

Teacher Education

Preparing student teachers for learner autonomy: Some personal reflections

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Introduction

In her introductory article in *Independence* 42, Leni Dam asks the question of what can be done in initial teacher education to “hatch” teachers for learner autonomy. As a complete newcomer to the field who has never experienced a learner-centred classroom, either as a learner or as a teacher, but as someone who would like to try out the concept of learner autonomy in my own teaching, I will make some suggestions thinking back to my own initial training. First, however, I would like to say a few words about how I came across the idea of learner autonomy.

After having taught language, study skills and EAP courses in the English department of Graz university for 8 years I decided, around two years ago, that it was high time for me to broaden my academic horizons. I opted for a PhD study in the field of initial teacher education. The study was to be based on a teacher portfolio describing the core didactic competences a teacher should strive to attain in the course of his/her career. This portfolio was meant to be used as a tool for reflection and self-assessment in initial teacher education, but should also accompany teachers throughout their teaching careers. To embed this document in an appropriate context my supervisor and I agreed that I should first undertake a review of the state-of-the-art of language teaching and learning. It was then that I came across the concept of learner autonomy.

Having myself been educated in a purely traditional way for twelve years at school and five years at university, the discovery of a learner-centred pedagogy in the form of learner autonomy not only intrigued me but also led me to question my own beliefs, attitudes and values concerning teaching. Confirming Lortie’s (1975) claim about the “13.000-hour apprenticeship of observation”, I had unconsciously internalised the patterns underlying my own teachers’ teaching practice. In other words, I found myself opting for what I now see as the “easier version” of teaching, namely the passing on of knowledge to learners while at the same time of course adhering to the principles of communicative language teaching. Like Frank Lacey (*Independence* 42), I too had had the advantage of establishing a friendly and respectful atmosphere in my classroom and of having students who were happy and satisfied with my teaching. However, looking back I now realize that I

never really gave my students the chance to have a say in decisions as to *what* or *how* to learn – basic principles in the development of learner autonomy. This was mainly because I would not have known how to approach such a task. How, then, could initial teacher education have prepared me better for learner autonomy?

Experiencing an autonomous classroom as a learner

It would have been extremely helpful for me personally if I had had the opportunity in my initial teacher education to experience learner autonomy myself. That is, I would have liked to be taught at least in one or two classes in the way you are supposed to teach in a learner-centred classroom. Getting acquainted with the theoretical literature is of course a prerequisite but by far not enough. I would probably have felt overwhelmed with the new kind of responsibility placed on me and might have needed a fair amount of guidance and support from the teacher educator. Yet, I would have appreciated in my pre-service training having more chance to reflect on my own learning and to set my own learning goals as a future teacher. What might have been helpful as well would have been the use of a diary where I could have recorded my own progress and entered questions about teaching in general or personal thoughts and comments, fears, doubts or positive and negative teaching experiences. These diary entries could have served as springboards for discussions with my peers and the teacher educator. I could have also imagined keeping a teaching portfolio in which I could have collected evidence for my progress in the form of lesson plans, teacher educator comments, video recordings of my lessons etc. Keeping a teaching portfolio would have meant for me having some control of my professional growth and would have also given me the chance to evaluate my own teaching.

Opportunity to reflect about a learner-centred pedagogy

It is questionable, however, if one or two courses taught according to the principles of learner autonomy would have been sufficient to enable me to adopt myself an autonomous approach in my future teaching career. What I would have needed in addition would have been the chance to explore my attitude towards

and beliefs about teaching in general and a learner-centred pedagogy in particular. To this end discussions among peers and with teacher educators should have focussed on what it means to guide learners towards autonomy. The teacher's role in an autonomous learning environment is radically different from the traditional role of the teacher as transmitter of knowledge. The basic question would have been for me to find out if I am willing to establish a more equal relationship with my learners in which responsibility for what is going on in the classroom is shared between me and my learners. In order to accept this new teacher-learner relationship, my conception of teaching would have needed to be seriously challenged.

Awareness of the different degrees of autonomous learning

It seems crucial to me that teachers willing to teach according to the principles of autonomous learning should be made aware in their initial teacher education of the fact that there are different *degrees* of how much help or support is given by the teacher in an autonomous classroom. Holec (1981) suggests that the final goal for the development of learner autonomy is that learners must take charge of *all* aspects of their learning. As mentioned above, I have never myself been engaged in pedagogy for autonomy in my practical teaching, but I believe that there are types of learners who need more guidance than others, that there will be times when learners need more support than at other moments and that there will be tasks in which learners will depend more on the teacher than usual. Keeping this more differentiated picture of the possible degrees of an autonomous classroom in mind, student teachers might be more confident to tackle such a challenging task in their own teaching.

Developing confidence in one's learners' capabilities

It would have been necessary for me in my initial teacher education to develop confidence in my future learners' capacities. As I would have been very much in doubt of my own abilities in relation to independent learning I would have found it difficult to envisage entrusting my future students with tasks my teachers used to fulfil. In my view, a necessary task for initial teacher education would be to show student teachers that learners are able to take charge of their own learning and that this capacity in addition will enhance learners' and teachers' motivation (e.g. by showing videos of autonomous classrooms).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that I have not been trained myself in a pedagogy for autonomy, I am seriously considering introducing learner autonomy in my own classroom. I am well aware that I will have to tackle the task cautiously in order not to put too much strain on myself

or my students. I will certainly find it very daunting to let go of deeply entrenched ideas of who should do what in the classroom, and to be faced with initial disorder and chaos. However, it is definitely worth a try and therefore I will simply take the risk and see what happens!

References

- Holec, Henri (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
 Lortie, Dan (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



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