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The Autonomy-Focused Approach in Higher Education: Theoretical Grounds and Practical Implications

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Introduction: based on the analysis of both the current practice and theory of autonomy in education, this paper is intended to determine the core principles, conditions and practical opportunities for implementation of the autonomy-focused approach in Russian universities.

Materials and Methods: to substantiate the benefits and reveal the core characteristics of the autonomy-focused approach in higher education, we performed the content-analysis of both national and international higher educational documents. The practical aspects of the autonomy-focused approach have been examined through applying the ideas of autonomy-focused education to the introduction of the G-MedEx international networking educational programme (the G-Med Ex Programme) at Professor V. F. Voino-Yasenetsky Krasnoyarsk State Medical University in 2015–2016. Analysis of the educational process outcomes and open discussions with teachers and students-participants of the G-MedEx Programme have also become an important source of information.

Results: it was revealed that the development of the university educational environment actors' autonomy is possible through the use of the autonomy-focused approach, which represents a critical tool for implementation of the personality-centred educational paradigm. Among the core characteristics of the autonomy-focused approach in higher education we suggested the principles of innovative self-change, personal involvement and self-fulfillment, critical awareness and self-reflection, readiness to face challenges, interdisciplinary character of training, and practical focus of education. Investigating the practical aspects of the autonomy-focused approach, we demonstrated its benefits using the example of an international networking educational programme.

Discussion and Conclusions: the results of the implementation of the autonomy-focused approach within the G-MedEx Programme suggest that using this approach is beneficial for both medical university students' and teachers' autonomy development. Practical relevance of the study is ensured through specifying the core principles, conditions and opportunities for implementation of the autonomy-focused approach in higher education, therefore allowing for possible application of the described approach in various universities and providing a basis for investigating its potential in other educational contexts.

Keywords: higher education, university educational environment, university teacher, teacher autonomy, learner autonomy, autonomy-focused approach, autonomous activity, international networking educational programme, professional development

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Автономно ориентированный подход в высшем образовании: теоретические основания и практическое применение

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Введение: наряду с выделением в современной педагогической литературе значимости автономности преподавателей и студентов университета, теория развития автономности субъектов образовательной среды вуза остается недостаточно разработанной. Статья направлена на устранение данного пробела в педагогической науке и посвящена исследованию сущности и возможностей применения автономно ориентированного подхода в высшем образовании. Цель статьи – на основе анализа современной образовательной практики и теории автономности в обучении определить ведущие принципы, условия и практические возможности использования автономно ориентированного подхода в российских вузах (на примере международной программы сетевого обучения).

Материалы и методы: для обоснования актуальности и выявления ключевых характеристик автономно ориентированного подхода в высшем образовании проведен контент-анализ отечественных и международных нормативных документов в области высшего образования. Практические аспекты изучаемого подхода были исследованы путем реализации его положений в рамках международной программы сетевого обучения G-MedEx. Данные были получены в ходе анализа результатов образовательного процесса и открытого их обсуждения с преподавателями и студентами – участниками программы G-MedEx.

Результаты исследования: развитие автономности субъектов образовательной среды вуза возможно при условии применения автономно ориентированного подхода как важного инструмента реализации личностно-ориентированной парадигмы образования. Среди ключевых характеристик подхода в высшем образовании выделены принципы инновационного самоизменения, личной включенности и самореализации, критического восприятия и саморефлексии, готовности принять вызовы междисциплинарного характера и практической направленности обучения. Исследование практических аспектов автономно ориентированного подхода показало эффективность его применения в рамках международной программы сетевого обучения.

Обсуждение и заключения: результаты применения автономно ориентированного подхода в рамках международной программы сетевого обучения G-MedEx свидетельствуют о его эффективности в отношении развития автономности студентов и преподавателей медицинского университета. Практическая значимость исследования обеспечивается выделением ключевых принципов, условий и практических возможностей применения данного подхода в высшем образовании, что дает возможность его использования в различных вузах и закладывает основу для исследования его потенциала в других образовательных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, образовательная среда вуза, преподаватель вуза, автономность преподавателя, автономность обучающегося, автономно ориентированный подход, автономная деятельность, международная программа сетевого обучения, профессиональное развитие

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Introduction

The contemporary postnonclassical period in education development is characterised by transformation of the whole educational system into a subject-oriented one which is focused on self-fulfillment, spiritual, moral, emotional and axiological development of the personality [1]. Prioritising innovative, proactive and creative human nature, this type of education is associated with the anthropocentric educational model as one of the mainstreams of contemporary educational theory. Following an anthropocentric and humanistic model of education in the context of constantly rising need for developing human capital [2] has made originally philosophical categories of “freedom” and “autonomy” commonly used in the context of pedagogy.

Current situation in higher education in Russia requires implementation of a new type of training which puts emphasis on interests of the student with consideration for his or her personal experience, inclinations, abilities and professional commitment rather than on the previously used tactics of “trying to guess the right answer to the teacher’s question”. Taking into account the prerogative of the Russian universities to design their own programmes and develop new courses and training structures, this type of education involves actualisation of a broad range of qualities and abilities by both students and teachers including goal-setting, important decision and rational choice making, self-appraisal and critical reflection on their own activities. Comprising the above-mentioned qualities, readiness for independent activity and continuous personal and professional development, it is autonomy that seems to be one of the most required personal characteristics in the current educational context. Accordingly, autonomous activity suggests the desire and readiness of the personality for relatively independent activity, critical reflection, important decision and rational choice making based on awareness of alternative options and their consequences.

Although a lot of changes have already been made in the area of higher education organisation over the last decade, promotion of educators’ and students’ autonomy seems to be able to adapt the educational environment actors to the new realities that will define the world structure in coming years.

The aim of the study is to determine the core principles, conditions and practical opportunities for implementation of the autonomy-focused approach (AFA) in Russian universities (using the example of an international networking educational programme).

Literature review

In accordance with the ideas of humanistic pedagogy [3–5], pedagogy and psychology of personality based professional education and self-development [6–9], “transformative pedagogy” [10], and the concept of pedagogy of freedom, self-determination and self-development gain more and more in importance not only for the student but for the teacher as well. In psychology and pedagogics, self-determination is defined as “the process and the result of a conscious choice of one’s attitudes, goals and means of self-actualisation under certain life circumstances, the main mechanism of achievement of one’s inner freedom” [11]. In turn, inner freedom of the personality is presented in scientific works as the main stimulus for personal development through education suggesting readiness to overcome existing habits, stereotypes and clichés, and to master new forms of activity proceeding from deep understanding of the educational context. This approach is in compliance with the psychological understanding of inner freedom as the ability of the person to follow their internal sensations in the situation of choice¹. This kind of freedom is known to be empiric, or based on experience (ibid.). At the same time, inner freedom is reported to be the “freedom from experience” that implies rejection of one’s experience [12]. These seemingly divergent conceptions

¹ Rogers C.R., Freiberg H.J. Freedom to learn. Columbus, OH, Charles Merrill Publishing Company; 1994.

harmonise if considered in the context of transcendental essence of the “autonomy” notion. The latter, just as freedom, suggests on one hand overcoming obstacles (in this case, it is experience rejection) and on the other hand, its own impossibility in case of absence of obstacles.

Autonomy is reported to be the key characteristic in reference to both the teacher and the student. It is based on goal-setting, independent choice of (and sometimes overcoming) the imposed forms, means, methods and contents of learning/teaching activities, reflection, initiative, independence and increased responsibility.

However, autonomy is not limited to potential capabilities and personal abilities of educational environment actors. It involves commitment to, readiness for and experience in usage of certain behaviour models constituted by a complex of values, motives, personal and professional characteristics as well as specific learning/teaching skills. Integrative complex of these characteristics makes it possible for educational environment actors to receive, realise and pursue opportunities given by their educational environment individually, rationally and responsibly.

University students’ autonomy is associated with their ability to learn and is considered as essential for all students [13]. Moreover, autonomy is presented as a key competency, which is necessary to all the professionals in recent international educational documents². Accordingly, teachers’ professional autonomy is to be referred to as their key competency ensuring acquisition of new competencies under conditions of the continually changing educational context [14]. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to consider autonomy as skill-based competence referring to the student and as behaviour-based competency regarding to the teacher.

Analysis of psychological and pedagogical theories of autonomy makes it possible to state that teachers’ professional autonomy is able to:

- provide the teachers’ perception of educational environment challenges not as stressors but as stimuli for self-development [14];
- induce high motivation for achievements and personal-professional development and stimulate external locus of control transformation into the internal one [15];
- ensure the teachers’ ability to “adapt to rapidly changing and ever-increasing technology innovations for teaching” [16] and constantly innovate;
- ensure recognition by the teachers of their leading role in setting and achievement of their personal and professional goals as well as to admission of responsibility for their professional activity. Such an approach corresponds to traditions of philosophical ideas of phenomenology, regarding the teacher as a “seeker of the essence”, an investigator of pedagogical processes realising the “sense-searching way of understanding and conversion of the pedagogical context” [17];
- lead to the development of students’ autonomy through promoting choice and encouraging students’ initiative [18].

The literature review also allowed us to recognise that, as a subject to change, university educational environment actors’ autonomy is capable of being increased in presence of certain conditions and specially organised educational or professional activity [19].

Materials and Methods

The study draws on descriptive research design. Most of the data were obtained through literature review and analysis of the results of selected studies. To justify the benefits and reveal the core characteristics of AFA in higher education, we performed the content-analysis of both national and international higher educational documents.

The core characteristics of AFA were determined taking into consideration philosophical and psychological ideas of internal freedom, personal autonomy and self-determination as well as pedagogical ideas

²European commission. Supporting teacher competence development for better learning outcomes, Brussels, European Commission, 2013; Key competences for lifelong learning. European Reference Framework. Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007.



of lifelong learning and personalisation of the educational process within the framework of anthropocentric and humanistic educational paradigm.

Applying our theoretical ideas to the process of medical students' training, we tried to reveal the AFA benefits concerning the implementation of the G-MedEx international networking educational programme (the G-MedEx Programme) at Professor V. F. Voino-Yasenetsky Krasnoyarsk State Medical University (KrasSMU) in 2015–2016.

For this purpose, a set of educational environment elements facilitating the G-MedEx Programme participants' training and their performance evaluation through the use of the autonomy-focused approach was developed. The results of the use of the autonomy-focused approach to design the G-MedEx Programme methodical support were analysed and discussed with the students-participants of the programme.

Results

The autonomy-focused approach to teaching and university educational environment organisation: Theoretical grounds.

It has been revealed that development of both students' and teachers' autonomy is possible with the use of AFA to teaching and university educational environment organisation [19]. The relevance of AFA to organisation of university educational environment is determined by several factors.

Firstly, AFA to organisation of university educational environment facilitates realisation of rights to free development, self-actualisation and the liberty of choice stated in the Federal Law No. 273 "On Education in the Russian Federation".

Secondly, it corresponds to ideas implemented in concurrent Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education and other actual statutes and regulations in the field of education which put emphasis on significance of elevated level of autonomy, responsibility and independence of university students and teachers within the framework of a novel educational context.

Thirdly, it complies with world tendencies in higher education development, in the framework of which autonomy is referred to as one of key competencies required of all professionals and is emphasized in the European qualification system, where the level of person's autonomy determines the level of their proficiency³.

Finally, AFA draws on the idea of autonomy in education, developing potential of which has been proved in a number of scientific works [20–29].

Advocating AFA in higher education, we revealed a number of justifications that can be classified under the headings of philosophical, pedagogical and psychological reasons:

– *philosophical reasons*: the need to prepare teachers and learners for effective functioning in a rapidly changing society through overcoming various obstacles and making choices based on "positive freedom" (or freedom "for") [5];

– *pedagogical reasons*: students are known to learn more effectively when they are involved in making choices and decisions about different aspects of their learning [14];

– *psychological reasons*: being very closely related with the process of self-determination, autonomy makes the process of learning / teaching inner-directed, and, consequently, desirable and enjoyable [15]; it leads to better performance, increase of self-esteem, self-efficacy and can prevent burnout [30].

The idea of AFA is close to the conception of the autonomous approach to the analysis of educational methodology, which is reported by E. E. Bukhteeva and V. A. Kalnney to be based on the systemic, learner-centered, activity, cultural and competency-based approaches [31]. However, compared to the autonomous approach, AFA has its special nature.

Firstly, it does not represent a synthesis of all the above-mentioned pedagogical approaches, being one of methodological categories within a large context of the

³European Commission. Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-economic Outcomes, COM. 2012. 669/3.

person-centered approach, or personality-focused paradigm. In terms of theory, implementation of AFA is based on personalisation of the educational process [32]. Such personalisation requires the use of novel educational techniques both in students' training and in advanced training for teachers. Aimed at formation of students and teachers' personal attitude towards the educational process, these new techniques should be based on the mechanisms of dialogue, reflexivity and cooperation.

Secondly, AFA involves emphasis on both students' autonomy as learners and teachers' professional autonomy, underlying the idea of close interaction and interdependence between teachers and students as well as the crucial role of teacher's autonomy in the development of students' autonomy.

The AFA can be categorized into six main principles which should guide teachers' and students' autonomous activity. Among these principles there is a principle of innovative self-change, which implies understanding of the necessity of self-change as a prerequisite of every innovation.

The principle of innovative self-change is closely related with the principle of personal involvement and self-fulfillment in one's learning/teaching activity, which implies considering life-long personal and professional development as a necessity.

The principle of critical awareness and self-reflection means that every activity should be based on critical analysis of every educational situation. This principle emphasizes a meaningful re-evaluation of teachers' and students' personal experience as the basis for improvements.

The principle of readiness to face challenges prevents the educational environment actors' conventional behaviour and following the stereotypes through their readiness to identify the problem and deal with non-standard tasks in new situations.

AFA also guides the interdisciplinary character of the educational process which implies readiness to get involved into interdisciplinary learning and teaching, discovering new ideas at the intersection of fields.

The practical focus of education is also of importance in the context of the autonomy-focused approach. This principle may be implemented through students work in teams where diverse professional skills, abilities, attitudes, interests and working styles are represented.

Operating a larger amount of information, the type of training described above involves the appearance of a new teaching and learning environment, given that this environment is based on creation of the conditions fostering the process of teachers and students' professional development, their autonomous motivation and transformation of external locus of control into the internal one.

The research conducted made it possible to outline the following conditions for implementation of AFA in the university educational environment:

1. The highest possible students and teachers' information awareness, including transparency of the educational process in terms of its tasks, goals, methods, evaluation standards and procedures.

2. Support of the university educational environment actors' autonomy and creativity.

3. Provision of the opportunities for active interaction and personal involvement of students and teachers in the process of the educational environment development through allowing their impact on the process and organisation of their learning/teaching and professional development.

4. Promotion of teachers and students' self-assessment and self-reflection based on their axiological awareness of their own learning/teaching (for instance, by means of rating system introduction).

5. Involvement of the educational process participants into practice-focused project activity based on research, modeling, analysis and correction of their learning/teaching activities.

6. Provision of real opportunities for teachers and students' creative activity and their independent choice of forms and means of this activity.

7. Enhancement of the educational process participants' intrinsic motivation to autonomous activity.



8. Providing access to a wide variety of informational resources to students and teachers.

The autonomy-focused approach to teaching and university educational environment organisation: Practical Implications.

It is difficult to overestimate the benefits AFA has for university teachers' refresher training course management. In this case AFA ensures collaborative and cooperative learning, which is based on the exchange of ideas and innovative teaching experience, peer review, self-evaluation and peer-evaluation practices [33].

Applying the ideas outlined above to the process of medical students' training, we tried to reveal the AFA benefits concerning the students-participants of the G-MedEx Programme that has been implemented at KrasSMU in 2015–2016.

Implementation of an international networking educational programme requires a complete rethink of traditional study goals and strategies of teaching in order to internationalise the content of higher education [34] and foster the students' autonomy. Individualized instruction was used to help the students cope with new academic difficulties in terms of general academic skills and linguistic proficiency. Courses of the Russian Language, Medical English, as well as the Russian Culture were included in the curriculum of the Japanese students to facilitate their coping with the obstacles of language and intercultural communication. Following a stronger desire of the Japanese students to actually interact with Russian people, we organized a series of formal and informal meetings, conferences and round-table discussions, which allowed foreign students to develop their intercultural communication skills. A new format of cooperation required that various educational resources should be available to the learners to offer them more freedom of choice.

Taking into account that different learners process information in different ways, a wide range of educational environment elements (including foreign scientific databases, video podcasts, lab equipment, simulators) were used in the training process. A special Guide-book was prepared

by Russian students to help Japanese students familiarize with Russian traditions and customs and navigate around the university campus and the city. Special Course Description Cards were elaborated in order to introduce Japanese students to the main principles of research and clinical practice in Russia, inform them about the goals of training and the ways of students' performance evaluation. Students Performance Cards with a set of can-do statements were designed to help learners follow the programme, choose the activities according to their needs, estimate their own performance and reflect on their learning.

Using AFA to design the G-MedEx Programme methodical support was both a practical solution to the newly recognized challenges and a way to help international networking educational programme's participants develop their learner autonomy.

Discussion and Conclusions

Summarising the research results presented in the article it should be stated that recognition and development of students and teachers' autonomy is possible in the framework of AFA that makes the university education environment actors involved into intensive analytical and project activity, based on analysing and reviewing not only a wide educational context but their personal learning and professional experience as well.

Using AFA to design the G-MedEx Programme methodical support was both a practical solution to the newly recognised challenges and a way to help the G-MedEx Programme's participants develop their learner autonomy. This training format was seen as beneficial not only by the students – participants of the programme, but also by the teachers who were involved in the programme design and implementation and who reported to have developed their autonomy through acting in a critical and creative way while selecting and designing instructional materials and evaluation standards and procedures.

Therefore, the proposed way of implementation of AFA in higher education suggests that using this approach proved to be effective, since it makes higher education system responsive to the changes

taking place in the modern Russian society. These results dictate the need for a broader research, which would reveal other possible aspects of AFA implementation and its benefits for teachers' and students' lifelong personal and professional development.

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