

# Understanding the Twofold Face of Autonomous Learning: The Individual and the Collective Dimension

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## Abstract

This paper aims to present a study that fosters an alternative view of learners' autonomy that considers both its individual and collective dimensions. The main objective of the study was, to understand how undergraduate students build themselves as autonomous learners when reconstructing meaningful learning experiences. Data were gathered through introspective diaries and semi structured interviews. The nine participants came from a private university; they were in fourth semester of Environmental Engineering and Psychology programs. They were also studying English II as part of their curriculum. Findings took the form of two main categories: learners as bricklayers investing in the reconstruction of their autonomous path and students making sense of significant others in their learning process.

## Keywords

Agency, Autonomous Learning, Capacities, Interdependence, Investment, Meaningful Experiences

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## 1. Introduction

This study represents a contribution to the generation of new knowledge towards the concept of autonomy in the area of language education and appears as the counterpart of the traditional way people have conceptualized this term. That is why there is still that tendency to consider that there are others (teachers, methodologies, or technological tools), which are worthy to determine to what extend and how learners become autonomous. This vision overlooks the process of introspection through which learners understand how autonomy emerges and permeates their learning, as well as their intellectual investment to act and decide.

In that sense, the practical development of this study offers the opportunity to understand the process of autonomous learning in a group of students based on a profile they build of themselves. This profile includes the decisions they make and actions they take as well as the sense they make of

significant others in their learning process.

In the same line of thought, this study opens the door to exploring the concept of autonomy from participants' perspectives. As their learning experiences are studied, researchers can understand autonomy as a psychosocial concept. It was necessary for the researcher to move beyond the idea of fostering autonomy as a mere problem to be solved. The participants of this process needed to have transformations that made them free to discover and understand who they were and what they could do alongside their learning experiences. It means that there was not a problematic situation to improve but a phenomenon to add understanding to, which was the way students perceived their autonomous process. This need was informed by a diagnostic process whose main objective was to explore the way autonomy was understood within a group of students of two programs (Environmental Engineering and Psychology) who attended tutorial sessions with their teachers in the different subjects.

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In that respect, tutoring was structured by the university as a mandatory space for all the students. At the same time, it was planned by professors with the main purpose of diminishing the level of students' dependence on teachers. However what students manifested was that those spaces were not thought for them but for the teachers, as learners they were rarely asked to reflect upon their learning process for reshaping it.

This situation let the researcher to state that students were not considered autonomous or having the capacity as if autonomy were something to be taught and even measured. They were allowed little to no contribution when deciding on the tasks, strategies, and objectives. Autonomy was then, framed by teachers under a set of procedures learners were expected to complete to demonstrate how autonomous they were. It was a problem, because students became more dependent on teachers' authority.

In trying to teach students autonomy, they were expected to be independent because they completed a set of tasks alone; but this actually made students dependent because they were relying on teacher to make the decisions. However, none of these strategies used constituted autonomy, as it is a process individually and socially rooted.

With that in mind, the following question, and objectives emerged, how do undergraduate students build themselves as autonomous learners when reconstructing meaningful learning experiences. The main objective was, to understand undergraduate students' building of themselves as autonomous learners when reconstructing meaningful learning experiences. In order to reach that goal specific objectives were established: to describe undergraduate students' meaningful leaning experiences reconstruction and to analyze students' reconstruction of meaningful learning experiences in terms of decisions made and actions taken.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

The present discussion is divided into two sub-sections: the individual and collective dimensions of autonomy.

The individual dimension of autonomy finds a connection with the notion of cognitive constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) as this theory conceives learning as personal meaning construction. For constructivists, learners are placed at the center of learning by using their previous experiences, beliefs, and conceptions, in their process of knowledge construction.

In this account, students are actors who acknowledge their own capacities in order to use them in their learning and wellbeing. The learners start a process of reflection of those talents they already possess and about which they were not conscious. This process can be consciously or unconsciously conducted, the learners empower themselves when he starts using their

capacities to achieve their goals. These statements find illustration in Nussbaum's (1990) contribution towards the humanization of education, which is based on the notion of human capacities.

Following the previous statements, the intellectual investment students make in their learning process emerges as another key concept for the discussion of the individual dimension of autonomy. Such investment refers to all the possible factors (energy, time, attitudes, and behaviors) learners account for in order to achieve their goals. In that sense, the notion of investment (Norton, 2000) appears as the ambivalent desire the actor has for learning, constituting a criticism of the idea of motivation. In first place, while motivation is mainly a psychological construct, investment is placed in a sociological dimension that implies meaningful connections between the learners' desire, commitment to learn, and their complexity as human beings.

It is possible to assert that the autonomous learner is an agent, as he becomes an active participant of his learning process; it reveals his capacity to arrange, decide, and act upon his particular learning experiences. This finds justification in the concept of agency at an individual level. It encompasses invisible behaviors, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings that must be understood from the various contexts and affordances from which they cannot be abstracted (Mercer, 2012). It implies the deliberate willing the learner possesses to carry out his decisions and actions or non-actions.

Accounting for the above, the collective dimension of autonomy, as part of a dual relationship plays a role that deserves discussion. Accounting for the former, it is presented from the social perspective and from the constructivist view of learning within which the notion of learners as active members of a society is widely acknowledged (Vygotsky, 1978, Tynjälä, 1999). The actors are creating meaning by making sense of situations, experiences, and significant others surrounding them.

For the purpose of this discussion, those contributors involve any person, cultural, or social situation the learner is in contact to. In that case, relatives, teachers, society, and the learners' immediate context appear as examples of some of these significant others. Significant others can make contributions that can influence or can control learners' decisions and actions. The role significant others play is relevant since they are involved in many of the experiences the learner has had and seen as meaningful. Moll (2000) presents a view of the idea of interaction in terms of significant others in learning: "To put it simply, human beings interact with their worlds primarily through mediational means; and these mediational means, the use of cultural artifacts, tools and symbols, including language, play crucial roles in the formation of

human intellectual capacities” (p. 257).

In the same line of thought, as the learner is nurturing his decisions and actions by interacting with others, there is a bidirectional relationship established. This relationship displaces the idea of unidirectional transfer of knowledge, and skills from a more knowledgeable individual to another and puts the participants in equal potential capacity to learn from each other, learn together, and to enrich each other's talents overall. In harmony with this statement, Lamb (2011) argues, “education for democratic citizenship is a driving force in many of the shifts in European education policy, the concept of democracy brings with it the idea that power is shared, with “citizens” being involved in decision making” (p. 79). These statements contain an interesting critique of the globalization trend, which subtly is leading areas like autonomy to homogenization while overlooking the interdependence the learner needs as part of his learning experiences.

In order to nurture and document the previous discussion regarding the alternative perspective to understand autonomy, next the investigator presents the revision of research reports conducted in Colombia during the last fifteen years.

After the revision in the previous sources, it was found that the interest on the topic of autonomy from the period 2000-2015 has been increasing though there were years when nothing was published about it. There is a report of sixteen studies developed in the Colombian context. There is a common interest among researchers to characterize autonomous learners' profiles and to establish the levels of autonomy on them in terms of the use of strategies, setting of objectives, context and learning styles (Buendía, 2015), (Cortés and Sánchez, 2005). Other studies are more centered on the development of autonomy in language learners through the planning, design, and implementation of specific interventions (Aguirre and Ramos, 2009); based-technology tasks (Bedoya, 2014), (Ballén, 2014); projects (Fandiño, 2008), (Pineda and Frodden, 2007), (Mesa and Frodden, 2004), (Usma and Frodden, 2003); independent work (Cabrales, et. al 2013), (Cabrales, et. Al, 2010); peer tutoring (Ariza and Víafera, 2009), (Víafera and Ariza, 2008) and cooperative work (Díaz, 2014). To the investigator all the previous studies constitute a framework for educational experiences and interventions which respond to specific needs (participants and settings), institutional policies, teaching interests, qualification of teaching and learning practices, which is very valid, however it also leads the researcher to think of the need to go beyond the pedagogical and instructional view of autonomy. It means, complementing that individual and psychological perspectives from which learners get the tools, models, or strategies to become autonomous, with an alternative perspective of autonomy where learners are the ones who build themselves as such at any learning process. This perspective will question

then, the tendency to measure, compare, motivate and develop skills, to move further and account for gaining understanding, reconstructing, investing, capitalizing capacities, making decisions and taking actions on behalf of students more than teachers'.

Having said that, the researcher found a couple of studies that favor reflective (Ariza, 2008), and introspective (Perdomo, et. al 2011) processes on students over the teaching process. These research reports provide insights about the scope of autonomy not only in, but outside the classroom at the time that allow participants raise awareness of the learning process they account for by means of interdependence. Regarding the study conducted by Ariza, (2008) the intention of the author was to report on the conceptions that students have of autonomy based on learning experiences in and outside the classroom. Results constituted an opportunity for students to reflect and see autonomy as a possibility to learn beyond the institutional setting. Establishing a connection between this research and the present study, the process of reflection on the part of learners appears as a key aspect in the practical development of this thesis as students decide to reflect on the learning experiences that they had had in life and at any level.

Regarding the study conducted by (Perdomo, et. Al 2011), the authors allowed their participants to look into their personal relationships and experiences with parents, describe them and reflect upon the influence these have in their autonomy. Results showed that as parents mean protection and support for children it contributes to reinforce students' will at the time that reinforces their capacity to reflect and act. Though the attention was centered just on the relationship with parents, this study highlights the influence of significant others in the process of autonomous learning. At the same time, the participants' voices are prevalent as they wrote narratives through which they were acknowledged with the capacity to reflect on their experiences and actions. In that sense, it offers support to the present investigation as students allow the researcher to understand the way they build as autonomous learners in and outside an institutional context, and by reflecting upon experiences they themselves determined as meaningful for them.

After the previous revision, the investigator realized more research is needed in order to have a deeper understanding of autonomy moving from the individual, psychological, and instrumental perspective, which at the time has been more focused on teaching than on learning.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Type of Study

The paradigm that guided this study was the qualitative one

because the main emphasis was the understanding of a human condition within the field of learning. Regarding data interpretation as the main research activity in this study, the research approach was interpretative.

### 3.2. Participants

In this particular study, a dialogical relationship was established with the nine participants in order to make sense of the data. The participants were undergraduate students in their fourth semester of Psychology and Environmental Engineering in a private university in Boyacá, Colombia. They were, fully informed as to the purpose and process of the research they were part. They signed a consent letter to participate in the process of data management and analysis.

These participants not only reconstructed their meaningful learning experiences and reported them to the researcher; they also participated in the process of gaining understanding of those experiences. They took part in the process of interpretation of the data where their voices were heard. Participants helped the researcher expand and validate the interpretation of the data gathered from the diaries by means of a dialogue around the phenomenon.

### 3.3. Setting

This research took place in a private university in Boyacá, Colombia. The institution prepares students for work and research in different areas. The atmosphere where data were elicited was tutorial sessions students attended twice a week. As class time was limited, students were encouraged by teachers and university policy to work independently to reach the objectives of their classes and reduce the level of dependence on teachers. The tutorial space was the main atmosphere in which the dialogical relationship with participants was established in order to determine and document the problem to be investigated not as a space to be improved.

### 3.4. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

A diary was the method that guaranteed the registration of the participants' reconstruction of meaningful experiences. Participants received an induction process in the writing of diaries. An initial stage was piloted for two weeks. After that, the participants were engaged in writing two diary entries (see Appendix A) per week for a period of three months. They wrote the diaries at home and came to the tutorial space every week where these were collected and discussed with the researcher. The main purpose of its implementation was to gain from participants their reflection of two aspects of their learning. The first was their reconstruction of successful learning experiences. The second one was their report on their behaviors towards specific situations of learning.

To collect the data, the information from the diaries was read and common themes were identified, and organized and served as source for the upcoming diary entries. To account for this process a matrix (see Appendix B) and an indexed coding were implemented. The indexation for diaries was as follows D: diary #: Number of the diary and P: Participant. After the initial analysis done with the participants, the researcher went deeper into the interpretation of the diary entries that were weekly shared with the participants for validation purposes. In order to enrich that interpretation the participants were also interviewed every other week based on the preliminary findings so that they could provide the researcher with more understanding of the information they had already provided. At this point, a semi-structured interview (See appendix C) supplied the dialogue around these inferences. The researcher transcribed and indexed the interviews using the following coding to facilitate the organization of the information SI: Semi-structured Interview #: number of interview and P: Participant.

## 4. Findings

The data interpretation was founded on the procedures of Grounded Theory (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). Its outcomes took the form of two emerging categories. The first is learners as bricklayers investing in the reconstruction of their autonomous path, and the second is students' making sense of significant others in their learning process. These findings highlight what constituted meaningful learning for the participants. Meaningful learning in this study relates to any kind of learning experience that represents significance for learners, about which language learning is not different.

### Learners as Bricklayers Investing in the Reconstruction of their Autonomous Path

This category is a symbol of creation in two metaphors. The first responds to the particular characteristic that the learner and bricklayer share as creative profile builders. It implies intellectual investment in their learning. The second component illustrates the learners' capacity to transform their context by means of their psychosocial capabilities and actions. This category acknowledges learners as agents of construction of their knowledge. This reflection moves them to make decisions and take actions. It makes them feel like empowered as learners who put their capacities into their service and wellbeing during their learning process. This brings up Norton's (2000) concept of *investment* from the context of language learning. She states investment as "socially and culturally constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (p. 10), she adds, "If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they

will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources” (p. 17). Though this study did not put explicit emphasis on learners’ self-investment for their target language learning, Norton’s ideas do contribute to understanding the intellectual investment a group of participants accounted for in their learning experiences.

The following participants’ excerpts support the first category:

My learning experiences have been successful because of my willingness to reach goals and not just to follow the crowd. I think that mediocrity is a virus that many people possess and maybe, at some point I was part of it as I took everything for granted. When I started university, I realized the importance of becoming someone in life so I got rid of that dangerous virus. Then I was able to do things that I thought I was not capable of. I have also learnt to be perseverant as a way to become someone, and I have been able to amend the mistakes that I make as a human being. (Caro D4)<sup>1</sup>

In each extract, the verbs that appear underlined respond to the descriptive phase of data analysis. This helped move the analysis to the interpretative stage. In this stage, the researcher stresses the implications these words have on the actions or decisions the participant makes.

Caro shows her intellectual investment and shapes it as her desires for the future. She keeps these desires in mind to decide on and act to become what she wants. Caro acknowledges the capacity she possesses to make her own decisions based on her learning experiences and towards where she wants to go. At this point, she shows a capacity to reflect upon attitudes she had in the past, and this allowed her to make meaningful transformations later. Therefore, she is establishing connections between her previous experiences and her current attitudes. Caro also presents herself as an individual able to take actions to achieve her desires. She acknowledges her initiative and perseverance towards her life learning process.

At this point, the different capacities Caro has portrayed respond to her wellbeing and individual interests. Then, Caro, as the bricklayer, is able to recreate her atmosphere and context; she uses her capacities to explore new alternatives and becomes aware of her inner power. She has to decide, act, transform, and attain what she wants. This, according to Nussbaum (2000) is part of the Capacities Approach that this author states.

I shall argue that the capabilities in question should be pursued for each and every person, treating each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others: thus I adopt a principle of each person’s capability, based on a principle of each person as end” (p. 5).

Participants of this study acknowledged their particular characteristics as learners. In that vein, one of them stressed:

I consider that knowing me day by day is a crucial aspect for my learning process. The fact of being conscious of what I want for life leads me to look for the appropriate solutions to what is not going well. (Lau D4).

Through this extract, Lau presents herself as an active and reflective individual. By looking at herself from inside, she gains understanding of what the implications of her decisions and acts are. At the same time she is adding sense and value to her desires and the process she follows to attain them. This data extract draws attention to Lau’s agentic behavior as she holds the belief that her individual behavior can make a difference and contribution to her learning process (Mercer, 2011). She acknowledges the process of introspection she accounts for when reflecting upon her individual actions and decisions.

In this vein, another participant is able to involve herself in an exercise of self-recognition by acknowledging her capacity to make decisions and take actions. She states:

English was a particular area where I could realize I had capacities I had never acknowledged; I discovered I was very good at analysis and memory processes. Those capacities made me feel proud of me because since I have put those capacities into action I have been able to achieve my learning goals not only in English but in other areas too. (Alexandra SI)

In this extract, Alexandra, as a bricklayer, recognizes her own talents that make her feel happy while reconstructing her path as an autonomous learner. Additionally, Alexandra is doing an exercise in self-recognition thanks to introspective practice. This is related to what Arfuch (2002) discusses about autobiographical space as an opportunity to capitalize on the personal voice through a narrative exercise. Alexandra becomes a capitalizer as she individually discovers and puts into practice hidden talents she possesses. Similarly, she acknowledges capacities she did not discover before and that can apply to areas different from her discipline. What constitutes as meaningful learning for Alexandra can cover any discipline. In this extract, she becomes aware of what she possesses, lacks, and decides to challenge her to get what she wants. Nussbaum’s (2000) idea of capabilities fits in with the humanization of education when she explains that people should be allowed to capitalize and potentiate the capacities they consciously or unconsciously have been able to develop for their own benefit. She explains, “... what people are actually able to do and to be in a way informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being” (p. 5). Alexandra’s capacities to reflect, make decisions, and take actions, structure what constitutes her investment in learning.

<sup>1</sup> All the excerpts were originally in Spanish and were translated for publication purposes.



In the following excerpt, another participant refers to her aspirations for the future and to her affective component. Both of these elements entail the concepts of investment and agency:

I have many goals that trigger my commitment to learn not only about what Engineering involves but also about other areas. My principal desire is to acquire knowledge so that anybody can make me feel ignorant. Similarly, someday I want to repay my parents for all their efforts. I want to be a great professional with the satisfaction of doing things well. (Lala SI)

Lala's investment is related to a set of desires she holds for her future and which empower her to act. Lala accounts for her own organization and recognition of what she wants for herself (Norton, 2010). She starts investing in the construction of her path by nurturing it through her field of knowledge, engineering. This refers to Lala's agentic behavior as she chooses to exercise her agency through participation and action, or indeed through deliberate non-participation or non-action. Agency is therefore not only concerned with what is observable but it also involves non-visible behaviors, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings (Mercer, 2012, p. 42).

Lala's declarations situate her as a holistic being where intrapersonal factors such as her emotions and beliefs about learning are interconnected with her life. In affective terms, Lala expects her knowledge to become visible and useful and to serve her as a tool to become empowered.

Upcoming extracts center attention on the reconstruction of autonomous learning through decisions participants make and actions they take for their learning process.

For me it has been difficult to reach this point because at the beginning when I left school my parents did not have money for me to study. Then I had to study nursing, then work and start paying for my studies. I think that when you are aware of the cost of becoming someone in life that is the moment when you gain responsibility and courage to keep going. (Aleja SI)

In this extract, Aleja reconstructs what for her was a difficult but meaningful learning experience. From that situation, she assumed a position and directed her actions towards the desires she had. Aleja shows a capacity to challenge her, set priorities, and take actions. The participant is not just reacting to the situation but is making sense of and engaging with the situation in order to change and influence it. At the same time as Aleja accounts for a transformation of her thoughts about learning to direct her efforts, energy, and time to construct her path. This interpretation finds illustration in Mercer's (2011a) idea of agency. For the author, this responds to 'agentic behavior'. This refers to informed incidents where the learner "appears to make decisions, take control, take actions, play an active role in guiding and directing learning processes, language contact and behavior" (p. 267).

Referring to the decisions made towards specific situations another participant expresses:

I have always tried to think constantly about the goals I set, I mean, if I focus on overcoming adversity, I will be closer to my goals. To do that the strategy is to know how to cope with difficulties dreams and wishes. For example, before I paid too much attention to irrelevant situations, which affected my meaningful learning process negatively. Then, I have set a purpose to learn how to identify and cope with difficulties and it has worked quiet well (Pau, SI)

Pau is emphasizing on a particular decision she made. She decided to change a particular behavior. Such a process moved her to understand and redefine behaviors that affected her negatively and to take actions to change them. This reveals Lala's active role in the guidance and direction of her own learning process. In this vein, another participant mentions some actions she has taken in her learning process as part of her agentic behavior.

My interest to learn, to ask questions and search for topics of my interest have helped me to make decisions about whether or not I want to learn about a specific topic. Additionally, these actions have helped me investigate topics of interest and grow intellectually in order to contribute to society. (Liz D5).

Liz presents herself as a performer of particular practices she has decided on. The actions she states provide her with tools to strengthen her learning process and empower herself to make her own decisions. Liz's reflections relate to Nussbaum's (2000) statement on the humanization process, which relates to the active role people play when capitalizing on and putting into action their talents.

The preceding paragraphs reflected on the definition, illustration, and interpretation of the first category. In the following sections, the same aspects are presented for the second category.

Students' Making Sense of Significant Others in their Learning Process.

This category responds to the social or collective dimension of students' autonomous learning. It refers to the contributions of significant others like relatives or teachers and their social and cultural practices. It refers to the interdependence students establish with external actors in the capitalization of their capacities. This finds justification in the Sociocultural Theory and particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as outlined by Vygotsky (1978). From this perspective, learners are in permanent interaction with the social context where the role of other people or the environment can contribute to the reconstruction of their path. It allows them to enrich their learning process while collaborating with others.

In response to the contribution of outsiders, the participant Annie highlights her parents as being able to guide her decisions and actions through their behaviors, support, and affective climate. She states:

I remember that my parents encouraged me to study what I wanted, what made me happy, because it was for my future and for the rest of my life. Thanks to their wise advice today, I am very happy of being studying Environmental Engineering. It is good to make decisions that are good for me but it is not bad to listen to another opinion because you can clarify many things. (Annie SI)

Annie talks about her parents as co-participants in her decisions. They offer her advice and support. This leads her to feel more secure when deciding and acting on her decisions. It also helps her give value to what she is attempting to do in her life. The role Annie gives to her parents finds illustration in theory. Parent's opinions are considered critical sources for children's decision-making, (Epstein, 2011). Parents constitute if not the first, the principal social cycle from where children start learning and establishing connections with the world. In that, sense most of what learners see, experience and gain from their parents' advice plays a role on their decisions and actions. In this respect, Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) state that,

Parents can support their children's need for autonomy by taking children's perspectives and viewpoints, allowing children choices, and supporting their initiatives and problem solving attempts. Such practices would help children to experience themselves as active agents in their school and other endeavors (p. 165).

Then, parents do not appear as controllers but as supporting agents in their child's decisions and actions.

Another participant in the semi-structured interview expressed:

My family has always been there to give a hand, support, advice. They are my motivation and what I love the most in life, because of them I do what I do and I am who I am. (Alexandra SI)

In respect to specific significant individuals, Alexandra highlights her family, in particular as being able to help her find meaning and value in what she does. Alexandra talks about those actors whom she perceives as being a source of encouragement. She is convinced that her family will support her so she makes a conscious decision to keep going. In that respect Wang et al., (2007) state that parental support that goes beyond the psychological control encompasses parents' warm, supportive and responsive behaviors that contribute to adolescents' emotional well-being. However, from this extract it can be stated that Alexandra is over valuing her parents' support, which can lead her to be more dependent on

them and privilege their decisions over her own.

Another aspect participants acknowledge is the role of teachers. That role may be either inhibiting or encouraging in their learning process. One of the participants, states:

Sometimes, I think the teachers and I, are in parallel worlds as regards my learning process because they expect more from me in terms of grades or academic achievements. Nevertheless, what is true is that I do well in my studies by accounting for different learning styles that I feel comfortable with though they may be different from my teachers' expectations. They would like me to do things or behave in one-way or another but what they do not know is that I can be a good student without meeting their expectations. (Aleja SI).

Through this excerpt, Aleja appears as a participant who questions the guidance she receives from her teachers. Aleja is judging to what extent the support she has from teachers is affecting her learning process, so she reveals awareness of her own capacities and the ways she implements them to reach the point she wants. At the same time, Aleja decides that her teachers' guidance might not be as necessary as her own strategies to reach her goals.

Finally, in terms of significant others as in this case the social and cultural experience, another participant expresses:

I think that to become a member of a society you have to learn how to do it first because each person's behavior is important in a society. On the other hand, everything you learn serves different purposes and particularly in my career, those are focused on cooperating to solve problems that affect the society. I mean, that the acquisition of knowledge alongside your formation has to be put into others' service. (Lala D10)

In this excerpt, Lala acknowledges her role as a permanent learner sensitive towards society's needs. Lala portrays here the interactive process conducted with others as part of the constructivism philosophy (Vygotsky, 1978) regarding the mutual gain or contribution all individuals get when in contact with others. In constructivism philosophy, everybody has important points of view and information to offer and this leads to collective wellbeing and mutual growth. Lala states a vis a vis relationship between her future profession and society; she sees it as cooperation where the actors put their capacities into mutual service and wellbeing.

## 5. Conclusions

Considering the research question that guided this study, *how do undergraduate students build themselves as autonomous learners when reconstructing meaningful learning experiences?*, the term "build" refers to that twofold face students of autonomous learning take towards their experiences.

The first category: *learners as bricklayers of their autonomous path* responds to the individual dimension framed by learners' agency and the profile autonomous learners build. In terms of the profile, the process of autonomous learning in this particular group of participants refers to their intellectual investment and self-recognition processes. Accounting for their agency, it emphasizes the capacity participants have to make decisions and take actions upon their learning process. This category acknowledges Norton's (2000) concept of *investment* from where learners are agents of construction of their knowledge. This reflection moves them to make decisions and take actions making them feel empowered agents who put their capacities into their service and wellbeing during their learning process. Additionally, Nussbaum's (2000) idea of capabilities fits in with the way students see their own autonomous learning process as they are recognizing, capitalizing, and potentiating the capacities they consciously or unconsciously have been able to develop for their own benefit. At the same time, the first category encompasses the notion of agency (Mercer, 2011a) and its connection with autonomy as the learner manages to make his own decisions, take actions, take control, and play an active role alongside his learning process.

The second category: *students' making sense of significant others in their learning process* has to do with the social dimension autonomous learners account for, when receiving the support of significant others. These others are actors who can guide their learning process, such as family, friends, teachers, and the social and cultural practices. In the instance of teachers, they appear as the ones who can guide but also inhibit their process of learning. This reveals participants' capacities to acknowledge the need of others' support but also to question that guidance. This category responds to the social or collective dimension of students' autonomous learning. It refers to the interdependence students establish with external actors in the capitalization of their capacities. Theories such as the Sociocultural Theory and particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as outlined by Vygotsky (1978) inform this idea. From this perspective, learners are in permanent interaction with the social context where the role of other people or the environment can contribute to the reconstruction of their path. It allows them to enrich their learning process while collaborating with others.

It is equally important to highlight the role that the introspection process played on the participants. They practiced introspection to understand the building of themselves as autonomous learners when reconstructing meaningful learning experiences. That exercise of reflection guaranteed rich data as the group was not told what to say or think about; they made their own decisions. Participants became the ones who gave the researcher the opportunity to know them and reflect upon their experiences.

## 6. Implications and Further Research

From the development of this study, the concept of agency appeared as a worthwhile topic to expanding upon considering its practical realization in conceptual terms. That process was illustrated through the inclusion of participants' voices where they reported decisions they made and actions they took in order to solve personal learning problems and to satisfy personal needs. In terms of the collective dimension, the practical realization has to do with acknowledging the contribution of others. This refers to the connection of significant others with the concept of autonomous learning.

Aiming at establishing direct connections to the teaching of English, the twofold aspect of autonomy could be implemented into the classroom as follows:

Incorporating introspective students' reflection about meaningful learning experiences using diaries or narratives can help both students and teachers understand different capacities and types of investment emerging from those experiences. With such inventory, it is possible that students become active participants in the English class as teachers allow them to propose the activities to cover a specific topic from the given curriculum from the perspective they think best works for them. In that sense, the English class can have sort of different ways of approaching a given topic not from the teachers' but from the pupils' perspective. To sum up, teachers can facilitate the incorporation of the students' individual and collective dimensions of autonomous learning by giving them the opportunity to deeply, reflect about their meaningful learning experiences. This becomes as an emancipation process to students as they can let the teachers know how they have experienced meaningful learning, at the time that they have the opportunity to illustrate that with their own proposals at the moment of studying any topic.

Finally, despite this study drew some conclusions to better understand the autonomous learning process in a specific population, much work and research need to take place. The discussion is open to enrich the teaching and learning process worldwide.

## Appendix A: Diary Format

### *Research Diary Protocol<sup>2</sup>*

Research Title: Understanding the Twofold Face of Autonomous Learning: The Individual and the Collective Dimension

Teacher-researcher:

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<sup>2</sup> The original instrument was in Spanish but it was translated for publication purposes.



*Purpose:* Dear participant I invite you to complete the diary format attached. The main objective is to make your own reconstruction, description, and reflection about your meaningful learning experiences.

*Procedure:*

1. Select one of your own meaningful autonomous learning experiences. It is an experience about which you can narrate, and describe decisions you made and actions you took towards specific learning situations.
2. Based on the previous decision complete the diary format suggested by the teacher-researcher.
3. The diary must be developed in order to share and discuss

it with the teacher-researcher.

4. If you consider it is important to modify, remove or add any information, feel free to do it.
5. During the discussion of the diary content, do not hesitate to participate, and provide additional, detailed information. Remember that there are not wrong or right answers.
6. Once the discussion session is developed, remember to advance writing the next diary entry following the criteria given by the teacher-researcher.

Thanks a lot for your participation and I hope that you find this exercise useful for your professional development.

Building and reflecting about meaningful autonomous learning experiences		DIARY #1:
DATE:	TIME:	
NAME:		
PURPOSE: Build and reflect about my meaningful autonomous learning experiences.		
My SUCCESSFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES: (Description of your decisions and actions towards specific learning situations)		
What made them meaningful and why is it that I still remember them? (reflection)		

## Appendix B: Matrix

Instruments	Participants									Themes	Patterns	Theoretical support	Interpretation
	Lau	Lala	Liz	Annie	Pau	Alexandra	Aleja	Caro	Sara				
Diaries													
Semi structured interviews													

## Appendix C: Protocol of Semi Structured Interview

### *Protocol of Semi-Structured Interview*<sup>3</sup>

Research title: Understanding the Twofold Face of Autonomous Learning: The Individual and the Collective Dimension

Teacher-researcher:

*Objective:* Dear participant I invite you to review the following protocol. The main purpose is to go deeper in the reconstruction and reflection that you have done in your diaries about your meaningful learning experiences. Remember that during the interview you can provide all the information that you consider important for your interpretation (examples, comparisons, etc.)

1. Based on the following statement answer the question What are the wishes that move you to be committed with your learning in different areas? “Both, in learning and in any area in life it is important to make everything with effort, dedication, and commitment to be successful”.

2. Based on the following statement answer the question: “My learning experiences have been successful because I have realized that being an intellectual is not all. It takes just a minute to organize your life and be better each day, it is too sad not to know who you are”.

- 2.1. For you, what is beyond the intellectual knowledge?
- 2.2. What does it imply to know you better?

3. Based on the following statement answer the question: “There is a moment when the only things that count are the interest and commitment one has. That is why that apart from having that inner calling for your career, it is necessary to know and understand that tough times might come. At university, I have always been aware that you are the one who make yourself comfortable when learning. That is why I have learnt to do well at subjects that are not of my interest”.

- 3.1. What does it imply to know and to understand?
- 3.2. Have you discovered capacities that you believed you did not have in different areas? Which?

4. Based on the following statement answer the questions: “Everything is a process but it is a personal decision how to live and how to reach your goals and dreams despite the difficulties. Strategies must be applied as well as personal

<sup>3</sup> The original instrument was in Spanish but it was translated for publication purposes.

capacities to be successful”.

4.1. What type of decisions do you make in your learning process in different areas?

4.2. How do you connect what you learn with the role you play as a member of the society?

4.3. What type of initiatives do you take alongside your learning process? How do you conduct them?

Thanks a lot for your participation.

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