

In Harding-Esch, E. (1977) Self-directed learning and autonomy. Proceedings of a seminar held at Cambridge University, 13-15 December, 1976.

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Some Possibilities and Limitations of Learner  
Autonomy.

The University of Cambridge has a long standing interest in learner autonomy. The Oxbridge tutorial system relies upon the student's ability to work independently and does much to foster intellectual independence and an autonomous mode of study. More specifically, in the language laboratories we are trying to provide learning facilities in 40 or 50 languages with only a very small staff. Students more or less have to act as autonomous learners in the environment that we can create for them: 'some are born autonomous, some achieve autonomy and some have autonomy thrust upon them.' We have also taken a more general interest in the development of learner-centred systems. I have myself been concerned for the last five years with a Council of Europe project for the development of a unit-credit system for adult language learning on a European scale. Being conceived very much in the spirit of permanent education, this project is an attempt to establish a cooperative framework for a learner-centred, motivation-based language learning system. My contribution to this discussion is very largely set within that sort of conceptual framework. It is informed also by my experiences with the National Council for Educational Technology in the late 1960s, which, under the directorship of Tony Becher of the Nuffield Foundation, was at that time attempting to develop the consequences of a thoroughly learner-centred view of education.

The attempt to make education more learner-centred has had the effect of encouraging individualisation on the one hand and autonomy on the other. It is necessary to distinguish carefully between these closely related but distinct concepts. It is possible to pursue individualisation in a thoroughly authoritarian framework. The teacher looks at individuals' problems, but decides himself how different kinds of individual should be treated. Individualisation is here seen simply as a way of increasing the efficiency of the transmission of certain predetermined sets of values and kinds of

knowledge from the person possessing them, typically a member of an older generation or of a privileged class, to another person who ought to be acquiring those things, because without them he is either immature or under-privileged.

I remember having a brief altercation a few years ago with a highly distinguished American psychologist when he spoke in Cambridge to the Society for the Application of Research on 'Educational Technology: a case study on the non-application of research.' The speaker said that he sympathised with the student revolt in the United States in the late 1960s, because what the students were really in revolt against was the inefficiency of the methods by which they were taught. On this he agreed. Where he parted company with the students was over their demand that they should themselves determine the content of what they were learning. He felt that education was necessarily a process of the transmission of the knowledge, values and beliefs of an older generation to the young, and that this should simply be done in the most efficient way possible, which was of course by exploiting extrinsic motivations to direct learning within multi-media programmed learning systems. I wondered aloud whether it was possible to take an alternative view of educational technology, as simply making greater learning resources directly available to the individual, through which he could, if necessary with guidance, but preferably autonomously, steer his own learning path. Our visitor replied firmly 'With that sentiment, I most thoroughly disagree'.

The increasing interest in the autonomy of the student envisages various advantages at various different levels. Perhaps the most important of these is the socio-political level, as part of a much greater attempt to move from authoritarian towards democratic structures in society generally. How far it is also a consequence of a thoroughly capitalistic (i.e. individualist, consumer-oriented) view of society is another matter, of course! There appears to be a general feeling, as a kind of follow-up to the Enlightenment movement, that supportive structures should be developed within the individual rather than erected around him; he should be a vertebrate rather than a crustacean.

Moving from socio-political to economic considerations, the achievement of autonomy is looked upon as being an educational objective more appropriate to the kind of society in which we increasingly live. It is no longer economically efficient for the educational process to take the form of the transmission of fixed quanta of knowledge and fixed skills determined in advance by some formal or informal educational authority as being in the long-term interests of a learner, regardless of whether he knows why, what, or by what methods he is learning. It is perhaps increasingly useful to replace that kind of educational experience by one leading to an improved heuristics and an awareness in the individual of the processes by which he learns, the processes by which he can himself organise his learning experience. With this as his intellectual capital, rather than an obsolescent and diminishingly effective capital of concrete knowledge and concrete skills, he is better equipped to face the changing and developing situations which he is likely to meet in adult life. If we can bring a learner to the point where he can continue to organise his own learning experience effectively, then there is a continuing effect after the end of the learning experience. He adapts and continues to learn, rather than simply being left with the residual product of learning, which atrophies the longer the learning experience is left behind. It seems reasonable to suppose that the consciousness of objectives, the consciousness of methods of learning is better served by having a learning process which itself consciously leads the learner from an initial situation of complete dependence on the supportive structures in education to a position of autonomy. It is perhaps not so much a question of taking autonomous learning as opposed to non-autonomous learning as something given, but as something which has to have its own dynamic. To lead the learner from an initially dependent to a finally independent position should be one of the built in educational objectives of a learning programme.

As well as these educational advantages there are also technical and organisational advantages. The more the learner is able to function autonomously, the less complicated will be the educational apparatus required

to support him, although there are snags here, to which I shall return.

Lastly, there are some economic and financial advantages. Faced with a naturally increasing educational demand, it is unlikely that we can continue to have educational budgets escalating at the same rate. The traditional educational structures are highly labour intensive. If increased learning leads to a directly proportional increase in the number of people involved as full-time educators, the economic expectations and standards of teaching staff will be depressed. New methods of organisation have to be found which are more economic of teaching effort with investment redeployed to some extent from the direct teacher-pupil relation to the creation of systems. If the use of educational technology to supply the tools for autonomous working leads only to 'enrichment' without economy, it is unlikely that sufficient funds can be made available from limited national resources.

I would like at this stage to draw your attention to another project run by the Committee for Out-of-School Education and Cultural Development in Strasbourg, on the organisation, methods and content of adult education: This project is directed by Henri Jeanne and a document has been produced containing a bibliography of papers on self management of education. Although these are not particularly concerned with language, the principles involved are of interest insofar as they can be applied to our specific field. It seems to me that what is said there about adult education can be applied not only to free adult education outside the usual institutional framework. The principles can well be applied in further and higher education and probably then progressively pushed down to school level. Despite the tendency of those structures to resist reform, some influence of the principles concerned already seems evident in a number of sixth form developments. Henri Jeanne feels that the basic aim of adult education is the improvement of the quality of life and he divides the factors which affect it into equality of opportunity, responsible autonomy, personal fulfillment and the democratisation of education.

In addition to looking at the advantages that autonomy in education has to offer, Jeanne insists that we look at the problems which it raises and the

autonomous framework demands very much more from the student than simply to acquiesce in a process of instruction 'de haut en bas'. At this point it may be useful to remember the criteria for a good language learner listed by David Stern (quoted in 'Languages for adult learners', *Trim, Language Teaching and Linguistics Abstracts*, GUP 1976). The ten requirements set down by Stern are:

- (i) the development of positive learning strategies;
- (ii) an active approach to the learning task;
- (iii) positive attitude towards the language and its speakers;
- (iv) sufficient linguistic knowledge on how to tackle a language;
- (v) the ability to draw inferences and discover rules;
- (vi) constant searching for meaning;
- (vii) willingness to practice;
- (viii) willingness to try to communicate in real situations;
- (ix) self-monitoring; and
- (x) developing the language as a separate system and learning to think within it.

Now clearly, students who can fulfill these various pre-requisites will already be good autonomous learners. If we assume that very few people will bring all these characteristics to their initial educational encounters, then the question is how to recognise and exploit them and how to develop them when they do not already exist. It is clear that if many of these characteristics are lacking, the pre-requisites for autonomy are not met. A student who is left to 'be' autonomous, when he does not meet the pre-conditions for such a role, is simply being treated irresponsibly.

The dangers of autonomy as seen by Jeanne particularly are, first, the anarchic danger - the danger of the disorganisation and fragmentation of the educational system if planning breaks down into a very large number of local and unco-ordinated individual decisions. What then, we must ask ourselves, are the kinds of institutional structure which can contain and favourise

autonomised learning without losing the sense of social integrity?

Secondly, there are the obvious difficulties of programming and organising a multi-media unit-credit system, if one should decide that this is the kind of containing system needed for autonomous learning. If the containing institution has to set up the conditions for autonomous learning, it may find itself faced with an extremely complex task, particularly if it is trying not to restrict that role simply to finding the best way to achieve certain pre-programmed goals. The third difficulty is concerned with democratisation. There is a laissez faire danger, in which autonomous learning may turn into a free-for-all with the effect of increasing rather than diminishing educational distances within the community. The Eurocentres in Bournemouth, having introduced self-learning components into an intensive course, report something of that tendency already; learners working in learner groups tend to sort themselves out into efficiently working groups and inefficiently working groups. Those people who work well together and help each other effectively will recognise and attract each other, forming very efficient small groups; but they will push to the margin those people who are not good cooperators and they will also push to the margin those who cannot keep up. These individuals do not form a coherent effective group; they either remain a series of scattered individuals surrounding yet rejected by an efficiently working learner group or else they may cohere into a kind of opposition. Unguided autonomy requires good management, and the question of the relationship between managing and guiding functions on the part of animateurs and administrators requires a good deal of very careful planning.

The last danger is concerned with evaluation. If one is not moving into an anarchic society, the various kinds of autonomous learning, in pursuit of different objectives, geared to the diverse needs of the learners, and using different methods according to the learner's view of his task, have to be brought into some system of equivalent qualifications - at any rate if there is to be any direct accountability from the educational system to an outside body of users. I know that there is a strong feeling on many

parts of the continent that this accountability is no longer required, that there is no longer any need for examinations, diplomas and certificates. On the other hand, there is every evidence that there is a strong demand for such attestations, not only on the part of the users, but also on the part of the learners themselves. It seems to be important for motivation that they have some idea of what they are working towards and that what they are working towards can be brought into relation with what is going on elsewhere. Learners do not always find sufficient motivation from intra-group success measurements. The danger is that, if this system of external evaluation is the only structuring factor in what is otherwise rather an anarchic situation, then those bodies that run certifications and examinations may become much more powerful. Unless some element of participation can be brought into test construction, an examiners' technocracy may control the apparently autonomous learner.

In addition to these dangers, Jeanne lists a number of difficulties. Firstly, teachers may have little or no experience of participation and self-management. Institutions are not neutral, and one cannot introduce autonomous working into an institution if the teachers do not know how to make it work, even though initially they may be keen. In many cases they are likely to have mixed feelings about it; most teachers react to the development of autonomy by feeling that in some way their professional status is threatened. Secondly, self-management and participation is enormously time and energy consuming. When Brasenose College was affected by the slight ripples which reached these shores from the events in Paris in 1968, the students there were asked by the Fellows what kind of participation they wanted on the governing body. They replied: 'Your job is to run the college and teach us, and ours is to learn - you get on with your job and we'll get on with ours'. They turned down seats on the governing body at that particular time. One must be sure that the positive educational advantages of the increased amount of 'overhead' work which is involved in learners structuring their own situation is justified and does not simply reduce the

effective learning time which is available to them, with no compensating, or inadequately compensating, educational experience. The third difficulty, is a practical one. Administrators can feel a loss of their prerogatives if organisation is broken down from very large units into very small ones. My own feeling is that this fear is not justified, and that there is still plenty for them to do, though of a different character.

A very important point made by Jeanne is that enthusiasm wanes; systems of autonomy are entered into in a mood of great enthusiasm, but this is very difficult to sustain. In the long run, institutions founded on self-management and participation may go stale. New types of formalism and sterilising conventions may become entrenched. It is difficult to replicate the experiences of a first generation in subsequent generations, since subsequent generations inherit structures and do not have to re-create them. A feeling of creativity has somehow to be incorporated into an educational system as part of its continuing activity.

We are now in a position to place autonomous learning in a wider education context: not as an ideal to be pursued at all costs, but as a tendency to be encouraged as far as possible, to an extent determined by the nature of the learners concerned, the institution in which they are working, the social context in which both are located, and the state of development of the available means and techniques of learning of all kinds.

Armed with an awareness of the possibilities and limitations of, and constraints upon autonomous learning, we may finally proceed to survey, in an ascending order of learner autonomy, the possible areas and extents of autonomy based on a systems approach within the language field.

Firstly comes self-study, ranging from, say, Teach Yourself Dutch, where the learner is simply given a book and left to himself through to the multi-media package, which can be quite sophisticated, but where essentially all necessary planning and thinking has been done by some prior authority, and where the student's autonomy is simply confined to how he himself comes to terms with a particular learning programme in the absence of a teacher.



There is then the question of student choice between different kinds of programme which are offered. However, the prerequisites for rational choice must be present. To provide a very large range of choice when you know that those who have to choose are unguided and lack criteria on which to base their decision is only to invite them to make the wrong choice. Learners do not necessarily recognise their own interests.

In the case of programmed group work, the student does not himself as an individual simply confront a learning programme that has been prepared for him, but students work in groups whose work is pre-programmed. This is then a rather limited concept of autonomy.

There is also the possibility of self-assessment, whether it is guided or unguided. There are different stages in testing: test design, test construction, test administration, test processing and test interpretation. Learners and learner groups may have a role to play at each of these stages. Self-assessment usually concerns itself only with the administration, processing and interpretation of tests, the tests themselves being professionally prepared by some testing body or test experts, or incorporated into course construction. However, there is no inherent reason why autonomy should not in some cases actually extend to the construction of test materials. This idea which is not looked on with favour by most test experts, who feel that it opens the gates to abuse and incompetence. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at certain types of tests, such as Cloze tests and dictations, which can be selected and composed, particularly within learner groups for mutual use; it is rather difficult for the learner to ensure security against himself!

Then there is self-analysis, where either individual learners or learner groups analyse their own needs in terms of their expected language behaviour. It may be possible to develop tools whereby learners can be presented with an apparatus which enables them to pose and answer the right sort of questions, presenting them with alternatives which put issues concretely before them. Self-analytic documents of this kind may enable learners to identify their

own learner-type. It is also possible, by self-administered placement tests, for learners to recognise their own prior knowledge level.

Following on from this, there arises the possibility of self-programming, that is setting one's own objectives and on the basis of these selecting or even producing one's own materials and courses, in particular by exploiting the possibilities of the discovery method, being equipped with the available public apparatus of grammar, dictionary, thesaurus and encyclopaedia, and bringing a general heuristics to bear upon an unknown material, including free access to active informants. If this sounds altogether unrealistic perhaps one point to what was suddenly demanded of linguists in the United States when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. A number of the American Service courses were developed by linguists who while they had a well developed heuristic, did not initially know very much about the languages concerned, but who were able to work with native speakers and a methodology. In doing this, they were of course a certain kind of advanced autonomous learner. Kenneth Pike's celebrated demonstrations of 'on-the-spot' linguistic analysis offered a striking extension of this principle.

Lastly, there is the question of self-management, of the extent to which learners can, individually or collectively, participate in the actual devising and administration of the institutional learning system within which their work is cast. One may look at how far learners and autonomous learner groups can exercise the functions which are traditionally associated with teachers in the first place, course designers in the second place and administrators in the third place. Clearly, autonomy is much more easily attainable, the closer you get to the learner himself, and an actual direct process of coming to grips with some given prepared programme. It becomes more speculative and more demanding, the more functions you try to transfer to the learner, and the more indirect those functions are by comparison with his direct learning role. One has to have some kind of master notion of cost effectiveness, taken in an extremely broad sense, and remembering the educational and social objectives as well as the direct narrow learning objectives, so that, given the

constellation of people all involved in the learning process, the most effective and economic way is found of deploying this amount of social effort, remembering that it is the learning act which is central, and that any other elements in the system justify their presence only to the extent that they succeed in facilitating the learning process.