



Professional Research Thesis

Titled

***Scaffolding Social Autonomy in Middle Eastern
EFL Contexts: The Role of Peer-Driven
Communities of Practice***

Researcher

Samia Mohamed Anwar Mohamed Hassan

Supervisor signature

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SUMMARY

This research investigated the development of social autonomy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Middle Eastern educational contexts through the implementation of peer-driven Communities of Practice (CoPs). While learner autonomy is recognized as crucial for effective language acquisition, existing research predominantly focuses on individualistic models. This gap is particularly pronounced in the Middle East, where traditional teacher-centered pedagogies and cultural norms present unique challenges.

This study aimed to address this gap by exploring the mechanisms through which peer-driven CoPs could serve as effective environments for scaffolding social autonomy. Employing a qualitative, multiple case study design, the research examined the intricate interplay between cultural norms, peer interaction patterns, and the evolving role of the teacher. Data was collected through a triangulation of methods—including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis—and was subjected to rigorous thematic analysis.

The findings provided a nuanced understanding of how social autonomy is perceived and enacted within a collectivist cultural framework. The significance of this study is threefold:

- Theoretically, it contributed a culturally responsive model of social autonomy that reconciles Western pedagogical theories with Middle Eastern sociocultural realities.

- Practically, it generated actionable strategies for teachers, teacher trainers, and curriculum designers to foster collaborative skills and learner agency while respecting established cultural dynamics.

- Pedagogically, it provided a sustainable framework for implementing peer-driven learning.

This research provided an evidence-based framework for developing pedagogical approaches that were not only linguistically effective but also culturally sustaining for EFL learners in the Middle Eastern region.

Introduction:

In contemporary English language education, the capacity for learners to act as autonomous participants in their own learning journey is increasingly regarded as a defining feature of effective pedagogy. Autonomy, once understood primarily as the individual's ability to set goals and direct personal study, is now recognized as a construct that is socially negotiated and collaboratively sustained. This "social autonomy" emerges through interaction, shared responsibility, and the co-construction of meaning within learning communities, reflecting the view that language is most effectively acquired when learners are engaged in authentic communicative practices.

In the Middle Eastern context, the evolving landscape of English language teaching presents opportunities to explore new pedagogical models that blend individual initiative with collective engagement. This is especially critical in a region where cultural norms, institutional traditions, and teacher-student dynamics strongly influence how learners perceive and enact their own agency. The expansion of cross-cultural communication, the integration of digital collaboration tools, and the growing demand for communicative competence in professional and academic domains create fertile ground for approaches that cultivate learner agency within supportive peer networks.

One such framework is the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), which stems from sociocultural theory and emphasizes learning as participation in shared practices rather than the passive absorption of information. Within Middle Eastern classrooms, peer-driven CoP can serve as a bridge between formal instruction and collaborative, self-sustaining

learning, offering a culturally responsive way to balance respect for authority with opportunities for shared leadership among learners.

Scaffolding in this context is a dynamic, reciprocal process in which learners both offer and receive structured support, progressively moving toward greater independence and competence. When embedded in peer-driven CoP, scaffolding is not limited to predetermined instructional stages but emerges organically through dialogue, collaboration, and shared activity. The long-term value of this process lies in equipping learners to carry these collaborative habits into professional, academic, and community settings long after formal instruction ends.

This study investigates how peer-driven Communities of Practice can serve as effective environments for scaffolding social autonomy among English language learners in the Middle East. It focuses on the mechanisms through which peers facilitate each other's growth, the influence of cultural norms on learner agency, the role of teachers in supporting without dominating, and the potential for sustaining these collaborative structures beyond the classroom.

The study Problem:

While autonomy in language learning has long been recognized as a critical factor in developing communicative competence, much of the research has focused on individual autonomy, often overlooking its social dimensions. In many English language learning contexts, classroom practices remain heavily teacher-centered, with limited opportunities for learners to engage in peer-led decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, or mutual support. As a result, students may develop language skills without fully cultivating the ability to function as self-directed members of a learning community.

In the Middle East, these challenges are compounded by several contextual factors. Traditional educational models often prioritize teacher authority and rote learning, leaving little room for interactive, learner-led engagement. Cultural norms that value deference to authority can make students hesitant to assume leadership roles in group learning. Moreover, in some settings, English language learning is approached primarily as a subject for examination rather than as a practical communicative skill, which reduces opportunities for authentic peer-to-peer interaction. Even when collaboration occurs, it may be perceived as supplementary rather than integral to learning, limiting its effectiveness.

Rapid technological adoption in the region has introduced new possibilities for collaboration through online platforms, yet many educators and institutions lack clear frameworks for integrating these tools into structured peer-driven learning communities. Additionally, limited access to professional development on fostering social autonomy means that both teachers and students may be unfamiliar with strategies to sustain collaborative learning beyond the classroom.

The concept of social autonomy—the capacity to take responsibility for one’s learning within and through social interaction—offers a broader and more dynamic perspective. However, the mechanisms by which social autonomy can be effectively fostered remain underexplored, particularly in relation to peer-driven Communities of Practice (CoP). While these communities have the potential to provide natural scaffolding through shared tasks, negotiated meaning, and collective resource building, empirical evidence on their role in scaffolding social autonomy in English language learning remains limited in the Middle Eastern context.

Furthermore, there is insufficient understanding of how cultural norms influence learners’ willingness to participate in and lead such communities, how teachers can facilitate without undermining agency, and how these peer-led structures can be maintained after formal instruction ends. Addressing these aspects is essential for designing pedagogical approaches that move beyond isolated skill acquisition, enabling learners in the Middle East to become active, reflective, and interdependent participants in their own language learning journeys.

The importance of studying:

The significance of this study lies in its ability to bridge theoretical innovation with practical application in the field of English language education, with a particular focus on the evolving educational landscape of the Middle East. In a region where English serves as both an academic necessity and a professional asset, there is a growing demand for pedagogical approaches that move beyond traditional teacher-centred models and instead cultivate learners who can think critically, collaborate effectively, and take ownership of their learning. This research is positioned to respond to that demand by examining not only how peer-driven Communities of Practice function but also how they can be adapted to cultural realities, technological opportunities, and institutional constraints in the Middle East.

1. Theoretical Contribution

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances the understanding of learner autonomy by positioning it as a socially negotiated process rather than a purely individual skill. It examines how social autonomy emerges when learners participate in shared practices, exchange feedback, and co-construct meaning within peer-driven Communities of Practice. By integrating the principles of scaffolding from sociocultural theory with the collaborative dynamics of CoP, the research presents a refined model of how structured peer support can lead to progressive independence. This framework also examines how cultural norms specific to the Middle East shape the enactment of learner autonomy, offering a culturally contextualized theoretical model.

2. Practical Relevance for Language Education

The study provides actionable insights for designing learning environments that promote sustained learner autonomy. It demonstrates how classrooms and digital spaces can be structured so that collaboration and peer-led scaffolding occur naturally as part of everyday learning. Such an approach aligns with the regional demand for communicative competence, as it situates English language learning within authentic, meaningful exchanges rather than isolated drills. By documenting specific mechanisms of peer scaffolding, the study will offer replicable strategies for teachers and institutions seeking to operationalise CoP principles in their own settings.

3. Impact on Teacher Development and Curriculum Design

The findings of this research have direct implications for teacher training and curriculum development. For educators, the study offers a framework for shifting from a solely directive teaching role to a more facilitative stance that encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their progress. Teacher training programs can integrate these insights to prepare educators to foster peer scaffolding and community-based learning, ensuring that students benefit from mutual support alongside formal instruction. This includes strategies for balancing teacher authority with learner agency, a key challenge in many Middle Eastern classrooms.

4. Regional Significance (with Cautious Transferability)

Regionally, the research addresses a pressing need in Middle Eastern education systems, where there is increasing emphasis on producing graduates equipped with strong communicative, collaborative, and self-directed learning skills. In many institutions, the transition from teacher-

led instruction to learner-centred practices is still in progress, and this study offers a model that can bridge this shift effectively.

Objectives of the study:

1. Analyse how cultural norms in the Middle East influence learners' perceptions and enactment of autonomy.
2. Identify the mechanisms through which peer-led scaffolding operates in language learning.
3. Develop practical models for implementing peer-driven Communities of Practice in diverse learning settings.
4. Identify teacher practices that effectively nurture learner agency without diminishing instructional authority.
5. Evaluate the regional impact and transferability of the peer-driven CoP model.
6. Investigate how peer-driven learning practices can be maintained after formal instruction ends.

Collectively, these objectives establish a coherent framework for investigating the interplay between cultural context, pedagogical practice, and learner development within Middle Eastern English language education. By addressing both theoretical and applied dimensions, the study seeks not only to generate nuanced insights into how social autonomy is cultivated through peer-driven Communities of Practice, but also to offer regionally grounded strategies that can inform teaching, curriculum design, and institutional policy. The focus on sustainability beyond formal instruction underscores the commitment to fostering long-term, self-sustaining learner engagement, ensuring that the benefits of peer-led scaffolding extend well beyond the classroom environment.

Study hypotheses and questions:

1. How do prevailing cultural norms in Middle Eastern educational contexts influence EFL learners' perceptions of social autonomy and their engagement in peer-driven Communities of Practice?
2. What interactional mechanisms and scaffolding patterns emerge within effective peer-driven Communities of Practice in a Middle Eastern EFL context?
3. In what ways does participation in a structured, peer-driven Community of Practice foster the development of social autonomy and collaborative competence among EFL learners?
4. How can teachers effectively facilitate the development of social autonomy in peer-driven CoPs while maintaining their instructional authority in a culturally responsive manner?
5. What factors contribute to the sustainability and transferability of autonomous, peer-driven learning practices beyond the formal EFL classroom?

Study Approach:

First: Research Paradigm and Rationale

This study is positioned within a social constructivist paradigm. This paradigm posits that knowledge and reality are not objective, pre-existing truths but are actively co-created through human interaction and social context. A social constructivist lens is essential for this research because its core concepts—"social autonomy" and "Communities of Practice"—are inherently interactional. Social autonomy is not viewed as an isolated, internal trait but as a capacity that is negotiated, developed, and enacted through dialogue and collaboration with others.

Therefore, the aim of this research is not to measure a static outcome but to interpret and understand the subjective experiences of learners and teachers as they construct meaning and agency within their specific socio-cultural setting. This paradigm guides the research toward exploring the rich, complex, and dynamic processes of peer-led learning from the participants' perspectives.

Second: Research Design and Approach

To achieve the study's exploratory objectives, a qualitative multiple case study design was selected. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. This design is particularly well-suited for answering the "how" and "why" questions central to this research, allowing for a deep investigation into the mechanisms of peer-scaffolding and the influence of cultural norms.

A multiple case study approach was chosen to enhance the robustness and transferability of the findings. By examining several distinct cases, this study will be able to identify patterns that are common across different settings as well as variations that are unique to specific contexts. For the purposes of this research, each "case" is defined as a single EFL classroom community operating in the Middle East.

Third: Research Site and Participant Selection

To capture a rich and varied understanding of how peer-driven Communities of Practice (CoPs) function in different educational contexts, this study employs a purposive sampling strategy. Three distinct cases were deliberately selected from different learning environments within the broader Gulf region. This approach allows for a robust cross-case analysis, illuminating how factors such as learner age, motivation, and institutional setting influence the development of social autonomy.

The three selected cases are:

Case A: The Virtual Professional CoP

- **Site:** A private, online language institute specializing in adult professional development.
- **Teacher Participant:** Ms. Fatima, a veteran instructor with over 15 years of experience in adult online education. She was selected for her expertise in facilitating virtual learning communities.
- **Student Participants:** 10 adult learners (aged 28-45) enrolled in an advanced Business English course. This group was chosen to explore how social autonomy manifests among mature, intrinsically motivated learners in a non-traditional, digital environment.

Case B: The Social Virtual CoP

- **Site:** An online program of a well-regarded private language center offering virtual after-school English programs.
- **Teacher Participant:** Ms. Noura, an instructor with 5 years of experience known for her skill in translating her dynamic, rapport-building teaching style to an online environment for teenagers.
- **Student Participants:** 8 teenage learners (aged 14-17) at an intermediate proficiency level. This case was chosen to investigate the interplay between strong digital social bonds and the development of academic collaboration.

Case C: The Play-Based Virtual CoP

- **Site:** An online language academy specializing in English for Young Learners (EYL).
- **Teacher Participant:** Ms. Alaa, an instructor with 7 years of experience specializing in using gamification and educational technology with children. She was selected for her skills in managing and structuring online interaction for a younger age group.
- **Student Participants:** 6 young learners (aged 8-10) at an A2 (Elementary) proficiency level. This case was chosen to explore how the foundational elements of peer scaffolding and social autonomy emerge among children who possess the basic linguistic tools to engage in simple, structured dialogue and offer elementary forms of peer support.

Justification for Selection:

This multi-case selection is highly strategic. By holding the learning modality constant (all cases are online), this research design effectively isolates the primary variable of interest: learner age and developmental stage. This allows for a powerful comparative analysis of how the nature of a CoP, the practice of peer scaffolding, and the enactment of social autonomy differ fundamentally between adults, teenagers, and children. This approach will yield nuanced insights into how cognitive maturity, social needs, and intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation shape collaborative learning in digital spaces. All participating teachers completed the preparatory CoP training workshop (see Appendix 5) to ensure a consistent baseline understanding of the pedagogical model.

Fourth: Data Collection

To construct a rich and trustworthy account of each online case, a strategy of methodological triangulation was employed, with data collected over the course of one full academic term. The specific application of these methods was adapted to suit the unique digital context and developmental stage of the learners in each of the three cases: the adult professional course, the teenage social class, and the children's play-based course.

1. Interviews

- **Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers (All Cases):** Each of the three instructors—Ms. Fatima, Ms. Noura, and Ms. Alaa—was interviewed individually via Zoom three times (at the beginning, middle, and end of the term). These interviews explored their pedagogical intentions and their evolving strategies for facilitating a CoP in their specific online environment, focusing on the unique

challenges and successes presented by their learner group's age and motivation.

- **Individual Interviews with Adult Learners (Case A):** In Ms. Fatima's online course for adults, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with all ten learners. This one-on-one format was deemed most appropriate for adult professionals, respecting their schedules and allowing for a deep exploration of how they connected the course's collaborative activities to their specific career goals.
- **Online Focus Group Interviews with Teenagers (Case B):** For the teenage learners in Ms. Noura's class, two online focus group interviews were conducted via Zoom. This format was chosen to leverage their existing social rapport, allowing them to build on each other's ideas in a comfortable, peer-supported setting. The focus groups explored their perceptions of online peer support, group dynamics, and the challenges of academic collaboration versus social interaction.
- **Parent-Child Dyad Interviews (Case C):** For the young learners in Ms. Alaa's class, a unique approach of parent-child dyad interviews was used. This involved interviewing a child together with their parent via Zoom. This method was chosen to acknowledge the significant role of parental mediation in the child's online learning. It allowed the researcher to gather the child's perspective in a supportive setting while also capturing the parent's insights into their child's engagement and the nature of off-screen support.

2. Virtual "E-Observations" (All Cases)

As all three cases were fully online, data collection relied exclusively on virtual "e-observation." This involved:

- **Observing Synchronous Sessions:** The researcher attended at least two synchronous Zoom sessions for each case as a non-participant, silent observer (with camera off). A detailed observation protocol was used to document the teacher's facilitation techniques, student interaction patterns in the main room and breakout rooms, and evidence of multimodal scaffolding.
- **Reviewing Asynchronous Content:** For Ms. Fatima's (Case A) and Ms. Noura's (Case B) courses, the researcher was granted observer access to the relevant collaborative platforms. This allowed for a systematic review of the content and interaction patterns within asynchronous discussion forums and collaborative workspaces.

The limits of the study:

First: Scope of the Study

- **Contextual Scope of the Empirical Investigation:** The empirical foundation of this study is exclusively situated within fully online English language learning environments. It is contextually bounded to three distinct online courses, chosen to represent a spectrum of learner ages and developmental stages:
 - An advanced business English course for adult professionals (Case A).
 - An intermediate social English course for teenagers (Case B).
 - An elementary play-based course for young children (Case C).

This focused, single-modality design allows for a controlled analysis of how learner age acts as the primary variable shaping the dynamics of virtual Communities of Practice.

- **Geographic Scope of Participants:** While the courses are delivered online, the students are drawn from various countries across the Middle East. This geographically diverse participant pool ensures that the findings reflect a broad range of Middle Eastern cultural perspectives on learning, authority, and collaboration.
- **Applicability of Recommendations:** Although the data collection was conducted in online settings, the study's findings and the pedagogical frameworks developed are designed to be transferable and applicable to both online and face-to-face teaching contexts. The research provides specific, actionable recommendations for educators working across this mixed-modality spectrum.

- **Temporal Context and Projected Relevance:** This study is situated within the contemporary educational landscape of the mid-2020s. The frameworks, strategies, and findings presented are projected to hold significant relevance for educators and institutions over the coming decade (approximately 2025-2035), as educational models across the Middle East continue to evolve.

Second: Delimitations of the Study

- **No Empirical Data from Face-to-Face Settings:** It is a deliberate delimitation of this study that no empirical data was collected from face-to-face classrooms. The recommendations for offline contexts are therefore analytical extensions based on the core principles identified in the online research, rather than direct empirical findings.
- **Not Statistically Generalizable:** As a qualitative multiple case study, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all EFL learners in the Middle East. The study's strength lies in its depth and contextualized understanding, offering rich, transferable insights that practitioners can reflect upon and adapt to their own specific educational settings.
- **Focus on Process over Product:** This study deliberately delimits its focus to the process of collaborative learning and the development of social autonomy. It does not include formal, standardized testing or other quantitative measures of linguistic improvement.

Study plan:

Introductory Chapter: Framework and Conceptual Foundations

Section 1: Understanding Social Autonomy in Language Learning

1.1 Defining social autonomy in the context of English language teaching.

1.2 Evolution of autonomy in educational research.

1.3 The interplay between individual agency and collaborative engagement.

Section 2: Communities of Practice as a Pedagogical Framework

2.1 Origins and theoretical grounding of Communities of Practice (CoP).

2.2 Core components: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, shared repertoire.

2.3 Adaptation of CoP principles in language learning environments.

Section 3: The Link between Scaffolding and Peer Support

3.1 Vygotskian perspectives on scaffolding in second language acquisition.

3.2 Peer-driven scaffolding vs. teacher-led scaffolding.

3.3 The role of dialogue and negotiation in skill internalization.

Chapter One: Mechanisms of Peer-Led Scaffolding within Middle Eastern CoP Contexts

Section 1: Interactional Strategies for Effective Scaffolding

1.1 Prompting and questioning techniques suited to culturally diverse peer exchanges.

1.2 Feedback loops: corrective, elaborative, and confirmatory in a Middle Eastern learning environment.

1.3 Gradual release of responsibility while respecting cultural norms of authority.

Section 2: Tools and Modalities Supporting Peer Collaboration

2.1 Digital platforms for peer collaboration adapted for regional accessibility.

2.2 Physical and virtual learning spaces that encourage safe and sustained engagement.

2.3 Integration of multimodal resources to enhance comprehension and cultural relevance.

Section 3: Patterns of Knowledge Co-construction

3.1 Negotiation of meaning in peer dialogue influenced by regional communication styles.

3.2 Shared problem-solving approaches that align with collectivist values.

3.3 Emergence of culturally informed collective norms and learning strategies.

Chapter Two: Cultural Mediation, Teacher Roles, and Sustainability of Peer-Driven CoPs

Section 1: Cultural Influence on Learner Autonomy

1.1 How Middle Eastern cultural norms shape learner perceptions of autonomy.

1.2 Balancing respect for authority with fostering learner agency.

1.3 Context-specific opportunities for increasing student-led initiative.

Section 2: Teacher Practices that Nurture Social Autonomy

2.1 Facilitator roles and strategies that preserve instructional authority.

2.2 Reconceptualizing Assessment: Evaluating Both Collaborative Process and Product.

2.3 Teacher training approaches for implementing peer-driven CoP effectively in the region.

Section 3: Sustainability and Transferability of Peer-Driven CoP

3.1 Retention of autonomous behaviors beyond formal instruction.

3.2 The Transfer of Ownership: Emergent Leadership and Peer Stewardship in Sustainable CoPs.

3.3 Challenges and Opportunities for Transferability.

Conclusion:

This study investigated the development of social autonomy in Middle Eastern EFL contexts through peer-driven CoPs. Using a comparative multiple case study of three online groups—adult professionals, teenagers, and children—it highlights how collaborative learning is shaped by age, motivation, and the teacher’s role as a culturally responsive “virtual architect.”

Social Autonomy as a Developmental Construct: Findings show that social autonomy is not a universal skill but a developmental competency expressed differently at each stage. For adults (Case A), it emerged as professional ownership, with learners managing processes and sustaining peer networks driven by career goals. Teenagers (Case B) expressed social agency—building community and navigating peer dynamics—yet relied on teacher guidance to link autonomy to academic aims. Young children (Case C) showed structured participation, learning to share, collaborate, and contribute within teacher-scaffolded settings.

The Teacher as Adaptive Facilitator: The research redefines facilitation as adaptive intervention. Ms. Fatima acted as a “virtual architect” for adults, Ms. Noura as a “community manager” for teens, and Ms. Alaa as a “digital shepherd” for children. These roles illustrate that teacher authority enables the conditions for autonomy to grow.

Sustainability and Purpose: Sustainability proved possible only in the adult professional CoP, where shared real-world goals drove long-term continuation. By contrast, teen and children’s groups dissolved once scaffolding was removed, showing that while CoPs support all ages, self-sustaining networks are most realistic with mature, intrinsically motivated learners.

Results:

This study investigated the development of social autonomy in three distinct online EFL CoPs in the Middle East. The findings, derived from a comparative analysis of an adult professional course (Case A), a teenage social class (Case B), and a children's play-based group (Case C), are summarized below in relation to the primary research questions.

1. Influence of Cultural Norms and Learner Age on Social Autonomy:

- Adults (Case A) enacted a form of "professional pragmatism," where direct, constructive feedback was culturally acceptable due to a shared professional goal. Their autonomy was group-oriented and task-focused.
- Teenagers (Case B) prioritized social harmony, leading to a strong reluctance to offer public, direct peer correction. Their autonomy was primarily social, focused on building and maintaining peer relationships.
- Children (Case C) operated within a highly structured environment where respect for the teacher's authority was absolute. Their earliest autonomous acts consisted of simple, peer-to-peer assistance within the rules of teacher-led games.

2. Mechanisms of Peer-Led Scaffolding:

- Case A was characterized by sophisticated elaborative and metacognitive prompts (e.g., "Can you provide data for this claim?").
- Case B relied on affective prompts and subtle, indirect recasting, often delivered via private chat to avoid face-to-face conflict.

- Case C used simple, modeled cognitive prompts (e.g., "Your turn!") and multimodal scaffolding (e.g., using emojis to convey meaning).

3. The Role of the Teacher in Facilitating Autonomy:

- The "Virtual Architect" (Case A): Ms. Fatima designed the learning environment and then stepped back, allowing the autonomous adult learners to take ownership.
- The "Community Manager" (Case B): Ms. Noura actively managed the social dynamics of the teenage group, constantly channeling their social energy toward academic tasks.
- The "Digital Shepherd" (Case C): Ms. Alaa remained a central, directive figure, leading and modeling all activities for the young learners.

4. Sustainability and Transfer of Ownership:

- The adult professionals independently created a permanent WhatsApp group to continue their professional network, demonstrating genuine peer stewardship.
- The CoPs for the teenagers and children were teacher-dependent structures that dissolved after the course ended, indicating that ownership had not been transferred. The primary sustainable outcome for the teenagers was a reported increase in general confidence for future online interactions.

Recommendations:

Based on these conclusions, this study offers the following recommendations:

For Educators: Adopt a developmentally-differentiated approach to fostering social autonomy. Recognize that the strategies for a children's class (structured play, heavy modeling) are fundamentally different from those for a teenage class (channeling social energy, building trust) or an adult class (providing authentic tasks, stepping back).

For Teacher Training Programs: Professional development should move beyond generic models of "facilitation." Training (as outlined in Appendix 5) must equip teachers with a diagnostic toolkit to assess the specific needs of their learners and to adapt their roles accordingly—be it as an architect, a community manager, or a shepherd.

For Curriculum and Program Designers: To foster sustainable, long-term autonomy, learning must be grounded in authentic, relevant, and shared purposes. For younger learners, the goal should be to build the foundational skills of collaboration within a structured environment. For mature learners, the goal should be to provide them with the tools and opportunities to build networks that have a clear value and purpose beyond the classroom walls.

For Future Research: Further research should explore blended learning models to see how the strengths of face-to-face social cohesion can be combined with the flexibility of online tools. Additionally, longitudinal studies that follow teenage learners into their university years could provide valuable insights into when and how the transition to a more mature, self-sustaining form of autonomy occurs.

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