

Paper presented at the *SRHE Annual Research Conference*, Newport, UK, 5-7 December 2018.

Beyond learning: Students' Responsibility for their Knowledge

Martin G. Erikson

Abstract: The claim that students should take *responsibility for their learning* is challenged through the alternative claim that students should be expected to take *responsibility for their knowledge*. It is argued that students can reflect on responsibilities for knowledge and teachers can support this in an everyday academic discourse regardless of discipline, whereas responsibility for learning is difficult to grasp without an elaborate learning theory. Further, the suggested shift from learning to knowledge will widen the scope to issues beyond learning, explicating a more nuanced student role. Through the focus on knowledge, students' responsibilities relates to educational purposes, and points to expectations on critical thinking as well as the students' academic freedom. It also makes it possible to discuss the mutual responsibilities of students and teachers with the same conceptual framework. This can also support the notion of students as co-creators of knowledge.

The expectation that students should take *responsibility for their learning* is a recurring theme in the higher education literature. It is found in in policy documents on international, national and institutional levels, as shown by Gover and Lukkola (2018), as well as in literature on teaching practice, such as Ashwin et al. (2015), and Biggs and Tang (2011). Still, there are few if any profound discussions of what this actually means, or if this responsibility relates to specific learning theories. Further, it has been argued that the focus on learning in contemporary educational discourse has disadvantages, and *knowledge* might offer an alternative conceptual approach (Biesta, 2005; see also Ashwin, 2014; Barnett, 2009; McArthur, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the potentials of expecting students to take *responsibility for their knowledge*.

The concept of 'Knowledge' is easier to grasp than 'learning'

If we want students to take responsibility, they must be made aware of it, understand it and accept it. Therefore, responsibility for learning depends on an understanding of a concept of learning, or students would not understand their responsibility. At the same time, students' everyday conceptions of learning can be naïve and limited (e.g. Devlin, 2002; Ferla, Vlacke & Schuyten, 2009). Therefore, responsibility for learning calls for explicit learning theories, which have to be understood by students regardless of their disciplines. While the concept of 'knowledge' can be challenged on various theoretical dimensions, it can even as an everyday concept be used a tool for reflexivity on academic practices and responsibilities, without theoretical considerations beyond ordinary academic discourses. It can also be used for discussions about disciplinary-specific expectations on students (e.g. McArthur, 2009; 2012). Knowledge can refer to actual and potential educational outcomes, including theoretical understanding, skills, metacognition and dispositions, regardless of whether these outcomes are intended, desirable, or included in teaching activities or assessments. Reflecting on these issues can potentially mediate student behaviour, creating responsibility for knowledge development as an effect of a responsibility for knowledge. In other words, responsibility for knowledge can be a driving force behind an actual responsibility for learning, to be discussed without the need for a concept of learning. A shift from learning to knowledge also makes it possible to discuss the mutual responsibilities of teachers and students at the same time and in the same terms (instead of separating teaching and learning – see, e.g., Ashwin 2014). This complexity also makes it reasonable to talk about students' *responsibilities* for their knowledge; there is more than one.

Contents, processes and purposes

Responsibility for learning, particularly in its everyday sense, focuses on processes. Further, taking responsibility for one's learning might be nothing more than developing strategies for passing assessments with minimum effort. To expect students to take responsibilities for their knowledge goes further and includes students' responsibilities to *use* their knowledge (e.g. Barnett, 2007). An example is students' responsibilities to demonstrate their knowledge in assessments. These responsibilities go beyond learning, and are integrated in the student role. Further, students are expected to develop responsibilities to eventually use their knowledge professionally and as conscientious citizens, which also points to matters of ethics (e.g. Donald, 2009).

Taking responsibility for knowledge is closely connected with assumptions about the value of the knowledge, which points to purposes of higher education. The same can be said about a responsibility for learning, but that would imply a learning theory which embraces purposes.

Responsibility, freedom and critical thinking

Responsibility and freedom can be seen as two sides of the same coin. With a notion of a responsibility for learning, the corresponding freedom is a freedom to engage in learning. With a responsibility for knowledge, the corresponding freedom is a freedom to engage in knowledge; to think and argue and take an informed stance. In other words: academic freedom. Further, a responsibility for learning does not in itself imply expectations about critical thinking – that would depend on particular definitions of learning, beyond the everyday concept. Responsibilities for knowledge, including responsibilities to use knowledge, more directly points to expectations to confront new ideas and new uncertainties encountered during their studies. Therefore, responsibilities for knowledge include forming a fair and reliable opinion on knowledge-claims and to consider arguments for and against them. Students merely reproducing a teacher's opinion do not take much responsibility for their knowledge. In other words: To have responsibilities for knowledge is to have responsibilities for critical thinking, including the critical thinking about self and the world at large (see also, e.g., Barnett, 2015; Dewey, 1910).

Conclusions

A focus on students' responsibilities for knowledge can help us visualize a more nuanced student-role, open for reflection both by students and teachers. It can be a topic for reflection for students, independent of theories of learning and including topics beyond such theories. It also points to the students' academic freedom. While students still need support to see their responsibilities and understand the implications of them, this can be combined with a discussion of students' and teachers' mutual responsibilities and possible roles as co-creators of knowledge, in line with the discussions of Macfarlane (2017) and Jaspers (1959). Different disciplinary traditions might pose different expectations on responsibility, but this is an advantage of the model. First, because it contextualises both teachers and students' responsibilities. Second, because it explicates teachers' need to apply pedagogical approaches relevant for their field of expertise, as well as the need for academic developers to adapt to disciplinary differences.

Various aspects of students' responsibilities for knowledge are in many cases implied in existing discussions of responsibility for learning, as found in, for example, Ashwin et al. (2015), Barnett (2007), Bowden and Martin (1998) or Fung (2017). Therefore, the present discussion is not primarily intended as a critique, but as a way of getting around the challenge of making 'responsibility for learning' comprehensible. Further, it shows that student's responsibilities goes beyond learning, and can be linked with teachers' responsibilities in a context of purposes of higher education.

References

- Ashwin, P. (2014). Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding in higher education. *Higher Education*, 67, 123-126.
- Ashwin, P., Boud, D., Coate, K., Hallett, F., Keane, E., Krause, K., Leibowitz, B., MacLaren, I., McArthur, J., McCune, V., & Tooher, M. (2015). *Reflective teaching in higher education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Barnett, R. (2007). *A will to learn*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education
- Barnett, R. (2009). Knowing and becoming in the higher education curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(4), 429-440. doi:10.1080/03075070902771978
- Barnett, R. (2015). A curriculum for critical being. In M. Davies & R. Barnett (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of critical thinking in higher education* (pp. 63-76). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Biesta, G. (2005). Against learning. *Journal of Nordic Educational Research*, 25, 54-66.
- Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (4th ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Bowden, J. & Marton, F. (1998). *The university of learning*. London: Routledge.
- Devlin, M. (2002). Taking responsibility for learning isn't everything: A case for developing tertiary students' conceptions of learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7(2),
- Donald, J. G. (2009). The commons – disciplinary and interdisciplinary encounters. In C. Kreber (Ed.), *The University and its disciplines* (pp. 35-49). New York: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (2010). *How we think*. Boston: D. C. Heath & Co.
- Ferla, J., Valcke, M. & Schuyten, G. (2009). Student models of learning and their impact on study strategies. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(2), 185-202.
- Fung, D. (2017). *Connected curriculum*. London: UCL Press.
- Gover, A. & Loukkola, T. (2018). *Enhancing quality: From policy to practice*. Brussels: EQUIP.

- Jaspers, K. (1959). *The idea of the university* (H. A. T. Reiche & H. F. Vanderschmidt, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Macfarlane, B. (2017). *Freedom to Learn – The threat to student academic freedom and why it needs to be reclaimed*. London: Routledge.
- McArthur, J. (2009). The student voices within disciplinary discourses. In C. Kreber (Ed.), *The University and its disciplines* (pp. 119-128). New York: Routledge.
- McArthur, J. (2012). Against standardised experience: leaving our marks on the palimpsests of disciplinary knowledge. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(4), 485-496.
doi:10.1080/13562517.2012.711934