

Interconnections: Learner Autonomy Teacher Autonomy

In the last issue of Learning Learning, Richard Smith - in conversation with Andy Barfield - began to explore some possible interconnections between teacher and learner autonomy. He started by defining teacher autonomy in terms of teacher-learning, and gave some examples of how teacher and student autonomy might develop together in practice. The first part of the conversation ended by focusing on the wider context within which this kind of 'teacher & learner development' can or can't take root. Do Japanese educational institutions offer particularly good or bad conditions for developing autonomy? The dialogue continues ...

Richard: Leaving aside the issue of whether students are 'culturally' predisposed or indisposed for autonomy (this is how the topic has mostly been framed over the last five years or so), I think something that might be just as relevant is whether teachers have autonomy in the sense of having the basic capacity (power / freedom as much as ability) to decide on objectives, syllabus, materials, methods and means of assessment - in collaboration with colleagues, perhaps - in a particular context. If that sort of control isn't in teachers' hands in the first place, then they have little to 'let go' of or let students 'take control' of, at least in that particular institutional setting, however autonomous students might be outside it!

I think I'm talking here about constraints on learner autonomy within an institution being very much related to constraints on teacher autonomy, in other words 'interconnectedness' between these two areas of autonomy in a negative sense. And without a basic degree of control over what and how they teach, teachers' power to experiment and develop in a self-directed way as teachers ('teacher-learner autonomy') will probably be quite limited as well.

As a university teacher in Japan I think I was 'allowed' autonomy in the areas I've mentioned to quite a large degree and that meant I had the space to help students take control and to learn from the experience. Of course, as Sam Cheu implies in relation to Taiwan elsewhere in this issue of *Learning Learning*, high school teachers in Japan may be in quite a different position: You could say, in a positive way, that they're more 'accountable' (to colleagues, the Ministry of Education, parents, the need to cover a particular syllabus, use particular materials, prepare for exams etc.) than university teachers have tended to be. In a negative sense, junior and senior high school teachers' freedom and so the (potential) freedom of

their students may be relatively restricted. Returning to the situation in Japanese universities, though, my impression when I left (a year or so ago) was that constraints on teacher autonomy were increasing, with greater external pressure being brought to bear for 'relevance', 'transparency' and 'accountability'. With that, though, there may be greater opportunities for collaboration among colleagues. Are these changes influencing your work with autonomy at all, Andy?

Andy: 'Relevance', 'transparency' and 'accountability' sound very worthwhile goals if you are moving towards an integrated curriculum and some sense of improvement over time at a collaborative level of working. The question is: Do teachers want that? Do their institutions also?

From my perspective within a national university, I would say any real change will very much depend on the sense, within any particular department or faculty, of a critical need to cater better to the students' goals and styles of learning. Put differently, there needs to develop a certain threshold of willingness to be more responsive to learners' needs for institutional change to happen: That may take a very long time to be achieved - the virtuous circle of autonomy can be extended, but it takes enormous amounts of time and effort. It isn't an easy journey. So, autonomy maybe best grows through informal collaborative work.

I'd also like to put the question of autonomy here in a wider context, though. Two pressures alongside each other: The first is that employment security is now an issue for practically anyone working in tertiary education in Japan, because of the falling student population, above all. The second pressure, which I would characterize as negative, is that institutional networks of power and authority tend to be strongly

encoded in university working relationships and teacher-student relationships. This can lead to a strong reluctance on the part of teachers to collaborate about their work or discuss teaching and learning without intellectualising it into an academic debate and display of knowledge - without formalising, in other words, further control through empty collaboration.

What makes me say that is that I've spent a lot of time on reform committees supposedly discussing educational change with only rarely the classroom realities of learning and autonomy being discussed: One modest conclusion that I've drawn is that committee work is probably not the most effective way to enhance either teacher or learner autonomy!

So, I think the question remains open as to how teachers, at any level of education, should work together to enhance their own and their students' autonomy. Richard, what strikes you as different in your work in the UK? Do you see any similarly strong internal or external constraints at work?

Richard: Well, I think I've become much more conscious of the role of external constraints since moving to the UK, where both universities and schools (and teachers in these institutions) have lost a lot of autonomy over the last 20 years viz-a-viz government-imposed quality control regimes. Where I work now there's a lot of productive collaboration among teachers and a strong sense of accountability (which, when it means 'responsibility', I don't see as a necessarily bad thing), but at the same time I've been feeling there's a relative lack of freedom to negotiate with students, since intended learning outcomes, syllabus, materials, assessment procedures and so on have to be specified in advance, according to certain externally imposed standards. Quite often I've felt I've been 'jumping through hoops' to fit in with what's expected of a teacher in this context.

On a positive note, though, I think there are likely to be 'loopholes' in this situation as in any evolving context, including high schools in Japan, Taiwan etc., and Japanese universities as - perhaps - they become more accountable. One key thing for critical educators committed to learner and teacher autonomy may be to identify what are 'real' external constraints, and what is in fact feasible in terms of self-directed work, possibly in spite of appearances: I'm still learning about this in my own current situation (I've recently discovered, for

example, that it might be possible to incorporate student self-assessment, so long as this is rationalized in detail in advance; also, I've learned - now I 'know the ropes' better - that it's possible to engage students in self-directed learning to a greater degree than I'd previously thought possible). I suppose every context has different constraints and 'loopholes'.

Andy: So, you're saying work through, around, with the loopholes and identify the constraints as a possible starting point?

Richard: Yes, the important thing may be to become aware of what these are and what is changing about them in one's own particular setting, as well as to work to get 'real constraints' changed collaboratively - I think it'd be very interesting to hear more on this from teachers like Sam in what we might see as relatively 'constrained' settings like Japanese or Taiwanese high schools - what *is* (as well as isn't) negotiable and feasible in practice in such contexts? What's changing and what can be made to change? Any chance of more reports like that in *Learning Learning*?

Andy: Funny you should ask! Sam Cheu and Bob Betts look at those very questions, and Flavia Vieira also takes these issues up in discussing teacher and learner autonomy ...

ここ最近、学習者の自律と学習者の発展の分野で一番面白

かったつながりは何ですか？

andyb@sakura.cc.tsukuba.ac.jp>

<mikenix1@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp>