have benefited and what they feel. This course is a bit closer to what you asked, as they have to look for things they need by themselves. They have to make their own decisions.

Table 10 below displays a summary of teachers' perceptions of students' views of autonomous learning and those critical factors leading to autonomous learning.

Table 10: Summary of teachers' perceptions of students' views of autonomous learning and critical factors

Teacher	Teacher's perception of students' perception of autonomous learning	Critical factor
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No idea of autonomous learning ● Stereotypical image of YI students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An ability
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No idea of autonomous learning ● Stereotypical image of YI students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An ability ● A desire for learning ● Not feasible in subjects he teaches

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Independent learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An ability ● Interest in the subject ● Feasible in subjects such as projects and business enterprise
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Independent learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An ability ● Willingness to commit ● Feasible in subjects such as projects and integrated studies

5.3.3 Value of autonomous learning

5.3.3.1 Autonomous learning as outcomes

Three teachers (Teachers 2, 3 and 4) associated autonomous learning with contentment and satisfaction on the part of the students. Teacher 2 commented:

Autonomous learning is something I (student) like to do, I enjoy doing, with a sense of satisfaction and the whole process is happy.

Referring to her experience with the CVS students previously quoted, Teacher 4 recalled:

...During the process they go and learn and upgrade themselves and achieve that target. Playing the song first and then the second and in this process, they enjoy it.

Their views resonated with those of their students who experienced enjoyment and satisfaction in the autonomous learning processes.

Despite this, different teachers associated different outcomes with autonomous learning and attached different types of value to it. Teacher 1 interpreted the autonomous learning outcome as self-help or self-reliance. In her view, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for acquiring some independent learning skills so that the students could survive without the help or presence of others, the teachers probably. She shared with the researcher an example of a local student who got admitted to the university after completing Secondary 5 because of his talent in inventing useful devices and new technologies. Teacher 1 illustrated her position this way:

For example, a student called Chan Yik Hei who likes electronics and mechanics very much and is obsessed with this aspect but poor in English.

Is it autonomous? But he couldn't meet the requirements of the school. He is good at some aspects but they might not be useful to the society. And some research requires good English but he is not good at it. Should we find someone to translate it for him? Is it autonomous learning? I think it is arguable.

Such view was congruent with her perception of having minimal involvement in the autonomous learning process, the outcome of which was, naturally, to be able to rely on oneself. Such perception was also consistent with her traditional view on learning and knowledge that the job of students was to acquire knowledge and skills imparted by the teachers.

Teacher 2 perceived the goal of learning as both a passport to wealth and spiritual enrichment, as discussed previously. So apart from a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction, he affirmed that the outcome associated with autonomous learning was being successful in learning. Responding to the researcher, he replied:

Yes. The chance of success is also higher as you continue to look for it (autonomous learning).

Interviewer: Successful in the learning aspect or the other aspects?

At the end, it is the certificate that matters. For some, they cannot get it.

In his opinions, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for building foundation which enabled his students to proceed from the DVS programme, a foundation programme, to higher diploma programmes. This idea was captured in the following response:

Through autonomous learning, their foundation will be strengthened.

When they move onto a new environment, the mode and environment become very different. Some of my past students told me they had lost their ways. The teachers there did not care about them and they couldn't even take the first step there. Therefore they got lost.

Teacher 3 considered the goal of learning as application of skills and knowledge learnt in different situations. This view resembled her perception of the outcome she associated with autonomous learning. She commented:

Yes, or perhaps it is value-addedness, not necessarily knowledge. Mainly

it is knowledge. It is either academic knowledge or knowledge for application. For example, like my husband, now he likes making bread and he reads the books and surf the internet vigorously and is making bread day and night ...

Interviewer: Is it in daily life?

Yes, it is at this level. It can upgrade yourself and you can enjoy a better living standard.

Autonomous learning was valued as a tool for self-upgrading, which was also underpinned by the developmental nature of learning as she perceived.

Teacher 4 had a distinctively different view of the outcome related to autonomous learning when compared with the other three teachers. In her conversation with the researcher, increase in knowledge was not stressed as the goal of learning. This view was congruent with her perception of the outcome associated with autonomous learning which was an increase in maturity and responsibility of her students. Autonomous learning was valued as a tool for personal development. She reflected on her situation this way:

In relation to autonomous learning? Looking back, those from CVS do not like to go to school. They have changed from not wanting to go to school to being able to adapt to the school, to enjoy going to school, to become punctual without anyone asking them to wake up. Rather I need to ask those who graduated from S5 to wake up. In this aspect, they have improved a lot, being more mature and responsible. As far as learning to be a man is concerned, they have improved a lot. They really became more mature.

5.3.3.2 Value of autonomy

Three of the teachers interviewed (Teachers 2, 3 and 4) associated autonomous learning outcomes with the concept of autonomy on the part of their students. Despite this, they attached different value to autonomy which again depended on whether they thought autonomy was important to students in the course of achieving their goals of learning. Teacher 1, however, did not see much value of students' having autonomy in the process. She maintained the view that syllabus contents, assessment tools and assessment criteria were non-negotiable. In her view, students should be prepared for meeting the expectations of their parents and the society.

This view, again, echoed her perception of knowledge which was to be transmitted from the teacher to the students. The job of the students was thus to take in whatever knowledge imparted by the teacher and be able to pass the tests and examinations. There was obviously no place for students' voice in the process itself.

Teachers 2 and 3 had similar views towards the value of autonomy, which they both considered as one of the outcomes of autonomous learning. These two teachers were concerned with students having the autonomy to decide what and how they were going to learn in the process. Teacher 3's experience on project work 'Practice Enterprise' previously quoted suggested that her students enjoyed autonomy as to what topics they were going to work on and how they were going to undertake those projects. Teacher 2 also commented:

Afterall, it is you (students themselves) who decide to have the autonomy to decide what and how to learn.

Teacher 2's comment also implied that there was a psychological dimension on the part of the students for they were required to engage themselves in the process leading to autonomy in the end. In a sense, the autonomy their students enjoyed can

be interpreted as 'managed autonomy'. Teacher 3 qualified the autonomy her students had with such phrases as 'led by the teacher', 'though it was guided', etc. It was obvious that the teachers did not have much confidence in their students in taking charge of their own work. Teacher 2 described his worry this way:

Yes. They are young kids. I think somehow it influences autonomous learning. Therefore the teachers should help them so that they can gradually become autonomous. If they know nothing, how can they be autonomous?

Like Teachers 2 and 3, Teacher 4 also placed much value on autonomy. While students of Teachers 2 and 3 enjoyed what the researcher labelled as 'managed autonomy' where students were working their way under their teachers' frame of mind, Teacher 4 respected her students' contribution in the process, despite the fact that students' ideas were 'erratic' and they just 'fooled around' in her words. Teacher 4 described her experience this way:

Their ideas are so unlike mine, I mean, very unconventional. But, to me, it's okay. They can always challenge their teacher's and their classmates'

opinions.

Table 11 below shows the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the value of autonomous learning, its outcomes and the value of autonomy.

Table 11: Relationship between the value of autonomous learning, autonomy and the outcomes associated with autonomous learning perceived by teacher participants

Teacher	Value of autonomous learning	Outcome of autonomous learning	Value of autonomy
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for acquiring independent learning skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Self-help ● Self-reliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low ● No negotiation between teacher and students
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for building foundation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Success in learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medium ● Managed autonomy (decision on what and how to learn)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for self-upgrading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase in knowledge which can be applied in different situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medium ● Managed autonomy (decision on what and how to learn)

4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Autonomous learning valued as a tool for personal development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase in maturity and responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High ● Students can challenge teacher's thinking
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5.3.4 Motivation

The interview data indicates that all the four teachers saw a relationship between motivation and autonomous learning. But then they differed in their perceptions on the types of motivational factors which brought about autonomous learning processes.

Teachers 1 and 2 associated extrinsic motivational factors with autonomous learning processes. Teacher 1 believed that the source of motivation came from students' need to pass examinations. She maintained that this was both practicable and appropriate for YI students who needed to secure a job in a highly competitive labour market upon completion of the programme. 'Marks' were thus used to lure students to engage in the process. She explained:

It is difficult to get good results in the two languages and Maths and

relatively, it is easier to get higher marks in accounts. I tell them if they understand what I teach in class and finish all the homework, they may not need to study too hard during the exam and can use the marks to make the average mark higher to compensate for the low marks in the two languages and Maths. At least, they need not study that hard during the exam.

Teacher 1 added:

The use of a bamboo stick is different. Marks is another factor. If you use a bamboo stick or sweets to motivate them, how many lessons can you use it? He will feel bored after eating too many candies, or they will no longer feel the pain after you hit them too often! It is different from marks. When they look for a job, they need to show others their results. If they are all U (ungraded) or zero, how will others employ you? In fact, marks is the source of motivation. How can I give you marks if you haven't done anything? It is easy to give you 100 marks and in fact everyone can get 100 marks, if you don't make any mistakes. If you don't want any marks, it is your problem, but not that I don't want to give you any.

But then she admitted that students could become highly selective about their learning, focusing on contents which were ‘worth studying’. She commented:

Say, as I said, when he knows which part gives more marks, he will put more focus on it and will calculate their marks up to 40, the passing mark. He will choose how and what to study hard. He knows the criteria of the school and will try to meet them. For example, in CE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination), students will find the scope too big and they are actually trained for years to choose what they think is worth studying.

Teacher 2 had similar perception as Teacher 1 when referring to the relationship between motivation and autonomous learning. According to him, autonomous learning was driven by a desire to look for answers to problems. Teacher 2 illustrated this point with this example:

To motivate them to learn something autonomously... For example, when they (students) want to set up a computer in their course, they may want to have a super computer and with this drive, they will look for

books or attend a course, I mean, identify their goals and start planning and things like that.

The source of motivation was again practicable as the skills his students learned in the process would strengthen their foundation and hence pave the way for a higher-level course.

Unlike Teachers 1 and 2, Teachers 3 and 4 perceived that the motivational factor leading to autonomous learning came from within, not something external. Teacher 4 made it clear that autonomous learning was not driven by the need to pass examinations. She explained:

I mean they (students) have learnt something and got the marks for a pass.

But it is not out of their interest. They won't commit themselves to autonomous learning.

Teacher 3 shared her experience of learning 倉頡 (a Chinese input system) with her students. She recalled:

Like me, when I first learnt 倉韻 ten years ago, it was not common at all.

I learnt it out of interest and I didn't need to teach it at that time. I may be the first one to learn it in the department. Even when I slept, I would think of the codes. And that led to autonomous learning.

Teacher 3 continued:

I told them (students) I didn't care what they did in the exam but they had to have a desire to learn.

Table 12 below captures the relationship between teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and motivation.

Table 12: Relationship between motivation and autonomous learning perceived by
teacher participants

Teacher	Type of motivation	Relationship between autonomous learning and motivation
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extrinsic ● To pass examinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Little
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extrinsic ● To pass examinations ● To look for answers to problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moderate
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Intrinsic ● A desire for learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Intrinsic ● Not to pass examinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close

5.3.5 Manners of pedagogical practice

5.3.5.1 Pedagogies

As far as pedagogies are concerned, Teacher 1 affirmed the use of the traditional chalk-and-talk approach with her class who were perceived to be unmotivated and have suffered a lot of setbacks in the mainstream education system of the local society. Teacher 1 explained her way of dealing with this particular type of students as follows:

For example, some students, when admitted to the course, are so afraid of English language or Mathematics. If you really teach English or Mathematics, like Mathematics, it is very difficult to arouse their interest. Imagine they are scared about Mathematics for more than ten years, it is impossible to make them like Mathematics. So you can only try to teach a few more times, hoping that they might think that the very first step towards learning is not that difficult. And you should work hard. If we can motivate them, then we can. If not, we have no other solutions. At least, we have tried our best.

The same strategy was used in the accounting lessons which she delivered to the same group of students. She added:

For example, like accounting, after I teach one topic, they memorise what they learn in this topic, its format and presentation and then we move on to another topic...

Clearly, the traditional transmission approach was the only strategy used by the teacher to go about 'teaching' her students in the classroom.

Teacher 1 was also very firm about sticking to the curriculum and the syllabus when preparing her lessons. Virtually, every step that was going to happen in the classroom was pre-planned and well thought out by the teacher. She commented:

We have to cover the syllabus and that is fixed. If some students want to know more, we have to take into consideration the ability of the class. For example, if all of them come from the weakest “u” class (students who failed the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination), we have to lower the level and do not do the difficult questions. That is the best we can do.

She added:

They are told that the marking scheme is set centrally by all institutes and so they won’t challenge us why two marks are allocated to this and three to that, unless you add up the marks wrongly. If it is added up wrongly, we will add the marks back to them. Otherwise 3 marks is 3 marks!

According to this teacher, teaching was somewhat bureaucratic which was not

meant to be catering for the interest of individual students. Confirming with the researcher that the syllabus could not be changed, Teacher 1 responded:

Yes. Someone told me he had studied accounting for three years already.

But I told him I could do nothing except getting an exemption. But it is not realistic as we can't entertain him at the expense of the whole class.

Impossible!

Unlike Teacher 1, the other three teachers respected individual differences among their students even though they were placed in the same class. Teacher 2 made extra effort to know the backgrounds of his students, explaining:

In fact, helping them (students) set targets involves lots of time to understand them. Every student is different. My role as a class teacher allows me to talk to them more often. For the other subjects, I will ask all the subject teachers for the results and the personality of my students.

This was consistent with his emphasis on the goal setting stage in the autonomous learning process. According to Teacher 2, the job of the teacher was to set

benchmarks for the students to allow them to acquire the knowledge and skills to lay their foundation for progressing to a higher level of studies. At the same time, students were supposed to be guided very closely by the teacher so that they would not lose their way. Teacher 2 described his interaction with the students this way:

As I said, when they know the benchmark against which they will be assessed, they can manage how to proceed provided that they know the right direction. It could be autonomous but still you (students) can't do it without... The student has to walk by himself, sets his own targets, looks for answers but throughout the process, there must be someone who can tell him he has made it or he can't proceed to the next level.

Teacher 3 was also concerned with individual differences among the students and she considered it important to provide spontaneous response to her students in the classroom even though she prepared her lessons beforehand. She described it this way:

I guess it is not the problem of TLP (teaching and learning package) as I am very familiar with it. Also, I will prepare it two weeks beforehand and

look at it again on the day I enter the classroom. This is not a problem.

Therefore the main kind of learning is the interaction with students as every student is different and their responses are also different. In the same case, the responses of student A and student B as well as mine are to me one kind of learning. How to handle this promptly is a question and this kind of learning is important.

In relation to this, Teacher 3 made great effort in engaging their students by using a variety of learning activities. She added:

I haven't taught anything other than practical subjects for a long time. As the number of lessons I am responsible is smaller, I usually have only one class. If it is not a practical subject, it is a theoretical one. For theories, of course I have to talk to them. I like to use the questioning technique, asking them questions first. And most of the time, as I believe my response is fast, I will refer to current issues when giving examples. They are interested in news or entertainment news, which can arouse their interest so that they can be brought into the topic. After this, generally worksheets will be given and sometimes discussions will be held. Also

they may be given cases so that they won't be bored.

Teacher 3 also tried to build in flexibility in the assessment, which was considered the teacher's business by Teacher 1. In her class, individual assessment, group assessment and peer assessment were introduced to engage students. When elaborating on the peer assessment mechanism, Teacher 3 said:

I would give them something to choose. It wouldn't be seventy or twenty.

It would be "how do you find it?" and there would be a range say 0 to 20 marks. For the presentation, it would be about the oral skill, the presentation skill, etc. There are some boxes for them to fill in.

Her students were encouraged to evaluate each other's work and hence reflect on their own work.

Like Teachers 2 and 3, Teacher 4 respected the individuality of her students and made great effort to know their backgrounds. She described what she did at the beginning of the school year as follows:

I am used to communicating with parents at the beginning of the term. By talking to parents, I know their atmosphere at home and their relations with their families or even parents' expectations over them. For example, some are just twenty and they only play video games and watch TV at home after school. They are obedient in class. They won't think of anything else and when you ask them to copy, they just copy without understanding what it is. This is not the way you learn! In fact you have to understand and then absorb it. I need to help them.

Her objection to the traditional approach to teaching and learning served as a guiding principle when she interacted with her students in the classroom. Teacher 4 explained what she did this way:

I have to wait for them to “play” for a while. Soon, some argue and some fight. At the end, they will come back to the project. In fact, I will encourage them how to look for information and what way they can think of it, or what they can try to explore ...

Interviewer: Can you give an example?

For example, they are going to set up a bridal shop. I will ask them to tell

me what information they have collected. They will then talk and talk. Afterwards, I will guide them to explore in-depth in some areas or a new scope or another scope or any other information that may help them. “Did you see the TV commercial? You may have a look.” If they are old enough, I will ask them to go to a bridal shop and pretend to get married and ask more. I will guide them to think about it. Sometimes when time allows, and it can be arranged, after they argue, I will ask them to talk about their reflections. They may have come across setbacks like not being able to find out anything of the people not responding to them. “Life is like that. It’s something special. When you see people delivering leaflets on streets, it is hard to see a few getting the leaflets even out of a hundred people. Will you get one?” When the process is not smooth, I think they will learn more. After they have gone through the difficulties in the first project, they will know more in the second and will fine tune themselves and start it in a better way. They will become smarter during the process.

Instead of ‘teaching’ her students, Teacher 4 engaged her students in deeper thinking and further actions by asking open-ended questions which promoted reflection on

the topics. She tolerated mistakes made by students and participated in discussion with them. The type of interaction going on in the classroom was interactive and a two-way process. The interview data shows that Teacher 4 placed a lot of value on the students' engagement in a self-reflective activity by making them to articulate 'setbacks' they came across during the project and discuss with their peers and herself how they would overcome the difficulties when they were given another chance of doing it. Such reflection fed back to the planning stage of the next cycle enabling her students to develop cognitively. The 'fine tuning' on the part of the students also implied a sense of change in their mindset and attitude.

5.3.5.2 Teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships

Power and authority resided with Teacher 1 in her relationship with students both inside and outside the classroom. She perceived that, as a teacher, she was fully responsible for executing the curriculum, syllabi and assessment. Students, according to her, were supposed to prepare for the examination, meeting the requirements of the programme. Said Teacher 1:

For example, once the curriculum is fixed, as a teacher, you will tell your

students its requirements and prepare them for the examination. We will tell them everything that will be included in the exam. We told them at the beginning of the term and then regularly during the term. Therefore they have good preparation in every subject

The traditional model of teaching and learning was deeply ingrained in the teacher's mind. Throughout the interview, she scorned the idea of doing student-centred activities, saying:

If the (education) system is made to accommodate them (students), the society will be adversely affected.

When the researcher probed into her contempt for the shift of focus on the students in the vocational context, she responded:

First, we have taught for two hours but we are still in a hurry. They have three lessons a week only and they can't even finish the classwork. The relationship can't even be closer. Not to mention another topic, something outside the syllabus won't be mentioned either.

Teacher 1 had the view that packed syllabi and schedules prevented her from building a closer relationship with her students. It seemed to the researcher, however, Teacher 1 could not care less as she was locked in her role as a transmitter of knowledge and skills and, correspondingly, saw the role of her students as recipient of such knowledge and skills if their goal was to pass the examination.

The interview data shows that Teachers 2, 3 and 4 had a more equal relationship with their students when compared with Teacher 1. Both Teachers 2 and 3 saw themselves as a 'guide' signposting their students as they progressed from one level to another. Teacher 2 described his role this way:

We have to guide them to take the first step so that they can move forward on their own step by step. If not, they don't know what to do.

Teacher 3 perceived her own role and her students' as having more of a shared responsibility in the process. When asked what the interaction with her students was like in the project activity, she responded:

They (Students) needed to ask the teacher. The teacher had to guide them.

Interviewer: What would they ask?

They would ask very very different things. Some were not practical. For example, they thought that the ten thousand dollars of capital was a huge sum and they thought of doing this and that. Then the teacher would tell them that they had to pay the deposit and the rent for over thirty thousand dollars and also had to pay utility bills and others. Guiding them step by step, they would modify the plan.

Despite this mutual commitment in the process, Teacher 3 found it necessary for the teacher to 'equip' them with the basics before allowing them to venture into the unknown under her guidance. She added:

First, the teacher has to teach the concepts and then assist them.

The interview data shows that Teacher 4, unlike the other teachers, freed herself from the traditional role of a teacher (Teacher 1) or a more facilitating role of a guide / a mentor / an advisor (Teachers 2 and 3). Teacher 4 saw herself and her students as 'learning partners'. According to her, the interaction between both parties inspired and influenced each other in a positive way. This bi-directional

influence enabled this teacher to reflect on and hence adapt her pedagogical practice to suit the target group of students. Likewise, her practice would facilitate these students to adjust their orientation and be adapted to the learning environment in the YI. Such relationship enabled both herself and her students to grow and develop. Teacher 4 described the situation this way:

Teaching depends very much on the students and what type of students they are and their backgrounds. Sometimes I need to **fine tune** myself to say something.

5.3.5.3 Feedback strategies

Teachers 1 and 2 gave feedback to their students which was corrective in nature. These teachers were very much concerned with whether their students had made a 'right' or 'wrong' attempt in their work and the assessment tasks, in particular. Teacher 1 considered it necessary to go through the assessment criteria with her students. As such, feedback was centred round those criteria to let students know how they could 'collect' marks here and there. Said Teacher 1:

Yes. If they know them (assessment criteria), they will focus on certain areas, enabling them to get higher marks and then a pass.

Teacher 2 commented:

I will help them reach the standard. Everyone wants to reach the standard and it is easy in my subject. I find it easy as I can teach you how to type this letter today and when I find your format wrong, I can quickly see it and tell you how to make it right. This is subject-based and I will always keep track of what they are doing and continuously offer help to them to correct their mistakes until they can type a completely correct letter.

This view was consistent with Teacher 2's perception of his role of setting benchmarks for students to enable them to move from a lower level to a higher level.

Unlike Teachers 1 and 2, Teacher 4's feedback to students could be interpreted as 'non-evaluative' or 'non-judgmental' in nature. As shown in the previous quote, Teacher 4 engaged her students in reflective exercise by getting them to talk to the

class what they did during their project work. She then shared with them her comments and suggestions on how they could explore further and collect more information to improve their work. Teacher 4 also ‘allowed’ her students to start all over again when they made mistakes in class activities. Teacher 4 explained this by sharing with the researcher a class activity in one of the ‘Office Machines’ lessons, saying:

But if they need it, say when they staple the notes wrongly, they will ask me to give them another chance. Then I will ask them to copy them if they know how to do it. They will finally learn it, I mean, get into their heart, in the end.

In the same activity, she created opportunities for students to feedback to each other’s performance in the task as follows:

If you don’t teach them any, they will think they can press the buttons randomly. By doing so, still they may get what they want. In other words, they may be able to learn it in the end. “Miss, how? Is it like this?” Say if a student can’t remember, I won’t show him how to do it. Instead I will

ask, “Anyone knows it? Help him.” Then someone will say it. “Oh, it’s here. How come I didn’t know it. So stupid.” They will laugh at themselves.

The type of feedback given by Teacher 3 could be interpreted as a mixture of the two types discussed above. She described how she commented on students’ work this way:

I would point out to them what was wrong. But I wouldn’t say you (students) couldn’t do this or that. In other words, they had to hand in the proposal first and after I read it, I would find out a lot of things missing.

It was evident that Teacher 3 considered that it was her job to identify the ‘gaps’ in terms of students’ performance or standards. Instead of correcting their work and supplying the ‘model answers’, however, she would try other means to make students think about how they could modify their proposals and hence ‘bridge the gaps’. Teacher 3 continued:

Then the teacher (Teacher 3) would ask them if they could remember

what they saw when they visited the shop, including how much, how big the shop was, whether the shop could accommodate so many things, etc., as a kind of reminder.

Table 13 below displays the relationship between teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and their pedagogical practice.

Table 13: Relationship between teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and their pedagogical practice

Teacher	Pedagogy	Teacher-student relationship	Feedback strategy
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Traditional ● Pre-planned classroom activities sticking to curriculum and syllabi ● Not catering for interests of individual students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unequal ● Teacher as executor of curriculum ● Master-apprentice relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Corrective
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Setting benchmarks to guide students along the process ● Catering for interests of individual students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More equal ● Teacher as facilitator ● Mentor-mentee relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Corrective

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Spontaneous interaction with students ● Engaging strategies ● Catering for interests of individual students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More equal ● Teacher as facilitator ● Mentor-mentee relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Both corrective and non-judgmental
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Objecting to traditional approach ● Emphasising reflection, evaluation and sharing of ideas ● Engaging strategies ● Catering for interests of individual students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equal ● Learning partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Non-judgmental ● Peer evaluation

5.4 Conclusions

Like the student participants, the teachers involved in this study construed autonomous learning as processes leading to different outcomes. These processes are characterised by different patterns which are underpinned by different epistemological positions held by individual teachers. The variation in the pattern of the autonomous learning processes is also related to the teachers' perceptions of students' views of autonomous learning, the critical factors perceived to be influencing autonomous learning and their perceptions of the sources of motivation. The differences in the teachers' perceptions of the autonomous learning processes and outcomes as well as the associated value can be reflected in their pedagogical

practice in terms of their teaching and feedback strategies and their relationship with students in the YI context.

Teacher 1 had a perception that was closest to the views of the first group of students interviewed who maintained that learning involved transmission of knowledge from the teachers or experienced adults to students. The autonomous learning process the two parties construed was perceived to be one-way with the teacher directing the whole process. They also attached little importance to autonomous learning which might explain their minimal involvement in the process.

What was considered the most valuable to the teacher and this group of students was in fact the qualification the students were able to obtain upon completion of the diploma programme which served as evidence that they had the competence, in terms of skills, to secure employment in the business field. This was in line with the purpose of the vocational type of education and training offered by the case institute.

Teachers 2 and 3 perceived learning as a process of applying knowledge and skills to solve everyday and work-related problems. The focus was therefore not on helping students to 'acquire' the knowledge and skills but to 'use' them in different

contexts. Their views were congruent with the second group of student participants who held a constructivist view of learning (Askew and Lodge, 2000). Their views of learning were closely related to their perceptions of autonomous learning as a two-way process. The interview data, however, reveal that Teachers 2 and 3 engaged their students in a different manner in the autonomous learning processes. Teacher 2 engaged his students less in the processes when compared with Teacher 3. This was found to be related to his an instrumental overtone in his view on knowledge and his perception that autonomous learning could not be practised in the subjects he taught. He pointed out that autonomous learning might be feasible in other subjects like the Whole Person Development Module and also during the time when he played his role as a class tutor, not as a subject lecturer. Teacher 3 engaged her students more in the autonomous learning processes she construed by involving her students in reflective activities. She did not seem to have a strong stereotypical image of YI students suggesting that her students were mostly capable of engaging in the autonomous learning processes which were associated with modules with a project element.

Teacher 4 had similar perceptions as Students 16 and 20 with respect to autonomous learning processes and outcomes. Both parties shared most of the views of Teachers

2 and 3 as well as the second group of student participants whose views were underpinned by a constructivist epistemology. Despite this, their epistemological views were more developmental in nature resulting in growth and change in the two parties. Their views were more in line with the co-constructivist model (Askew and Lodge, 2000) which, in turn, shaped their perceptions of the autonomous learning processes and their associated outcomes. The autonomous learning processes construed by Teacher 4 and the two students (Students 16 and 20) were categorised by extensive sharing, interaction and reflection based on students' own experiences as well as feedback from the teacher and their peers. Such reflection enabled the students to feedback to the goal setting stage, hence, closing the loop of the whole process. This extension of the autonomous learning processes was significantly different from those construed by the other teachers and students involved in the study. The interview data show that Teacher 4 engaged their students on a more equal standing leading to, in her words, 'fine-tuning' to both herself and her students.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has begun with an evaluation of effectiveness of the instrument and strategies used to collect teachers' data. Having described the teachers' backgrounds and restated the relevant research questions, the researcher then reports the major findings of this study in terms of the themes and patterns derived from a critical examination of the teachers' data. Such analysis forms the basis of the discussion chapter which aims to answer each of the specific research questions of this study.

6 Discussion of Research Findings

6.1 Overview

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the significant findings regarding the specific research questions in relation to the students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and how they related their perceptions to their practice at a vocational institute. In the following section, the researcher discusses these findings by relating them to the literature review presented in Chapter 2 with a view to answering each of the specific research questions reflecting the research aims and objectives.

6.2 Discussion of the research findings

Specific Research Question 1:

In what ways do students construe autonomous learning?

All the student respondents construed autonomous learning as classroom processes leading to different learning outcomes. These autonomous learning processes involved goal setting, questioning, monitoring of progress and concluding. The fact

that these processes generated different outcomes as it was found that they operated differently depending on individual students. The variations in the processes were shaped by students' conceptions of learning and knowledge, a 'presage factor' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). This relationship is captured in Biggs' 3P model. Students, and teachers as well, bring into the classroom their own views and experiences which feed into the process stage. During the process stage, the students and the teachers interact in the classroom whose engagement is underpinned by different views and experiences. These variations in classroom engagement, in turn, produce different learning outcomes.

Half of the students (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) perceived autonomous learning as one-way processes in the sense that they depended very much on their teachers to provide them with a goal of their learning. The questioning took the form of confirming with their teachers whether what they were doing could lead to a pass in the module. They monitored their progress by checking to see whether they could meet the deadlines of the assignments. Finally, the concluding process was characterised by minimal interaction between the students and the teacher and also among the students themselves. These students simply did not make an effort to discuss before drawing a conclusion. Instead they just put

together disjointed pieces of work produced by individual members of the group.

Learning in this sense was compartmentalised and disconnected. The way this group of students construed autonomous learning was influenced by their views of learning and knowledge which were instrumental in nature. They saw learning as a receptive process during which they acquired knowledge transmitted by teachers or found in textbooks. Knowledge enabled them to secure a well-paid job and hence a passport to wealth.

The relationship between these students' instrumental view of learning and their perceptions of autonomous learning is consistent with the transmission-receptive model of teaching and learning depicted by Askew and Lodge's discussion (Askew and Lodge, 2000). In this model, learning is regarded as an individual responsibility. Teachers and learners assume distinctive roles of transmitters of knowledge and passive recipients of knowledge respectively. The direction of communication is seen as one-way, from teachers to students. This explained why there was minimal engagement of the students in this group.

The outcomes resulting from these one-way autonomous learning processes interpreted by this group of students were an increase in knowledge and

strengthening of foundation which allowed them to move onto a higher level of studies at other member institutions of the VTB. The ultimate goal of their learning was to obtain a certificate, a passport to a well-paid job in the highly competitive market of the local community filled with numerous associate degree and degree holders.

The other half of the student respondents (Students 5, 6, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 20) construed the autonomous learning processes in distinctively different ways when compared with the perceptions of students discussed above. At the goal setting stage, these students negotiated their goals with their teachers. The questioning phase took the form of frequent sharing between the teachers and the students and among the students themselves. They monitored their own progress by checking against the goals set at the beginning of the activity and also their teachers' advice and comments. Finally, they drew practical and sensible conclusions by reflecting on their own and other members' views. A two-way interaction between the students and the teachers was evident in the processes.

The way that this half of the student group construed their autonomous learning processes was linked to a different conception of learning and knowledge which

moved further away from the instrumental view attached with the first group of students. Students in this second group still considered it important to obtain a certificate upon graduation for enhanced employability. Unlike the first group of students, these students equated knowledge with wealth which had value in itself, interpreted as a fuller or richer life. They also perceived learning as a discovery process, the goal of which was to be able to use and apply the knowledge and skills in their everyday life and the workplace context presumably. Apart from this cognitive dimension, two more aspects were identified with these students in relation to the autonomous learning processes they interpreted. There were a psychological dimension and a social dimension attached to these processes. The former dimension required the students to 'put their heart and soul' into the processes and the latter was justified by students' awareness of others' viewpoints and feelings in the processes.

The link between their views of learning and knowledge and the two-way autonomous learning processes they construed concurs with Askew and Lodge's classification of a 'constructive' model (Askew and Lodge, 2000). Students and teachers are not 'locked' in their respective roles as in the transmission-receptive model. They have a more dynamic relationship in the learning process.

These autonomous learning processes are essentially ‘metacognitive processes’ defined by Biggs (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). Metacognition ‘is the recognition that self-knowledge, and self-control on the basis of that knowledge, is a fundamental goal in learning’ (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.162). This self-knowledge or self-awareness is also captured in Vygotsky’s discussion of the development of volition (in Wertsch, 1985). Interaction with his/her peers and teachers enables a student to internalise a structure of his/her own to construct meaning and make sense of the world in which s/he is living. Student 2 in this group made this point very explicit, saying, ‘I discover myself more through the angles of other people.’

The outcome following from these autonomous learning was perceived to be extension of thinking, which enabled these students to use the knowledge and skills learnt in different situations, not exclusive to the business context. They also interpreted the autonomous learning outcomes as independence and an increase in ownership of their learning. In addition, these students saw an improvement in their social relationships and increased self-confidence, corresponding to the social and psychological dimensions identified with the autonomous learning processes they construed. These outcomes were markedly different from the first group of students who construed autonomous learning as one-way processes, in terms of the sheer

number and the extent.

Within this second half of the student group, two students (Students 16 and 20) construed the autonomous learning processes with a slightly different pattern. The process did not end at the concluding stage, a pattern characterised by the rest of the students in the second group. The reflection they did on their own and with their fellow classmates allowed them to feedback to the goal setting process when they were given the next task. The autonomous learning processes construed by these two students can be represented by a loop. This variation in pattern extends Biggs' common metacognitive processes, the last one of which is 'terminating when the goals have been met' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p. 148).

Their interpretation of the autonomous learning processes can be posited to be shaped by their views of learning and knowledge which are developmental in nature. Students 16 and 20 perceived learning as a discovery and reflective process accompanying change and personal development. Their view is in line with Askew and Lodge's co-constructive model which is characterised by an element of change and development (Askew and Lodge, 2000).

The outcomes interpreted by these two students were again different from the rest of the students in the second group. The outcome they associated was an increase in conceptual understanding. They also felt a strong sense of satisfaction as a result of the processes they experienced. These outcomes relate to a deep approach to learning proposed by Biggs, where students 'operate at a high, or abstract, level of conceptualisation' and 'enjoy the process' respectively (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.153).

Specific Research Question 2:

In what ways do teachers construe autonomous learning?

All the four teachers construed autonomous learning as processes leading to different outcomes. The ways they construed these autonomous learning processes were shaped by their views of learning and knowledge. The variation in the patterns of these processes were also influenced by the teachers' perceptions of their students' perceptions on autonomous learning, abilities, interests and feasibility of autonomous learning in the subject they taught.

Teacher 1 construed autonomous learning as a goal setting process during which she

fed her students 'her' goal of getting high marks in the accounting subjects she taught, enabling them to obtain a certificate upon completion of the learning programme and eventually join the workforce to support their own living. Her interpretation of this one-way process was underpinned by an instrumental view of learning and that knowledge, accounting knowledge and skills in particular, could be passed from the teacher to the students. Such view was consistent with Askew and Lodge's transmission model of teaching and learning (Askew and Lodge, 2000). Her insistence on providing her students with such a goal was also influenced by her perception that her students had no idea about what autonomous learning was. She had a strong stereotypical image of YI students whom she perceived as having no interest in their studies and lacking ability in managing their own studies.

Teachers 2, 3 and 4, unlike the first teacher, construed autonomous learning as two-way processes during which both their students and themselves were involved. This was linked to their constructive views of learning and teaching, as suggested in Askew and Lodge's discussion (2000). The nature of these processes and their level of engagement, however, varied depending on other factors they perceived to be influencing the processes.

Teacher 2, like Teacher 1, perceived that his students had no understanding of autonomous learning and that they simply lacked the ability and the intention to kick start the processes. He also admitted that autonomous learning might not be feasible in the subjects he taught which were skills-based in nature. Hence, he placed great emphasis on the goal setting process. What made his processes different from Teacher 1's was that Teacher 2 would not feed his students with a goal. Instead, he would assist them in the goal setting process by analysing, or to put it simply, helping his students to see the situation in which they were in. In contrast to Teacher 1, Teacher 2 did not retreat himself from the process right after the goal setting stage. He involved himself in guiding the students to plan their own pathways.

Compared with Teacher 2, the autonomous learning processes construed by Teachers 3 and 4 were more extended and elaborate. This, again, was linked to their views of learning and knowledge as well as the critical factors perceived to be affecting the nature of the processes. Teacher 3, like Teacher 2, displayed a 'constructive' view of learning and teaching (Askew and Lodge, 2000) which explained why the autonomous learning processes she construed were two-way. Her version of these two-way processes involved goal setting, planning, monitoring of

progress and self-reflection. This self-reflection process was not evident in the processes interpreted by Teacher 2. It is worth noting that she perceived that her students had their own idea about autonomous learning which was to be interpreted as synonymous to independent learning. In relation to her perceptions of students' abilities and interests, she did not seem to have a stereotypical image of the YI students. She thought that some of her students were capable of doing autonomous learning and they had deep interest in the subjects they liked, which however, might not be those offered by the institute. She also admitted that autonomous learning was feasible in subjects she used to teach such as Business Enterprise which required students to complete a project. Her views were different from those of Teacher 2 even though the two teachers construed autonomous learning as two-way processes.

Teacher 4 had a developmental view of learning and knowledge which was congruent with the 'co-constructive' view of learning and teaching suggested by Askew and Lodge (2000). Learning was perceived as a developmental process which involved change in mindset and symbolised growth and development. Knowledge, according to Teacher 4, was to be discovered and internalised. This teacher had very similar views as those of Teacher 3 on how she perceived her

students in relation to their interpretation of autonomous learning and feasibility of practising autonomous learning in the subjects she taught. She also perceived that her students interpreted autonomous learning as some kind of independent learning and that autonomous learning was feasible in subjects such as Integrated Studies which had a project element. Like Teachers 1 and 2, Teacher 4 thought that her students might not have the ability and the willingness to commit themselves to autonomous learning. However, these two factors were subject to change because students' capabilities could be improved and they could also be motivated to develop interests in the subjects. All these again had bearings on the ways in which she construed the autonomous learning processes which involved goal setting, planning, monitoring of progress, self-reflection and sharing of reflections. The last process of reflection sharing was not present in the processes construed by Teacher 3. This enabled her students to feedback to their goal setting process when they were given a new project. This was consistent with her developmental view of learning which led to growth and transformation. There was also a striking similarity between the views of Teacher 4 and those of Students 16 and 20 in this respect.

Specific Research Question 3:

What value do students place upon autonomous learning?

The three groups of students identified in the discussion on the first specific research question in relation to their ways of construing autonomous learning placed different value upon it. The first group of students who perceived autonomous learning as one-way processes placed little or a low value on these processes. Autonomous learning was seen as a tool for acquiring more knowledge and checking to see whether they were able to meet the assessment criteria prescribed by the teachers. This corresponded to their perception of the outcomes i.e. an increase in knowledge and building of foundation to enable them to proceed to the next level of their studies.

On the contrary, the second group of students placed a relatively high value on the autonomous learning processes. On the cognitive dimension, it was valued as a tool for self-reflection, resulting in extended thinking, a sense of independence and increased ownership of their learning. On the social dimension, these processes were valued as a tool for communication, bringing about an improvement in social relationships of the students concerned. On the psychological dimension, they were

valued as a tool for building self-image, boosting students' self-confidence.

Students 16 and 20 also attached a high value to the autonomous learning processes which were valued as a tool for generating hypotheses to solve problems. This matched the outcomes of the autonomous learning processes they interpreted which were an increase of conceptual understanding and a great sense of satisfaction.

As Biggs puts it, 'Metacognition thus includes those processes that imply self-determination, or autonomy, in learning and problem solving' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995, p.149), the value different groups of students placed upon autonomy was compared and contrasted. The findings implied that students perceived different types of autonomy, which were underpinned by different motivations and different models of teaching and learning. This concurs with the views of researchers such as Ecclestone, Benson and Biggs discussed in the literature review chapter.

The first group of students who placed little value on the autonomous learning processes held a low regard for autonomy. Most of them were satisfied with minimal autonomy in terms of the choice of topics of their assignments. A few of them simply welcomed the idea of doing whatever the teacher had given in order to

get the task done. The type of autonomy they displayed was congruent with Ecclestone's 'procedural autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002) and Benson's 'technical autonomy' (Benson, 1997, 1998 & 2001). This group of students had a preference for a transmission style of learning and teaching. They were concerned with the opportunities of securing employment and social mobility upon completion of their learning. Such motivations were consistent with 'external' type of motivation (Ecclestone, 2002) and Biggs' 'surface motives' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). They saw basically no relationship between their motivation and autonomous learning. According to these students, autonomy could possibly be one of the means but certainly not the ends in their learning, in relation to their 'engagement in the task' as defined by Biggs (Biggs and Watkins, 1995)

The second group of students who construed autonomous learning as two-way processes attached a positive value to these processes and also a high value to autonomy, struggling to exert more control over the processes. Unlike the first group of students discussed in the previous paragraph, they negotiated with their teachers the choice of learning contents, learning methods and assessment tools. It was evident that they perceived and preferred a 'transactional' type of learning and teaching (Bruner, 1987; Cooper and McIntyre, 1996; Ecclestone, 2002). Their sense

of autonomy could be mapped against 'personal autonomy' and 'psychological autonomy' posited by Ecclestone (2002) and Benson (1997, 1998 & 2001) respectively. The findings also reveal that they possessed mixed motivations. Like the first group of students, their learning was driven by extrinsic motivators relating to their employability. This external type of motive, however, was not the only source of their motivation. Students in this group also recognised that their drive was from within, underpinned by intrinsic motivation (Ecclestone, 2002). In relation to autonomous learning, these students saw a close relationship between motivation and their version of autonomous learning processes. They interpreted that their desire for success in learning and interest in business subjects led to the two-way autonomous learning processes. Relating to Biggs' relationship between the level of engagement and their approach to learning, the type of autonomy construed by this second group of students was both the means and the ends, which characterised the deep approach to learning (Biggs and Watkins, 1995).

In relation to the value of autonomy, the perceptions of Students 16 and 20 differed from those of the second group of students identified. Student 16 demanded a change of the assessment criteria by reflecting to the teacher his own judgment in order to improve the marking criteria and consistency based on his own thoughts,

not just the teacher's. Student 20 called for a broader curriculum to include subjects like liberal studies in order to widen students' scope of learning. The type of autonomy can be compared to Ecclestone's 'critical autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002) and Benson's 'political autonomy' (Benson, 1997, 1998 & 2001). This was consistent with the way they construed the autonomous learning processes which, in turn, was influenced by their view of learning which was developmental in nature. The type of motivation these two students displayed was predominately intrinsic, driving them to engage with the subject in a critical manner and share extensively with their teachers and classmates.

Like the second group of students, Students 16 and 20 saw a close relationship between motivation and the autonomous learning processes they construed. However, the findings reveal that these processes were a drive for their learning resulting in enhanced motivation, suggesting a different pattern in the direction of influence.

Specific Research Question 4:

What value do teachers place upon autonomous learning?

In relation to the difference in the nature of autonomous learning construed by different teachers, these teachers placed different value on it. They also perceived autonomy differently as they saw fit for their students studying at the case institute. These relationships were underpinned by different motivations they associated with their students.

Teacher 1 placed little value on autonomous learning, which was perceived to be some kind of independent learning tool. This linked to her perception of the autonomous learning processes and outcomes. The former involved minimal interaction and virtually no negotiation between the students and the teacher in the processes. The associated outcome was interpreted as self-help as this teacher did not see her role in the process except telling students what the target was at the very beginning. This teacher also saw no place for the development of autonomy which was certainly not the means and the end of their learning (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). The type of motivation she perceived to be associated with her students was extrinsic as they were there to pass the examinations and eventually get a job to

meet the expectations of their teachers, their parents, the institute and the society.

Teachers 2 and 3 valued autonomous learning as a tool for building a foundation and self-upgrading respectively. This enabled their students to move up the academic ladder as implied in the concept of the Qualifications framework and also the social ladder as implied in 'enjoying a higher standard of living' suggested by Teacher 3. The outcomes these two teachers construed as leading from the autonomous learning processes was an increase in knowledge. As perceived by Teacher 2, this resulted in a certificate when student completed their programme and it also enabled students to seek answers to everyday problems. Teacher 3 perceived that such increase in knowledge would enable students to use it in different contexts. These perceptions of a mixed kind of motivation they associated with their students were consistent with their views on learning and knowledge which led to wealth and, at the same time, had value in itself, interpreted as spiritual enrichment. In relation to the importance of autonomy, it was evident that both teachers recognised the 'procedural' type of autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002) as they were comfortable with the negotiation between themselves and the students over the types, pace and timing of learning activities and assessment tasks. It was found that Teachers 2 and 3 also recognised some degree of 'personal autonomy' (Ecclestone, 2002) specifically in

the project module which aligns with a transactional type of learning building upon a more equal teacher-student relationship and interaction in the classroom. Despite the fact that they were willing to share their power with their students, they considered it necessary to guide and monitor their students closely so that they did not 'get lost' during the processes.

Teacher 4 had a different orientation to autonomous learning which was valued highly as a tool for personal development. The outcomes of the autonomous learning processes she construed were interpreted as an increase in maturity and responsibility. This was consistent with her development view of learning. When compared with Teachers 2 and 3, Teacher 4 attached more value to autonomy which was not confined to a particular kind of subject. Students were encouraged to exchange their views with the teacher and their classmates. They were also given opportunities to reflect on their own and each others' ideas during the processes. She was comfortable with the idea of being challenged by her students and negotiating with them what they intended to learn at the beginning of the learning programme. It was evident that she recognised the 'critical' type of autonomy posited by Ecclestone (2002) which corresponded to Benson's 'political autonomy' to a large extent (Benson, 1997, 1998 & 2001). Autonomy was both the means and

the end of students' learning, resembling the approach to learning employed by 'deep learners' (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). This was, as Ecclestone and Biggs, suggested, underpinned by an intrinsic type of motivation.

Specific Research Question 5:

How do students' views on autonomous learning relate to their manner of educational engagement?

The findings reveal that students' views on autonomous learning relate closely to their manner of educational engagement. The nature of interaction between the students and the teachers in the classroom was influenced by their perceptions of their own role and their teachers' in the autonomous learning processes and outcomes they construed. This is in line with Kinchin's discussion of the influence of the epistemological views of both the students and the teachers on the learning and teaching process (Kinchin, 2004).

Students who perceived autonomous learning as one-way processes interacted with their teachers minimally in the classroom. These students saw themselves as passive recipient of knowledge. This corresponded to their perception of the role of their

teachers as a transmitter of knowledge. The two parties assumed very distinctive roles and responsibilities. This was reflected in the students' language in the interviews i.e. the job of the students was to 'listen' and that of their teacher was to 'teach. The teachers were also perceived as 'leaders', 'judges', 'instructors' and students were happy about being the 'followers' as long as the outcome of strengthening their foundation in terms of how much knowledge they accumulated was achieved. This picture of a traditional classroom implied an unequal relationship between the students and the teachers. The latter dictated the classroom activities by articulating the ways in which students would be assessed. Students in this group had very little engagement with the tasks assigned and minimal interaction with their peers and teachers in the learning process. This was consistent with their preference for rote learning as the only way to handle their tasks, thinking that this strategy enabled them to rely on their own when their teachers were not present. The result was quite the opposite – they depended more on their teachers.

The second group of students who construed autonomous learning as two-way processes on which they placed a high value interacted in a constructivist classroom (Kinchin, 2004). They perceived themselves as 'explorers' and 'active participants' in the course of interaction where they endeavoured to learn to apply the knowledge

and skills learnt both in workplace and everyday contexts. The role of their teachers, as they perceived, was more of a 'facilitator' in the learning process where students were free to explore within the structure laid down by their teachers. This was congruent with the concept of 'scaffolding' proposed by Bruner (1987), which was underpinned by a constructivist view of learning. The relationship between this group of students and their teachers was more equal and dynamic in nature when compared to the first group of students identified in this study. These students experienced a higher level of engagement with their tasks by reflecting on the process they went through. They also showed a preference for sharing of views and discussion with their peers and their teachers, characterised by Barnes' 'exploratory talk' which 'enables students to take responsibility for them' (Barnes, 1991). This was consistent with their perception of the autonomous learning outcome as an increase ownership of their learning. It has to be stressed that these students also saw their teachers as a caring figure who cared about their emotional needs, thus playing the role of a 'supporter'. This student-teacher interaction and relationship fits well into Askew and Lodge's constructive model of teaching and learning in the process of which power still resides with the teacher (Askew and Lodge, 2000).

The two students who construed the autonomous learning processes and outcomes

differently from the rest of the students in the second group were more proactive in their interaction with their teachers in the classroom. Their perceptions of their own role and their teachers' were markedly different from the first group of students identified. The roles are not so clear-cut. They took the initiative to negotiate the assessment criteria and curriculum contents with their teacher referring specifically to their own needs, expectations and interests. These two areas were seen as forbidding areas by the first and the second groups of students in this study. Students 16 and 20 preferred a student-centred learning environment. This has to be matched by a teacher who is willing to empower students to take charge of their own learning, invite students to voice out their needs and expectations and invest effort in finding out the interests and backgrounds of individual students. In other words, they need a teacher who is willing to change. But then the interview data show that Student 16 experienced a sense of frustration when his request for change was not taken seriously by his teacher who asked him to reflect his needs by filling out the course evaluation questionnaire to be given at the end of the term. Likewise, Student 20's initiative was also suppressed when he claimed that the teacher and the institute should consider the interests of the majority first.

Specific Research Question 6:

How do teachers' views on autonomous learning relate to their pedagogical practice?

Different manifestations of the autonomous learning processes and outcomes associated with different teachers account for the difference in their approaches to teaching including their pedagogies, feedback strategies and their relationship and interaction with students in the classroom.

Teacher 1 construed autonomous learning as a one-way process leading to certification on the part of the students. This perception resulted in her choice of a more traditional style of teaching which recognised transmission of knowledge and skills to students. There was minimal interaction between herself and the students in the classroom. All the classroom activities were pre-planned which should not deviate from the curriculum and syllabi designed for this group of students. The feedback strategy she used was corrective in nature which matched her perception of her role as a transmitter of knowledge. It was evidence that she tried to distance herself from the students in order to maintain her control over their learning processes. She also perceived that it was necessary to maintain her role as an

authority figure to draw students' attention and respect in the classroom. This fits well into respective roles of the teachers and the students in the vocational context which can be described as a master-apprentice relationship which suggests an unequal power relationship between the two parties. As this perception was deeply ingrained in the mind of this teacher, she experienced a great sense of frustration when she referred to the recent change in institutional policies to cater more to the 'demands' made by the students.

When compared with Teacher 1, Teacher 4 showed markedly different pedagogical practice which again related to her perception of autonomous learning. Teacher 4 made great effort to get to know the backgrounds of her students by meeting with their parents at the beginning of the school year, recognising individual differences and orientations among the students. She placed great emphasis on sharing, discussions and reflective activities between herself and the students and also among the students themselves through the practice of peer assessment and peer teaching. Teacher 4 engaged herself deeply in her interaction with the students in the classroom. This contrasted with the practice of Teacher 1 who did not involve herself in the process except setting the goal of learning for her students at the very beginning. In this relation, Teacher 4 invited her students to share with her their

expectations at the beginning of the term such that she could tailor her teaching to suit their needs. This practice was a manifestation of 'reactive teaching' which 'was characterised by the teacher's willingness to adjust learning objectives in order to accommodate student interests and intention' (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996, p119). This also aligns with the teacher's recognition for a 'critical' type of autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002) which involves critical thinking, reflection, deep engagement with the subject the students are interested in and internalising feedback from the teacher to make sense of the task. The type of feedback given by Teacher 4 was non-judgmental in nature which aimed to stimulate and extend students' thinking. This in a way helped the students to relate what they had learnt previously in other subjects, hence connecting their experiences. The type of relationship and interaction between Teacher 4 and her students was seen to be more equal and dynamic, considering each other as 'learning partners'. Teacher 4 recognised her need to 'fine tune' her strategies based on her students' behaviour, intentions and interests which, in turn, would help students to see their own strengths and weaknesses. This was in line with the concept of 'bi-directionality' discussed in Cooper and McIntyre's work on teachers' and students' perceptions on effective teaching (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996) and the 'co-constructive model' of learning and teaching depicted by Askew and Lodge (2000).

If the two contrasting types of pedagogy practised by Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 are considered to be occupying two opposite ends of a continuum (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996), the teaching strategies employed by Teachers 2 and 3 can be mapped toward the middle of the continuum. They both recognised the shared responsibility between the teachers and the students in achieving the goals of learning which was built on a close relationship between the two. When compared with Teacher 1, they employed more interactive strategies in the classroom. When compared with Teacher 4, they had less confidence in sharing their power with their students in the process. They saw their role as a teacher, not so much as teaching students the necessary knowledge and skills but guiding and signposting along the pathways. Their perceptions fit into a 'mentor-mentee' relationship which has become more and more popular in the vocational context recently.

Specific Research Question 7:

What are the similarities and differences between students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning?

Similarities

The interview data show that both the student and the teacher participants of the case institute construed autonomous learning as processes leading to different outcomes. These autonomous learning processes are manifested in different patterns which are underpinned by different epistemological views held by individual participants and their perceptions of the sources of motivation. There are basically three categories of perceptions toward autonomous learning, each being characterised by matching views between the students and the teachers involved in the study.

The first group of students (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18 and 19) and Teacher 1 have matching views toward the nature of learning and knowledge itself. They maintained that learning involved transmission of knowledge which could be passed from the teacher to the students. The goal of learning perceived by these

students and the teacher was instrumental in nature as long as it fitted the purpose of acquiring knowledge and skills to enhance students' employability. This instrumental view of learning and knowledge was consistent with the extrinsic type of motivation perceived by both the students and the teacher whose goals of learning and teaching were to pass examinations and prepare students for examinations respectively. With these underpinning epistemological position and motivation, the autonomous learning processes construed by this group of students and Teacher 1 is very similar in nature, the pattern of which can be interpreted as a one-way process characterised by a great emphasis on the goal setting element. This goal was 'given' by the teacher who shaped and directed the whole process. The two parties also have similar perception of the outcome associated with this one-way autonomous learning process, which can be interpreted as an increase in knowledge.

The second group of students (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) shared similar views of learning and knowledge with Teachers 2 and 3. According to them, learning was a process of applying knowledge and skills to solve everyday and work-related problems. Knowledge was therefore not something external to the learners, but of a more versatile and dynamic nature which enabled them to 'use' it in different situations. Despite this, this second group of students and the two

teachers still considered it important to obtain a qualification, a ticket to a well-paid job, even though this might not be the sole purpose of learning. This again was consistent with their mixed type of motivation they perceived. The autonomous learning process construed by the two parties was more elaborate and dynamic in nature which was characterised by some sharing and negotiation between them, leading to a similar perception of the outcome i.e. application of knowledge in real-life contexts.

Students 16 and 20 as well as Teacher 4 held a developmental view of learning and knowledge which underpinned the autonomous learning process they construed. Their epistemological views, together with the intrinsic motivator they perceived, contributed to an even more extended pattern of the two-way process they interpreted. The autonomous learning process was characterised by a feedback element built upon ample opportunities for reflection, sharing and negotiation. Such extension turned the two-way process into a loop which was closely associated with the autonomous learning outcome they perceived. These two students perceived the outcome as an increase in conceptual understanding and the teacher, Teacher 4, considered it as an increase in maturity. These outcomes are of a similar nature which symbolises change and transformation of the mind, a perception that echoed

their developmental view of learning and knowledge.

In terms of the level of engagement in the autonomous learning processes the students and the teachers perceived, students and teachers who held a more instrumental view of learning and knowledge had shallow engagement characterised by minimal interaction and sharing in the process among the students themselves and also between the students and the teacher. On the other hand, students and teachers having a more developmental view of learning and knowledge engaged themselves in the autonomous learning process deeply as reflected in the extent of the process characterised by their involvement and interaction in all the elements identified consisting of goal setting, planning pathways, monitoring of progress and concluding by engaging in self-reflection.

In terms of the value the students and the teachers placed upon autonomous learning, following from the above line of argument, the two parties who construed autonomous learning as a one-way process, underpinned by a more instrumental view of learning and knowledge, held a low regard for it. They related autonomous learning barely to their perceptions of motivation. On the other hand, students and teachers seeing autonomous learning as a two-way process, underpinned by a more

developmental view of learning and knowledge, placed high value upon autonomous learning. These students and teachers saw a close relationship between autonomous learning and their perceptions of motivation.

In terms of the value of autonomy, defined as control (Benson, 1997, 1998 & 2001) and self-determination (Biggs, 1995) over the learning process, those students and teachers who placed relatively low value on autonomous learning attached little importance to autonomy. Neither was it perceived as a means nor an end of learning. They were satisfied with limited choices concerning their studies having no intention of negotiating with their teachers who, likewise, considered it unnecessary to create opportunities for such negotiation with their students. Students and teachers who placed high value upon autonomous learning, on the other hand, considered autonomy as both a means and an end of learning. The students, in this case, were well aware of their own needs and interests which the teachers respected and valued in order to facilitate students' learning. Autonomy, realised as independence and increased ownership of students' learning, was taken as the end product by these students and teachers.

A large majority of students and teachers associated autonomous learning with the

project component in their learning and teaching activities respectively. This project component was characterised by free exploration of themes and topics, open-ended questioning, analysis, evaluation, sharing and reflection. These elements are in line with a transactional type of learning advocated by the constructivists.

Differences

The interview data reveal that all the teachers intended to make a distinction between their own perceptions and their students' perceptions of autonomous learning. This attempt suggested that they would like to the researcher to be aware of the differences between the two perspectives. They were not prepared to identify with the views of their students with respect to autonomous learning, disapproving of their students' views, as the teachers generally believed that the YI students were immature and lacked exposure. This was in sharp contrast to the students' data. All the student respondents did not refer to their teachers' views toward autonomous learning in particular throughout the interviews.

The findings on the part of the teacher respondents show that they were concerned with three critical factors which were perceived to be influencing students' development of autonomous learning. The interview data from the teachers suggest

that for autonomous learning to take place, their students had to have the ability and the willingness to commit themselves to the process. Such willingness was built on a desire for learning and a genuine interest in the subject they were pursuing. The third factor perceived by the teachers to be contributing to the success of autonomous learning was the nature of the subjects they were delivering at the YI context. Autonomous learning was closely associated with subjects comprising a project element. Teachers 1 and 2 considered that it was not feasible to practise autonomous learning in skills-based subjects such as accounting and IT application in business contexts. Teachers 3 and 4 also commented on the feasibility of autonomous learning in subjects like 'Business Enterprise' and 'Integrated Studies' which required students to integrate knowledge and skills learnt in other subjects of the diploma course and subsequently apply them to plan and set up a business of their own. Interview data from the student respondents, however, reveal that they did not attribute success of autonomous learning to any of the critical factors perceived by their teachers.

In terms of the value and outcomes of autonomous learning, the interview data between the student and the teacher groups show that the perceptions of the former were of a more complex nature when compared to the latter. Students' perceptions

of the value and outcomes of autonomous learning could be mapped on to three dimensions, namely cognitive, psychological and social dimensions. On the cognitive dimension, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for acquiring knowledge and reflection, resulting in an increase in knowledge and extension of thinking. On the psychological dimension, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for building self-image with an increase in self-confidence as an outcome. On the social dimension, autonomous learning was valued as a tool for communication leading to the outcome of improvement in students' social relationship. These patterns of the students contrasted sharply with the teachers' perceptions which were predominantly cognitive in nature.

6.3 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has attempted to discuss the significant outcomes in the light of the conceptual framework identified in the literature review chapter. In so doing, the researcher has answered all the specific research questions by relating the research findings to theories and issues relevant to the studies of perceptions of autonomous learning in the western and local contexts reviewed in the second chapter. The discussion here helps the researcher to draw appropriate conclusions,

see implications and arrive at reasonable recommendations in the next chapter.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Overview

This chapter begins with a discussion of the significance of the present study and how it contributes to the existing body of literature in the area of autonomous learning with specific reference to the local context of Hong Kong. In the following section, the implications filter out from the significant areas of convergence and divergence between the student and the teacher respondents. The recommendation section describes ways in which the institute and the teachers can change to address the implications derived from the major findings of this study. The evaluation section contains a reflective account of the researcher with respect to the purpose of the study, the limitation of the research method and the skills the researcher has learnt throughout the research process. The final section identifies the possible areas of further research and the suitability of the research method to other vocational school contexts and individual researchers.

7.2 Significance and contribution of the research

With reference to the aims and objectives of this research project which have been translated into specific research questions, the researcher considers the present study successful in capturing students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning, which is the first of its kind conducted at an institute providing vocational education and training in the local context of Hong Kong. The researcher has attempted to explore their perceptions in terms of how they construe autonomous learning and the value they place upon it. The researcher has tried to examine the relationship between their perceptions and their practice at the case institute. The researcher has also identified similarities and differences between the students' and the teachers' perceptions toward autonomous learning. In the process of achieving the aims and objectives of this study, it is hoped that an in-depth understanding of the meaning and nature of autonomous learning can help inform policies and practice in relation to teaching and learning at the case institute and the wider context of the VTB which embraces the mission of producing autonomous learners who are ready to join the workforce and take up lifelong learning.

Both the students and the teachers participated in this study construed autonomous

learning as processes lead to different outcomes. The nature of such processes, however, differed, which was shaped by their epistemological positions and their perceptions of motivation. The teachers' interpretation of autonomous learning processes was also influenced by factors they considered critical such as students' abilities, willingness to commit and feasibility of practising autonomous learning in different subjects offered at the case institute. The students' and the teachers' perceptions can be reflected in their engagement in learning and pedagogical practice respectively. Those students and the teacher (Teacher 1) who construed autonomous learning as a one-way process were engaged in a 'master-apprentice' relationship, the two traditional roles played by teachers and students in a vocational setting. Students and teachers (Teachers 2 and 3) who interpreted autonomous learning as a two-way process were engaged in a 'mentor-mentee' relationship. The two students (Students 16 and 20) and Teacher 4 who perceived the process as a loop were more ready to consider each other as 'learning partners'.

In terms of the level of engagement in the autonomous learning process, those students and teachers holding an instrumental view of learning and knowledge are characterised by minimal engagement in the process. This pattern contrasts with that of the students and teachers having a developmental view, which is characterised by

a high level of engagement in the process. This picture is consistent with the value they placed upon autonomous learning. Students and teachers interpreting autonomous learning as a one-way process underpinned by an instrumental view of learning and knowledge attached little value to the process itself. Neither did they consider autonomy as a means nor an end to their learning. Contrary to this pattern, students and teachers construing autonomous learning as a two-way process underpinned by a developmental view of learning and knowledge placed great value on the process. Students and teachers in this category perceived autonomy as both the means and the end to learning.

The findings have significant cultural implications in relation to the wider context of Hong Kong which embodies the Chinese culture. Half of the students participated in this study (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18 and 19) did not see autonomous learning as a goal of their learning despite the fact that they did not share a simplistic view with the management of the institute interpreted as the provision of self-learning facilities, e-platforms, extended learning packages, etc. They were satisfied with a limited choice over the process. Even the rest of the students (Students 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) who looked up to the development of independence and greater ownership of their learning were satisfied with a

‘procedural’ type of autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002). For Students 16 and 20 who demanded more autonomy in terms of a more flexible design of the curriculum matching students’ needs, interests and expectations showed hesitation and reservation about their demand. The interview data indicate that they valued collective interest more than their own interest, a cultural norm among the Chinese who value conformity more than individualism.

This kind of ‘cultural resistance’ to autonomous learning is also evident in the teachers’ data. Teacher 1 was not ready to give up her role as an authority figure directing students’ activities. Teachers 2 and 3 were more willing to share their power with their students but they did not have much confidence in students taking charge of their own learning. These teachers were loaded with a great sense of responsibility as a fatherly or motherly figure in the classroom rather than seeing themselves interacting with their students on an equal footing. This could perhaps be attributed to the traditional Chinese belief ‘養不教、父之過; 教不嚴、師之隋’ meaning ‘to raise children without teaching them, it’s the fault of the father; if the teaching is not rigorous, it is the result of the teacher’s laziness’. It would certainly be unwise for the researcher to jump to the conclusion of the prevalence of ‘cultural resistance’ toward autonomous learning in the wider context of Hong Kong if the

small sample of students and teachers interviewed is taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the researcher considers this speculation reasonably informed by Biggs' study conducted in the local mainstream setting discussed in the literature chapter. This speculation therefore points to a direction for further research in autonomous learning with different groups of stakeholders in other types of institutions in Hong Kong.

7.3 Implications of the research findings

The findings reveal that there are areas of convergence and divergence between students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning which is underpinned by the difference in their views on learning and knowledge. In this study, a few students who preferred a more transactional style of learning and teaching experienced a sense of frustration and helplessness in a teacher-directed classroom where the teacher exercised control over the entire learning process. In the case of Teacher 1, she also had a feeling of contempt for the shift of focus from the teachers to the students, the orientation of which was not consistent with her own perceptions. The implication is that a mismatch of their perceptions is likely to result in frustration and confusion in the learning and teaching process.

The case institute has institutionalised policies with a view to helping students to become autonomous learners. These include the provision of self-access learning facilities and development of independent learning packages as an initiative to reduce class contact hours which have been replaced by 'notional learning hours' in line with the Qualifications Framework (QF) requirements. Under the local QF, the intended learning outcomes pertaining to the concept of autonomy have been coarsely and vaguely defined. To align with the QF requirements, the institute has translated these poorly defined generic learning outcomes into course-specific learning outcomes intended for the students such as 'students should be able to perform the tasks with a degree of autonomy'. Both the students and the teachers in this case study, however, did not share a simplistic view of autonomous learning with the top management of the institute and the QF authority. They perceived autonomous learning as processes leading to different outcomes which relate closely to their engagement and practice in the classroom. The desirable manifestations of the autonomous learning bear similar characteristics of the metacognitive processes in Biggs' discussion on students' approaches to learning (Biggs and Watkins, 1995). These two-way processes are underpinned by a constructivist view of learning and teaching which requires both the students and the teachers to engage actively in the processes. What the teachers do in the classroom and the role they project to the

students will likely encourage and promote autonomous learning processes of different nature with different outcomes. This study shows that the students and teachers placed different value on autonomy which was manifested at different levels (Ecclestone, 2002; Benson, 1997, 1998 & 2001). Autonomy, in a desirable manifestation, has also been identified as both the means and the ends of students' learning, a perception shared by both the students and the teachers involved in the study. The implication is that defining autonomy in terms of an outcome does not help the teachers much in facilitating its development on the part of the students. Although the researcher is not in a position to rewrite the QF definitions on autonomy, the results of this study, with specific reference to elaboration on the nature of autonomous learning processes and sub-processes, namely goal setting, questioning, planning, monitoring of progress, drawing conclusions, reflecting and feeding back to goal setting, should help both students and teachers in the vocational context to interpret the guidelines prescribed by the QF so as to improve their learning and reflect on their pedagogical practice respectively in relation to the promotion of autonomous learning.

The interview data show that most of the teachers involved in this study had a stereotypical image about YI students who lacked ability, interest and motivation in

performing autonomous learning when compared with the mainstream students. Their perceptions would affect their choice of classroom activities, pedagogies and feedback strategies in the interaction with their students. This study shows that the stronger the stereotype, the lesser the chance for the teacher to adopt engaging strategies which facilitate autonomous learning.

A majority of the students and the teachers interviewed associated autonomous learning with project work. The project element was characterised by more student-student and student-teacher interaction, discussion and sharing, exploratory and reflective exercises as well as peer evaluation. Both the students and the teachers valued this type of learning activities in the programme they were pursuing.

7.4 Recommendations

Kinchin suggests that congruence of teachers' and students' views will maximise the effects of learning (Kinchin 2004). It is impracticable to place the teacher and students with matching views on autonomous learning and its value in the same class to maximise its effectiveness in order to benefit the students. It will certainly

help for the teachers to engage students in meaningful dialogues at the beginning of the school year in order to find out their interests, value and expectations. This will enable the teachers to tailor their teaching to suit the needs of individual students. Teachers' thinking and pedagogical practice in the classroom will, in turn, have an impact on students' thinking and behaviour. This two-way communication will also help to build a supportive atmosphere and a trustful relationship between the teacher and the students.

To facilitate the development of more desirable manifestations of autonomy, i.e. personal and critical types of autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002), it is necessary for both the institute and the teachers to recognise autonomy as a means, apart from seeing it as an outcome of students' learning. This requires the teachers to be willing to share their power with their students by creating opportunities for discussion and negotiation in terms of curriculum contents, learning outcomes, assessment criteria, etc. which are meaningful to the students themselves. In this connection, the institute can invite student representatives to serve on task groups or committees which are commissioned to undertake curriculum design.

As far as practicable, teachers can incorporate the project element into the subjects

they are delivering in order to promote autonomous learning. Students form into project groups so that they can collaborate and share their views and experiences. Through questioning, discussion, debate, analysis, making judgment, students work out compromised solutions to solve problems. Students can reflect on their learning, relate and integrate what they have learnt in different modules of the course and apply those knowledge and skills in real-life environment. Students can also give feedback on how they felt and what they have learnt in the debriefing. Teachers should facilitate discussion and support the process of knowledge construction to achieve the intended outcomes.

7.5 Evaluation and limitations of the research

The researcher considers that this thesis has achieved what it set out to achieve at the beginning. The researcher findings represent a snapshot of the institute at the times of the interviews based on the perspectives of the students and teachers which contain areas of convergence and divergence in relation to their perceptions and practice of autonomous learning. The implications are derived from the research findings and the recommendations made are based on those implications. The researcher therefore thinks that they are valid and appropriate to the groups of

students and teachers interviewed.

The researcher has learnt various skills during and after this research study. The research skills ranging from conceptualising a problem in relation to a context, building a conceptual framework, coding and presenting the data, drawing conclusions, etc. are invaluable to the researcher with little prior experience. The researcher has also learnt the techniques of interviewing different groups of people, the students and the teachers in this case. The researcher considers it most important to respect the respondents and build a sense of trust during the interviews. These skills certainly lay the foundation on which future research studies can be built.

The researcher is well aware of the limitations of this study. Despite the measures taken by the researcher to motivate the participants to produce authentic accounts during the interviews discussed in the methodology chapter, the study is limited by its sampling size and criteria. The samples of participants are confined to a small group of students and teachers involved in a foundation level diploma programme and in one subject area i.e. the Business stream of studies. All the participants have also been selected from one single institute, the Youth Institute, which offers various types of foundation level vocational education and training programmes in a variety

of trades. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalised to all the students and teachers in the institute and certainly not to the wider student and teacher population of the VTB.

As far as the research methodology is concerned, the researcher considers that the use of semi-structured interviews on the small group of students and teachers as well as the use of inductive data analysis are appropriate in view of both the time and resources constraints faced by the researcher. Notwithstanding this, the study is also limited by the use of a single method as the only means to collect data. In this study, the researcher invited the participants to share with her their views of autonomous learning and what they did in the classroom. If time and resources allow, the researcher would consider arranging class observations or video taping to observe and record what actually happened in the classrooms to validate the interview data. But collection of observational data has to be done with care as class visits can be fairly intrusive from the point of views of the participants. The researcher has thus considered conducting repeated interviews with both the teachers and students as an alternative in order to overcome the limitation imposed by this single method research.

Being the only person involved in coding and analysing the interview data, the researcher is conscious of the subjectivity and biases built into the process. In this respect, the researcher has tried to overcome this challenge by involving colleagues having no relationship with the Bureau and the case institute to comment on the translated transcripts and the codes generated and work together to improve them subsequently. These measures enable the researcher to strengthen her claim of capturing the authentic perceptions and experiences of the participants with regard to autonomous learning at a specific period of time in the case institute.

7.6 Suggestions for further research

The implications of the research findings and the recommendations would result in considerable change in policies and practice of the case institute in relation to curriculum design, course objectives, intended learning outcomes, module contents as well as teaching and learning strategies of a foundation level course. For generating Bureau-wide recommendations, it is necessary to conduct similar research in other member institutions which offer vocational education and training programmes at different levels in a wide variety of disciplines or trades. This will help to explore whether other groups of stakeholders hold similar or different

perceptions of autonomous learning and whether there is a different mix of teaching and learning practice. Relating to the issue of ‘cultural resistance’ made in Section 7.2 above, the researcher acknowledges that she will not be able to make a claim on cultural differences about students’ and teachers’ perceptions of autonomous learning considering the limited number of respondents involved in the present study. Further research in the cultural respect is needed to substantiate the researcher’s speculation of ‘cultural resistance’ in the development of autonomous learning in the Chinese context.

The researcher considers that the qualitative in-depth interview method used in the present study can seize the true perceptions of both the students and the students on issues that cause tension. Such research method is also considered to be more appropriate in finding out their understanding than the use of any quantitative method with a focus on statistical information. Despite its effectiveness, this research method requires an individual researcher to invest a great deal of time and resources in the data collection and analysis processes. It would be ideal if a team of researchers could be involved in conducting the interviews and data analysis process which could then progress to the conclusions and recommendations in a more efficient way.

7.7 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has concluded the thesis by examining critically the significant outcomes of this research study in the light of the Chinese cultural context. Acknowledging that a majority of relevant studies have been conducted in the western context, the researcher considers this study original and important in the sense that the findings contribute to the understanding of the perceptions of autonomous learning from the perspectives of Chinese students and teachers in a vocational setting. Such analysis has led on to a discussion of the implications and recommendations on policies and practice specific to the case institute and the Vocational Training Bureau as a whole. The researcher has also evaluated this case study in relation to its aims, methodological limitations and the skills and experience gained throughout the research process which the researcher considers invaluable. Finally, the researcher has given thoughts on the possible research areas and focuses in autonomous learning.

An extract of coded transcript of Student 20

I: Interviewer; R: Respondent

I/R	Transcript	Code
I:	To you, what is learning?	
R:	Learning to me is in fact very important. Sometimes, learning can enhance my skills and knowledge as well as help make progress and raise my individual competitiveness. Personally, if one is willing to learn, it is a big support as learning can really enable one to learn a lot. One can satisfy his quest for knowledge and improve his ability to do different things. In my case, learning is more important as learning to me has a very deep meaning.	VOL WTE DFL
I:	Then what is knowledge to you?	
R:	In fact knowledge to me is also very important because we will come across a variety of knowledge when studying. This can enrich the different aspects of the subjects. For example, when studying English, we can study many things related to English knowledge, grammar, vocabulary,	VOK IOK

	tense, etc. And I think knowledge can be converted into wisdom.	TRAN
I:	Why do you think so? I am interested in that change. How is it?	
R:	Sometimes knowledge has different levels. For example, you gain experience during the process of learning and you can transform the knowledge and experience into wisdom. Say ... I can't think of a practical example.	VOK INTEROK TRAN
I:	Because this is something very abstract.	
R:	It is very abstract but it is possible.	
I:	You mean knowledge and experience can be transformed into wisdom. Then what is wisdom?	
R:	Wisdom to me is a kind of predictive ability. That is, I can accurately predict how a phenomenon develops and have a thorough understanding of the root of the phenomenon. You can apply what you have learnt and you can use it as you wish.	CU APPOK INTEROK
I:	Do you mean you can apply and use the knowledge very easily?	

R:	Yes. And it is helpful to me and others. Also, wisdom can enable me to understand right and wrong more. As I can thoroughly understand a matter, naturally first I will not make the mistake again. Second, I can do things in a better way. Therefore, wisdom to me is a kind of experience and understanding.	IOG PD CU
I:	Besides knowledge, are there any experiences you have gained?	
R:	Some experiences, some feelings and something I have come across and when they come together, they will become wisdom.	INTEROK
I:	This is quite abstract. Going back to YI, have you had classes for three months?	
R:	Yes.	
I:	That means you have attended many lessons already and the timetable is quite tight. Can you think of some classroom experiences that involve different kinds of learning?	
R:	Visual, listening, ...	TOLA

I:	What is visual?	
R:	For something visual, the teachers use a projector and show their powerpoint files that include notes. Then the teachers will explain more. It is both visual and listening. And usually there are practical assignments that involve actual work and oral presentations. Therefore listening, speaking, reading and writing are all included.	TATOK APPM
I:	Any other learning types?	
R:	Or you will be invited to make a performance. Sometimes it takes two to ...	APPOK
I:	What kind of performance? Singing?	
R:	It isn't. It is only a speech or a dialogue.	APPOK
I:	A presentation? Do you mean you have to present something?	
R:	Yes, to present something.	
I:	Basically they are the same types. Some are listening and some are practical. For the types you have mentioned, are there any related to autonomous learning? What is autonomous learning to you? What is the meaning of it?	

R:	Autonomous learning ... taking the initiative to learn. If I take the initiative to learn, it will be helpful. I will then learn a lot more and do not need someone to teach me all the times. I will discover new knowledge actively. That is what autonomous learning means to me.	IOAL ALAT INDEP DOK
I:	What is your point of view towards this?	
R:	Actually I think autonomous learning is something good. Autonomous learning can enable someone to learn more, more new knowledge.	VOAL ALAT
I:	How can it enable someone to learn a lot more new knowledge?	
R:	Because it is based on the fact that someone can take the initiative to learn, he will then continue to explore new knowledge and skills. That means autonomous learning can make someone make progress and raise his competitiveness. Autonomous learning can affect individuals deeply. If one is not involved in autonomous learning, he will learn less than others. That is, the gap will become bigger and he may not know the knowledge most	DOK ALAD ALO VOAL ALO

	people have.	
I:	That means for something you know, if autonomous learning or experience is not involved, he will not know it without the process.	
R:	Yes. It will be weaker than someone, being left behind.	
I:	Is it related to you have mentioned about knowledge and wisdom?	
R:	Of course, there is a close relationship. For someone who can learn autonomously, he can take the initiative to explore more knowledge and naturally more knowledge will be discovered. As a result, s/he can apply the knowledge learnt based on what s/he learnt more easily. Later, s/he can make use of the experiences and processes and turn them into wisdom. Therefore, ...	RBVOLAAL DOK ALAT CTPK TRAN
I:	What you have said about the process is in fact in line with how you see autonomous learning, right?	
R:	That means autonomous learning can help one increase his desire for learning and hence raise his drive and motivation.	ALAD MOT DOI

Code	Meaning
ALAD	Autonomous Learning As Drive
ALAT	Autonomous Learning As Tool
ALO	Autonomous Learning Outcome
APPM	Application Modules
APPOK	Application Of Knowledge
CTPK	Connection To Previous Knowledge
CU	Conceptual Understanding
DFL	Desire For Learning
DOI	Direction Of Influence
DOK	Discovery Of Knowledge
INDEP	Independence
INTEROK	Internalisation Of Knowledge
IOAL	Image Of Autonomous Learning
IOG	Identification Of Gap
IOK	Integration Of Knowledge
MOT	Motivation
PD	Personal Development
RBVOLAAL	Relationship Between Views Of Learning And Autonomous Learning
TATOK	Teacher As Transmitter Of Knowledge
TOLA	Types Of Learning Activities
TRAN	Transformation
VOAL	Value Of Autonomous Learning

VOK	Views Of Knowledge
VOL	Views Of Learning
WTE	Willingness To Engage

A start list of codes for teachers' data

Code	Meaning
AAE	Autonomy As End
AAM	Autonomy As Means
AEOK	Active Explorers Of Knowledge
ALA	Autonomous Learning Ability
ALAD	Autonomous Learning As Drive
ALAT	Autonomous Learning As Tool
ALO	Autonomous Learning Outcomes
ALP	Autonomous Learning Processes
APPM	Application Modules
APPOK	Application Of Knowledge
CAEOS	Certification As Evidence Of Success
CDMOT	Curiosity Driven Motive
CFEED	Corrective Feedback
CF	Critical Factors
CFSCL	Contempt For Student-Centred Learning
CI	Collective Interest
COLC	Choice Of Learning Contents
COLM	Choice Of Learning Methods
COM	Change Of Mindset
CR	Conflict Resolution

CTPK	Connection To Previous Knowledge
CU	Conceptual Understanding
DC	Drawing Conclusions
DE	Deep Engagement
DFL	Desire For Learning
DM	Decision Making
DOI	Direction Of Influence
DOK	Discovery Of Knowledge
EFEED	Evaluative Feedback
EMP	Empathy
ENJOY	Enjoyment
EP	Exploration Process
ER	Equal Relationship
ES	Engaging Strategies
ET	Extended Thinking
EXAL	Example Of Autonomous Learning
FA	Fixed Ability
FB	Foundation Building
FFPA	Fitness-For-Purpose Approach
FOAL	Feasibility Of Autonomous Learning
FEEDS	Feedback Strategies
FT	Fine-Tuning
FEEDTGS	Feedback To Goal Setting
GD	Group Dynamics

GS	Goal Setting
IAD	Interest As Drive
ID	Interactive Discussion
IE	Institutional Expectations
IFEED	Individual Feedback
II	Individual Interest
IIS	Interest In Subject
INDEP	Independence
INDEPL	Independent Learning
INTEROK	Internalisation of Knowledge
IOG	Identification Of Gaps
IOK	Integration Of Knowledge
IP	Institutional Policies
IRESP	Individual Responsibility
IS	Interactive Strategies
KAPTW	Knowledge As Passport To Wealth
KASE	Knowledge As Spiritual Enrichment
LABI	Learning As Basic Instinct
LE	Learning Environment
LL	Lifelong Learning
LOC	Learning Outside Classroom
LOE	Level Of Engagement
LS	Life Skills
MOP	Monitoring Of Progress

MOT	Motivation
NAA	Non-Academic Arena
NEFEED	Non-Evaluative Feedback
NNAC	Non-Negotiable Assessment Criteria
NNAT	Non-Negotiable Assessment Tools
NNLC	Non-Negotiable Learning Contents
NOA	Nature Of Autonomy
NOS	Nature Of Subjects
OOAL	Opposite Of Autonomous Learning
OPOAL	Own Perceptions Of Autonomous Learning
PE	Parents' Expectations
PE	Peer Evaluation
PFA	Preparation For Assessment
PP	Planning Pathways
PPCA	Pre-Planned Classroom Activities
PROK	Passive Recipients Of Knowledge
PS	Problem-Solving
PT	Peer Teaching
PW	Project Work
RFID	Respect For Individual Differences
RL	Rote Learning
ROS	Role Of Students
ROT	Role Of Teachers
RT	Risk Taking

SATAP	Selected Attention To Assessment Performance
SBM	Skills-Based Modules
SE	Social Expectations
SE	Students' Engagement
SE	Shallow Engagement
SEN	Sensitivity
SFB	Students' Family Background
SI	Self-Image
SIGN	Signposting
SIL	Success In Learning
SOB	Setting Of Benchmarks
SOP	Sharing Of Power
SOR	Sharing Of Reflection
SPOAL	Students' Perceptions Of Autonomous Learning
SPS	Students' Preferred Strategies
SR	Self-Reliance
SREACT	Spontaneous Reaction
SRESP	Shared Responsibility
STEREO	Stereotyping
SU	Self-Upgrading
SUBC	Subject Constraints
SYLC	Syllabus Constraints
TAA	Teacher As Advisor
TAC	Teacher As Carer

TAEOSYL	Teacher As Executor Of Syllabus
TAF	Teacher As Facilitator
TAG	Teacher As Guide
TAM	Teacher As Mediator
TATOK	Teacher As Transmitter Of Knowledge
TE	Teachers' Expectations
TE	Teachers' Engagement
TFPD	Tool For Personal Development
TFR	Tool For Reflection
TOL	Transmission Of Knowledge
TSR	Teacher-Student Relationship
TWQ	Two-Way Questioning
VOAL	Value Of Autonomous Learning
VOK	Views Of Knowledge
VOL	Views Of Learning
WCFEED	Whole Class Feedback
WPD	Whole Person Development
WTE	Willingness To Engage

Examples of memos written during the data collection and data analysis

processes

Memo written after first interview with Student 4

A very different experience with this student when compared to the interviews conducted with the first three students who seemed to be more articulate and cheerful. This student was very quiet and passive. There was some kind of 'stiffness' throughout the interview. I think I should have given her more time to think and organise her thoughts instead of 'jumping in' too quickly to avoid the 'dead air'. Too much prompting can be threatening. This student definitely requires more warm-up time before the next interview.

Memo written after reviewing interview data of Students 16 and 20

Interview data of students 16 and 20 show that these two students valued learning and knowledge not so much as a means to secure a job or to gain wealth and status, which is in fact the 'mainstream' view held by students in a vocational setting. According to them, knowledge and knowledge were associated with personal growth. An element of 'transformation' can be identified in their elaboration of their epistemological views. I was really impressed by student 20, in particular, when he talked about turning knowledge and experiences into wisdom. This is clearly

moving away from the 'instrumental' view of half of the group of students involved in the study. On checking the backgrounds of these two students, the difference in their views is probably related to the type of education they received before they attended the case institute. Student 16 studied 'Integrated Humanity' in the HKCEE curriculum, whereas student 20 received his early and junior secondary education in Mainland China which focused more on the development of a broader knowledge base instead of placing students into 'streams' such as arts, science or business in the local community. Obviously these two students have a view quite different from what the institute is promoting i.e. fitness-for-purpose type of training focusing on specialised skills related to a specific trade. Can they develop fully under the vocational setting? In the wider context of Hong Kong, the curriculum reform is well under way with an aim of dissolving the 'boundary' between traditional disciplines. How is the vocational institute going to cope with this change?

Memo written after second interview with Teacher 1

This teacher grumbled more in the second interview. I can sense her frustration in 'acting out' the syllabus and her relationship with some of her students who may not be 'cooperative' in her class. This frustration could have come from her experiences of having a very low sense of control over her students' learning. For example, she talked about not being able to motivate her students and it was not possible for her

to cater to the needs of individual students for the interest of the whole class should be given the priority. She also talked about not being able to build up a close and friendly relationship with her students because of the limited class contact hours. This low sense of control is certainly incompatible with her view that ‘the teacher should have full control in the classroom’.

Memo written after reviewing interview data of Teacher 4

Her elaboration on the autonomous learning (AL) processes is very much similar to that described by teacher 3. Labels characterising the AL processes such as ‘goal setting’, ‘planning pathways’, ‘monitoring of progress’ and ‘reflection’ apply to teacher 4’s data. Evidence from the data suggests that this teacher was really thinking and acting from the point of views of her students. Like teacher 3 who engaged her students in discussion and self-reflection in the project-based activities, teacher 4 engaged her students at a deeper level by making them share their reflection with the other groups. This ‘extension’ helped her students to reconsider their goals set at the beginning of the project. I think this additional element warrants another label – ‘feedback to goal setting’. This tag also distinguishes her from teacher 3 as the process interpreted by teacher 4 has an extended part which connects it to the beginning, i.e. closing the ‘loop’ so to speak. This expands or extends the processes identified in the interview data of the other teachers.

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