Pioneering Autonomy: An Interview with Leni Dam

Leni Dam, with Richard Smith

Earlier this year Leni Dam visited the University of Warwick to talk to MA students at CELTE (the Centre for English Language Teacher Education). Here is part of an interview recorded with her at that time.

Leni, how did you first get interested in learner autonomy? How did you start promoting autonomy with your own students?

Those were the days when we didn't call it learner autonomy – the beginning of the 1970s. I was teaching a group of mixed-ability students – boys and girls, but especially the boys were a problem. Whatever I did they'd say 'it's boring'. I got upset with them and said 'OK, if what I'm doing is boring what do *you* want to do?'. I remember banging the desk and my bracelet breaking and spraying into the air like a kind of rain shower. Anyway, this forced them to say 'it might be an idea if we do this or that'. Then we made up some kind of plan where they were partly responsible for the contents – a fairly long plan. There was material on Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, where I'd been living during my year as an assistant in an English school – fairly fixed data – but they had expressed their wishes. At the end of the project I asked them what had been good and what had been bad. Because they had to an extent decided what to do it was a bit difficult for them to say it was completely bad. I believe that that was my first little step towards learner autonomy. It was an important experience for me – I'd seen it was possible to ask them questions to get them involved.

Did you carry on with the same procedures?

Yes, I received evaluations saying 'we like the lessons this way' – they were involved. In some of my writing I refer to this kind of classroom experience – having students evaluate at the end of an activity and then making use of their evaluations. I never ever went back to using a course book the way I'd been doing up to that point. From then on it would always be some kind of project followed by a simple evaluation. Not a matter of a lot of materials but rather of 'What can be done with what we've got?'.

What were some of the difficulties or challenges that you faced in those years?

It's difficult to remember. I had a feeling that they were always involved from then on.

You mean, when you think back you think more of the positive?

I can't remember any difficulties. Over the years the students have become more and more involved. Perhaps because I've become better at setting up aims and objectives that they can relate to. So, this wasn't exactly a 'difficulty', but I considered more and more 'How can I get them involved?'.

One really good thing for teachers about your writing, I think, is the way you provide snapshots of your practice (for example in your book for Authentik and an article you wrote a few years ago in Die neueren Sprachen). So, if we compare how you were doing things in those early days and the classroom you ended up with two years ago when you stopped teaching in secondary school, how would things have looked different?

There wouldn't have been so many posters. And there seem to be more explicit principles now. We made a video of the first class of beginners I had – it was the first video we made – called 'Beginning English': It was an experiment; filmed in black and white. What happened back then was they did activities of their own choice, but there were no posters in the first years. There were no logbooks either – these came in fairly late, in the early 80s. Of course, though, we did a lot of evaluation.

Probably now I also have more awareness of group work – how to form groups and get the students to form groups.

Do you have more discussion with them about this?

Yes, about what's a good group and so forth. So there's been this growing awareness about the different elements when learning – development all the time.

Can you say some more about the reasons you introduced logbooks and posters, as I think this will help us get a deeper insight into your practice. Why did you introduce them?

Logbooks: I think it's closely connected with one of the European conferences – it was held in Copenhagen – a Dutch teacher had brought along a logbook from his class. We could see there in one book the identity of the individual learner. I took that straight back to my class and said 'we're going to try it out'. I said 'These are my needs – I need to know where you are because you're doing different things, individual things. It's something for dialogue between you and me, and for awareness-raising for yourself. If you can think of something else instead of the logbook then tell me'. But nobody wanted to do anything else.

As for posters, I can't remember the year. It was an alternative to the blackboard. I remember clearly that I'd been to a course myself where a group of people suggested that we should talk deeply about ourselves. I refused for a very long time – I didn't think we were psychologists. But then they said, now Leni, come up. I felt in the end that I was more or less stark naked, and all this had been written on the blackboard and there I was on the blackboard. I clearly remember that I had not said everything I wanted to before the facilitator took the eraser and rubbed everything out. I felt it was really disrespectful. From then on I thought about things discussed in class. If it's important enough to spend time on discussing then it should remain somewhere. It's been a long time now that I've never ever used the blackboard again. Everything's been kept on posters. What's on the posters are plans, ideas – headlines for these, for what to do in class, how to behave and so on.

It also meant I could move away physically from the blackboard – I was more with the groups. But one mother was very upset – she said to me why don't you show things on the blackboard? But I said: 'What the students are learning *is* there – on the posters.'

So they're kept all the way through?

Yes. I keep all the posters on nails, and new ones are put on top of the old ones but the old ones are always there. It's very practical. Sometimes, especially in the early classes I refer back to the old posters. And every season I would take them all down and put them into a book. This is similar to what Mike Breen talks about when he describes the process curriculum, seeing what happened in retrospective, what you actually did. Posters are useful – they're full of answers to the questions 'how do we learn?, why do we learn?'. So reflection on these things becomes natural for the learners. The posters have become a useful tool for awareness-raising. As I said before, we always evaluate every aspect of the learning-process: 'What's good group-work?', 'What's a good talk?', and so on. It's all kept on posters.

Can I ask you a few questions about how your work relates to the 'wider world' of autonomy? Is it right that you started talking about 'autonomy' after you came across Henri Holec's work?

That's right. It started with the first Council of Europe publication where Gerd [Gabrielsen] and I have a description of our practice – where 'Beginning English' is described. I'd come across Holec's definition of learners 'being willing to and capable of', and I thought that fitted well with aspects of what I was doing

Were there at that time or as you went along any people you read or heard talking about autonomy that were particularly influential on you?

No (laughs).

Mike Breen and Chris Candlin for example?

In the late 70s. I'm sure the courses on communicative language teaching and learning I attended in Lancaster had an influence on the types of tasks and activities that I did in the classroom. There were summer courses in 78 and 79.

But you were very much already involved?

Actually it was in 1973 that I started. Then I got involved with Gerd. The 73-76 group were my first experiments in reorganizing my classroom and my teaching. The reason for that was that in 73 there arose the possibility in Denmark to have non-streamed classes. I had two girls. One weak one and one strong one. They were best friends. In order not to split them up I found a paragraph that said if you apply to the Ministry you don't have to stream classes. But that was politically really problematic. The union claimed we shouldn't do it unless we were given extra money for extra hours because we needed more time for preparing more materials etc. I didn't go for that so I was thrown out of the union. I was really unpopular in that respect!

I was one of only five people in Denmark doing that. But there was a whole Nordic movement going on. So that was the 'differentiated teaching and learning' that forced me to completely reorganize my teaching. The autonomy part – the story with the boys – also started with this group of 14-16 year-olds. Then later, in Lancaster, Mike said to me – why start when they're in the eighth form, why not when they're beginners? I went back and used what I'd done with the big ones. But apart from that, I think I've done it myself.

Learner autonomy, in the last ten or so years especially, seems to have become a buzzword worldwide – the phrase 'learner autonomy' has

spread worldwide enormously. But has promoting learner autonomy really spread? How do you feel?

Staying with Denmark for the moment, this differentiated teaching and learning possibility started in 1973. In 1976, as a result of that, in the national curriculum there appeared the recommendation that 'as far as possible teachers should see to it that what they do suits individual learners'. But thirty years later I would guess that only a very small percentage actually do differentiate teaching and learning in their classes – unfortunately.

So, similarly, why hasn't promoting learner autonomy spread more than it has?

Differentiated teaching and learning is still a town in Siberia . In fact it looks like we're going backwards again. Teachers believe it's they who have to set up a variety of activities. But differentiation lies within the learner. That's how, in Denmark, I combined autonomy and differentiated teaching and learning. There's still a long way to go, though.

Finally, Leni, what are your plans for the coming years?

I'll keep fighting! I believe that logbooks are one of the crucial tools. If we can find more tools that'd be good. And I believe we need more classroom data. That is a big mistake – that we haven't seen to it to get more classroom data. As long as we get into the classrooms we can see what is being used and what works. There's too much just abstract talk about autonomy among academics and at the university level. Too much talk about self-access centres, too. That was a cul-de-sac that we entered into. Nothing really changed with the new self-access materials. Many of them should be burned!

Leni Dam is a pedagogical adviser and in-service teacher trainer at the Centre for Higher Education for Copenhagen and Northern Zealand, where, since 2001, she has been responsible for the Diploma in Education. Until very recently she has also been a practising secondary school teacher of English, at Karlslunde School.