

LEARNER AUTONOMY WITH A FOCUS ON THE TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy and teacher development are processes which are both necessarily underpinned by common educational principles. Any learner-oriented classroom needs to include not only the developmental needs of the learner, but also the professional growth of the teacher, since learner autonomy also implies changes in the teacher's role.

AUTONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT

At least since Rubin's (1975) seminal paper on what the good language learner can teach us, the themes of learner autonomy, learning strategy, and learner-centredness have been very much central to the concerns of informed TESOL practitioners. It is clear that the terminology of autonomy and strategy mean different things to different writers (e.g. Wenden & Rubin 1987, O'Malley & Chamot 1990, McDonough 1995), but this need not be a problem so long as we take it as a reminder that we need to listen carefully to each other if we are to understand what each of us is trying to say.

In general terms, anyway, I believe it is now perfectly normal to put forward such propositions as the following and have them accepted as a "given" part of our professional discourse:

- Learners are individuals who have different ways of learning.
- There are different strategies which learners can use to improve their learning.
- Being autonomous does not mean learning on your own; it means taking responsibility for your own learning.

The connection that I think has not been made often enough is between such statements about learners and the equally telling parallel comments that one can make about teachers:

- *Teachers are individuals who have different ways of teaching.*

As individuals, teachers bring to class the same unique mix of human characteristics that learners do. The more that each person's teaching is in tune with their values, strengths and aptitudes, the more likely they are to be teaching effectively.

- *There are different strategies which teachers can use to improve their teaching.*

As we know from working with language learners, there are no good strategies *per se*, there are good strategies for particular people towards particular purposes. We can expect the same to be true of teachers. In both cases, the twin starting point would appear to be raising one's awareness of one's own current position —Exactly how do I learn/teach at the moment?— and learning more about the options that are available. The simplest and most powerful first step for any teacher is to make recordings of some of your lessons and listen to them. If you do not discover something that surprises you and/or that is worth working on in some way, you are a very unusual teacher indeed.

- *Being autonomous does not mean teaching on your own; it means taking responsibility for your own teaching.*

An emphasis on individual self-awareness must not be seen as suggesting that teachers should work alone: isolation is the teacher's biggest enemy. The most powerful next step for any teacher to take towards professional development is to put behind you those awful memories of being observed and assessed, and to invite a colleague who you trust to watch you teach. After the class, tell your friend about what happened and what you thought was interesting. You don't need their evaluation. Just by sharing the experience and helping you articulate how you experienced it, they are helping you develop your thinking and your teaching in ways that suit your style —ways for which you are taking responsibility.

FOCUS ON THE TEACHER

I have so far made a point of shifting the focus onto the teacher, and that is where I intend to keep it. I think we need to redress the balance a little. There is no need to understand this as being in opposition to learner-centredness, as we can easily make plain.

Take, for example, an excellent article on learner-centredness by David Nunan, in which he says (1995:154):

I should like to suggest that, all other things being equal, the gap between teaching and learning will be narrowed when learners are given a more active role in the three key domains of content, process and language.

What stands out in this text, from a teacher-focused perspective, is the passive voice of: "*learners are given a more active role.*" One does not have to disagree with

the proposition involved in order to point out that a wealth of teaching expertise is essential if learners are successfully to be brought to a position where they are both willing and capable of taking on “*a more active role in the three key domains of content, process and language.*”

And to focus on just one of the domains Nunan lists, learning process, he goes on to say (ibid:154) that the following conditions are required:

- learners are trained to identify the strategies underlying pedagogical tasks
- learners are encouraged to identify their own preferred learning styles and to experiment with alternative styles
- learners are given space to make choices and select alternative learning pathways
- learners are given opportunities to modify, adapt, create and evaluate pedagogical tasks and learning processes
- learners are encouraged to become their own teachers and researchers.

Again, what stands out for me is the way in which a focus on the learner produces this run of passive verbs. If we read the same text from the point of view of the implicit agent of these verbs, then we have to ask what it actually means for the teacher when we say that learners are trained, are encouraged, are given space and are given opportunities? As a teacher, exactly how do I do these things? In terms of my activity, is the encouragement regarding learning styles carried out in the same way as the encouragement regarding students becoming their own researchers? It is very clear, I think, that such a move towards learner-centredness makes enormous demands on teachers.

I do not regard anything that I have said so far to be in disagreement with Nunan’s position. I have merely unpacked an aspect of our situation entailed by his observations. I do, however, find it useful to diverge from Nunan’s terminology in a related area.

Nunan (ibid: 134) defines a learner-centred curriculum as one in which:

... key decisions about what will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner. Information about learners, and, where feasible, from learners, will be used to answer the key questions of what, how, when and how well.

Acknowledging that learners do not come “... *naturally endowed with the ability to make informed choices about what to learn, how to learn it and when to learn*”, Nunan (ibid) goes on to define the expression “*learning centred*” in terms of:

... a classroom which carries learners toward the ability to make critical pedagogical decisions.

I find it more useful to see this procedural feature as another characteristic of learner centredness, as the focus remains overtly on the student and the student’s progress.

This is not a trivial matter, for such a move makes the term “learning centred” available for the much more inclusive and powerful concept which, as I have argued, is anyway entailed by Nunan’s suggestions:

A learning centred classroom is one in which the developmental progress of both students and teacher is respected, as they all strive to learn and grow in their individual and complementary ways.

To bring about such a change of definition would involve a change of attitude regarding the roles of teachers and students, but it in fact only reflects honestly the claim for space-to-learn to which teachers are also entitled if they are to live up to the demands being made of them.

It is not exactly news that learner/teacher relationships are mutually shaping, but it might be interesting (because it is somewhat unfashionable) to take this teacher-focused reading a little further. I should like to propose the following:

There is nothing good for teaching
which is not also good for learning.

Of course that’s true. Isn’t that what we think teaching is, helping people to learn? And once we’ve acknowledged that, why not go a little further down the road to see where it gets us? What would it be like if we started from a really wholehearted focus on the teacher, and said that:

The main point and purpose of becoming a teacher
is the personal development of the individual concerned.

Well, perhaps I’ve gone a little too far this time, but I’m not insisting on this one, only asking what it would be like. You might want to take a few minutes to think about a response, before you read mine.

OK, this is it. I have to start by saying a bit more about what I see development being made up of. Development comprises two essential characteristics, awareness and direction: awareness of where one is, and movement in a direction which one has identified as desirable.

Development = Awareness + Direction

We are not short, in TESOL, of directions to move in, of suggestions for how we should teach in ways which are more functional, or communicative, or lexical, or collocational, or task-based, or, on Friday afternoons, perhaps also comical-historical-pastoral. What we are short of is an awareness of how we as individuals, or as groups of colleagues, actually *do* teach. This, it seems to me, is where a focus on the teacher is required. Because, even if we do recognise a goal for ourselves as teachers, how can we plan to get there if we don’t know where we are starting from? And how many attempts at innovation in teaching (and heaven knows we have had enough of them in TESOL) have foundered on this very issue of not being clear where we are starting from?

Development can only start from where we actually are, but how many of us have a clear and coherent view of ourselves as teachers? And if we do, how many of us have checked that self-image with the image that others have of us, either our students or our colleagues?

Let me put my conclusion from all these annoyingly rhetorical questions quite starkly. We have had enough of new ideas about language teaching to last us a good while. There will doubtless be more to come, but they won't do us any harm so long as we don't take them too seriously. What we have to take seriously is less of other people's ideas about how we should teach, and more of a proper, continuing exploration of how we do teach. We have to pay serious attention to ourselves.

Once we start to do that, the next step will make itself apparent. Once I focus seriously on my teaching of my students in my context, once I pay careful attention to what is happening in my classroom, the chances are that I will discover something that I want to change, or something that I want to do more of, or less of. Teaching that is appropriate for each one of us in our own situations will emerge from this (potentially never-ending) process.

Appropriate methodology is emergent methodology.

All this is only common sense. How can someone else tell me that I should be more or less, say, "communicative" in my teaching, when not even I have tried to investigate how "communicative" I am, in my own eyes, or those of my students or my colleagues?

The methodological outcome of this position is both empowering and demanding:

The most appropriate way for each one of us to teach is exactly the way that we do teach —provided only that we are committed to an ongoing investigation of just what it is that we do, with a view to enhancing the processes and outcomes both for our students and for ourselves.

WAY TO GO

From this point on, there are two major issues I would like to address:

- 1 How does a person do this sort of thing?
- 2 What is it like when one does it?

As far as the first issue is concerned, you would need to take some time and trouble informing yourself. It is not difficult these days to find books which give an introduction to the ideas of what is variously termed teacher development, action research, or reflective practice. If I were to pick out one, it would be David Nunan's (1989) *Understanding Language Classrooms*. I select this partly because it is excellent, and partly because earlier in this paper I exploited another piece of Nunan's work to serve my own purposes. While such exploitation is acceptable behaviour in our community, it seems only fair to point out that no one has made a greater contri-

bution to the kind of approach to methodology that I am advocating here than Nunan himself. Other books oriented to working in such investigative ways are Allwright & Bailey (1991), Edge (1992), Altrichter et al. (1993), Edge & Richards (1993), Nunan & Lamb (1996), Field et al (1997), and Wallace (1998).

I don't intend to go into methodological detail here. Let me just affirm that there are implications for a person's time and effort. I did not start out with the proposition that the point and purpose of teaching is to get it over with as quickly as possible, but that the main point and purpose of becoming a teacher is the personal development of the individual concerned. Development takes effort, there's no doubt about it. If it sounds interesting (and there are more descriptions in what follows), the "how-to-books" are out there to be read.

What I would like to do now is to respond more to the second question I raised: What does this kind of work look like when it happens? Despite excellent exceptions such as Bailey & Nunan (1996), there are not so many descriptions of this available, and it is a part of my great good fortune in my current job that I get to work with teachers who do approach their teaching in this way, and who write reports on it. Let me tell you about a few of them.

Henny Burke, teaching an elementary class of adults, noticed how her classes in spoken English seemed to keep her students in a child-like role, when compared to the adult side which emerged when they talked about a reading passage. She had noticed this because she kept a teaching diary which she wrote up after each class, or at the end of a teaching day. Having made the initial observation, she later recorded a class to confirm it. She stresses that there was no *problem* here, as such, and the learners all seemed perfectly happy (Burke 1995:24):

I was interested in making changes in my teaching as part of my own exploration, not because there were glaring problems in the class.

She saw her development at that point as lying in the ability to bring out more of the adult side of the students in all her classes. The path she chose was to introduce techniques from Community Language Learning into her spoken English classes, thus giving the learners a chance to say more or less what they wanted to on any subject. One of the students commented (in Burke's translation, *ibid*:36):

It helps take away a bit some of the fear of saying stupid things.

On consideration, the students said that they wanted to continue with CLL classes as a regular change from the usual format, which they did not want to give up.

Burke felt that she had taken a step towards teaching adults as adults, and helping them function as adults in English.

Tom Morton started to realise that there were similarities between the way he learned a foreign language and the way he taught it. As a learner, he had always wanted to know that he had learned something specific in a lesson. And now, there always had to be a certain "chunk of knowledge" to be learned in his classes, which he, as teacher, chose. He saw his development as lying in the ability to involve students more in determining the content of what they were going to learn.

He set up a task-based activity, and invited in a colleague to watch him and to give feedback. The class went very well. The real insight came for Tom, however, when the observer pointed out that the class had felt uneasy when he had tried to involve them in classroom management decisions. This started him thinking about the different kinds of control and choice which are operating in the classroom, and about which ones the students actually want to be involved in. He felt that he had taken a first step towards trusting students to provide more language learning content for his lessons, and also that he had begun to develop a kind of empathy for students with different learning styles than his own. He comments on his own feelings about these developments (Morton 1995:18):

... we must free ourselves from dependence on a narrow interpretation of science, the latest theory, or the charisma of certain gurus. To do this, we need to try to understand what we do ourselves, in our own situations, and then tell each other about it.

Michael Boshell works in a bilingual primary school, where he is responsible for teaching some subjects in English. His science classes tended to be based on his talks and on readings, followed by teacher questions. He knew that some children were regularly quiet and reluctant to answer, although they maintained that they had understood the lesson. Just like Burke and Morton, he took the essential first step towards self-development—he decided to take responsibility (Boshell 1995:37):

Unable to obtain an answer from the quiet children themselves, I turned inwards, I felt that maybe I was the reason why the quiet children participated only in a limited way.

He made a video of one of his classes and came to the conclusion that he was, as he put it, denying these quiet children “space”, both physically and linguistically. If they were slow in answering, he walked over to stand close to them. If their answers broke down, he completed them.

His first attempt to encourage the children was unsatisfactory, because the activity he set up was too unstructured and they floundered. He continued, still using video recordings on which to reflect, trying to find the right balance between the amount of structuring and of space that the children needed in order to feel secure enough to participate in the lesson.

He found his development in a feeling of increased faith in the ability of these particular pupils to learn, and a new kind of satisfaction in finding different ways of being helpful in that learning.

Annie Corner found that the feedback she gave on her students’ written work was well-received. But she also knew that it was enormously time-consuming and tiring, and she was concerned that this might have an effect on the reliability of the feedback that she gave over a large pile of assignments.

She gave some time to thinking and reading about feedback and what it was meant to achieve. She then produced a questionnaire and asked students to comment

on her feedback. After one further assignment, she changed medium and gave her feedback on cassette, again inviting student comment.

From her own perspective, the difference was entirely positive. She could say more in less time, and necessarily critical comments could be made acceptable by tone of voice and proper contextualisation. The making of the tapes was also itself energising, as compared to the writing of notes. Despite the major drawback of difficulty of reference, the student response was also overwhelmingly positive. They felt personally addressed and saw much more clearly the relevance of what was being said. The feedback was more satisfactory both in terms of justifying the grade that was given, as well as in terms of showing how to improve the next piece of work.

I have presented here brief reports on the experience of four teachers working along the development parameter (one of which was me). I hope I haven't misrepresented the other three. If you would like to read their reports in more detail, write to me and I will send you a copy of *Teacher Development in Action*, where they are printed. You could find the other one in Edge (1995b).

LEARNING TOGETHER

It is time I got back to my big question, What would it be like if we said that the main point and purpose of becoming a teacher is the personal development of the individual concerned?

With regard to the attitudes and the processes described above, my response to that question is, "Pretty good".

Teachers, taking responsibility for what happens in their classrooms, committed by definition to the furtherance of learning, working co-operatively with their colleagues and students, are the prime sources of appropriate, emergent methodology. If the position still seems extreme to some, I should like to call two more witnesses.

First, I empathise with Kolb (1984:209) when he says:

If there is a touch of aggressive selfishness in our search for integrity, it can perhaps be understood as a response to the sometimes overwhelming pressures on us to conform, submit and comply, to be the object, rather than the subject of our life history.

Maybe that's just a personality quirk, so finally, I should like to bring the development parameter home, so to speak, into the mainstream of our educational endeavours, which is where I believe it belongs. One of the most significant findings of Huberman's research into the life cycle of teachers is that those teachers most likely to avoid burnout or cynicism, and who come to the end of their careers with the greatest sense of satisfaction, are those who have been consistently involved throughout their teaching in small-scale experimentation — "*tinkering*", as they put it, with their teaching in sensitive response to the emergent features of their professional context (Huberman 1989:50f).

This is how I see issues of autonomy and development coming together in a properly learning-centred classroom — one in which the developmental progress of

both learners and teacher is respected, as they all strive to learn and grow in their individual and complementary ways.

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