



Teacher
education

In-service Teacher Education for Learner Autonomy

Leni Dam

In the last issue of *Independence*, Anja Burkert suggested ways of improving initial teacher education for learner autonomy. One of her suggestions was the use of portfolios – something that June Miliander took up in her contribution in the same issue. In the next issue, José Luís Vera-Batista will describe a successful model for implementing learner autonomy in initial teacher education, developed and used by him and his colleagues at his university in Tenerife.

But what about all the practising teachers, who, similarly to Anja Burkert, have not been confronted with learner autonomy in their initial teacher training and who might be possible agents for developing autonomy in their classes? How can these teachers be helped to be willing to, prepared for, and able to promote autonomous learning with their students? How can they be supported in getting started? How can they be supported in the first phases of introducing change into their classrooms? How can they be supported in maintaining the process of developing learner autonomy? In this contribution, I shall describe a possible ‘model’ for in-service teacher training that has proved successful when it comes to introducing change into teachers’ classrooms – in this case towards learner autonomy. I shall also mention a few additional ways in which teachers who want to effect change in their classes can be supported.

A model for INSET courses¹

Some history

An early form of the model in question first saw the light of day as far back as the late 1970s as a result of cooperation between Mike Breen, Chris Candlin, Gerd Gabrielsen and myself (Breen, Candlin, Dam, and Gabrielsen

1989). At that time I was a pedagogic adviser in Hundige, Greve municipality, and was as such in charge of the local in-service courses. This gave me the opportunity to get Mike Breen and Chris Candlin over from Lancaster University as instructors. The aim of the workshops was to introduce and implement innovation in language teaching, including the concept of learner autonomy.

Even though the participants were extremely enthusiastic about the workshops and were filled with ideas as regards making changes in their classrooms, I, the local adviser, could see that not much happened in that respect. Obviously our workshops were not well enough geared towards introducing change, not to mention the implementation of learner autonomy. We had to reconsider and change our plans and thus rethink the content for the workshops. The development of a model for an INSET course geared towards the development of learner autonomy started there – a development that is still in progress as I write this. (For a full account of the first evolution of the programme, see Breen et al. 1989).

Ever since, it has been a matter of trying to fit the ‘basic’ model developed then (see Taylor 1990, appendix 3) to the needs of the actual participants in the workshops, their personal and cultural background, their teaching conditions, and the curricular guidelines under which they are working (similarly to the model for initial teacher training to be described by Jose Luis Vera in the next issue).

Even though the workshops have had many names over the years, ‘Differentiated teaching and learning’, ‘Getting the learners actively involved in their own learning’, ‘Awareness raising about one’s own learning’ or ‘Taking responsibility for one’s own learning’, the basic idea has all the time been teacher education for learner autonomy. And the basic question has always been – and still is: How

¹ By INSET courses is meant courses or workshops run for teachers who have finished their initial teacher training and are practising teachers

can in-service teachers who have been used to teaching traditionally, that is with a focus on teaching rather than learning, be supported in getting started with developing learner autonomy in their classes?

Main criteria and basic principles underlying the model

...teachers will hardly be prepared or able to administer autonomous learning processes in their students if their own learning is not geared to the same principles. (Edelhoff, 1984:189)

This statement holds true of course also when it comes to INSET courses. The organisation and the contents of a course or a workshop² must mirror what is expected to take place in the teachers' own classrooms when developing learner autonomy. Below I will try to sum up seven important criteria and underlying principles for the model developed. They are based partly on Marilyn Taylor's very thorough research project on the development and change effected through this form of in-service training course (Taylor 1990) and interviews carried out in that connection with teachers who attended one or more workshops during the late 1980s; partly on participants' evaluations collected at the end of more recent workshops; and partly on my own observations during my thirty-odd years of experience as an in-service teacher trainer. The overriding issue underlying all the criteria mentioned, however, is the fact that we are dealing with human beings who bring to the learning environment their identities, their experiences, and their knowledge – a background that we have to respect and start out from. In this way we support and develop their self-esteem – a necessity when it comes to being willing and able to change.

² 'Courses' are often considered to be longer than 'workshops' – and often with a touch of 'teaching' rather than 'learning'. In this article the term 'workshop' will be used for both types, stressing that it is a matter of working *with* the course participants. Content-wise the principles suggested here are the same.

1. The organisation and contents of a workshop: An on-going process, open to change according to participants' as well as curricular needs and demands

It is my experience that in order to obtain the best results, a workshop should ideally, in one way or the other, include the following elements or phases:

1. Inspiration to and planning of change.
2. Implementation of plans for change in participants' classrooms.
3. Evaluation of and feedback on gained insights.
4. Decision-making as regards next steps to be taken in the process of change

In the interviews (Taylor 1990) as well as in the evaluations, participants point to Phases 2 and 3 as especially important factors in the workshops. The possibility to try out something 'new' and yet related to your own classroom setting and of your own choice (Phase 2) is encouraging and not face-threatening. Furthermore, the chance to share gained experiences with other participants (Phase 3) is highly valued.

At the end of Phase 1, the participants are asked to write out in detail a plan – a contract – for what and how they are going to improve, innovate or develop things in their own teaching. They are asked to describe:

- *What are you going to develop / try out / change in your own classroom?*
- *Why are you going to do it? (Expected results?)*
- *How are you going to do it?*
- *What kind of data will you bring along to share with your colleagues when meeting again?*

With regard to planning what to do in the classroom it is stressed that 'small is beautiful'. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the planned steps to be taken can and should be carried out on 'Monday' – not at some time in the future. The value of the contracts can be summed up as follows (Taylor 1990: 21):

Another strong motivational feature identified by the teachers as important in encouraging them to implement their plans [for innovation] were the 'contracts'.

Apart from being the basic structure of ‘the model’, the four phases detailed above can be considered to be the outline of any plan for classroom research to be carried out by any teacher – away from a workshop. The point is that having experienced this research-model in a workshop, the teachers are likely to be better prepared to make use of it in their daily work. In addition to being an on-going process in itself, the workshop will – hopefully – be the beginning of a never-ending process of professional growth for the teachers.³

2. *Make aims for as well as expected outcome of a workshop plain to participants*

This may sound obvious and self-explanatory. However, in my experience, many announcements of workshops – short or long – do not live up to this demand. I, myself, have tried to improve in this respect over the years. Because, when it comes to ‘advertising’ a workshop, especially the types of workshops we are dealing with, it is vital to make clear to the applicants that the focus of the workshop in question will be on how to change your teaching – in this case towards the development of learner autonomy. In Denmark, unfortunately, this seems to put off some men beforehand, whereas women seem more prepared for change.

3. *Establish an atmosphere of trust and openness within the group of participants*

Similarly to a class of schoolchildren, a group of participants in a workshop can vary a lot. There are basically four types of participants in my workshops (apart from those newly educated teachers who are at a loss when it comes to putting theory into practice):

- There are the ones who are bored or at least not satisfied with their own teaching and are looking for new ways of improving the state of affairs.
- There are the ones who have read about or have heard about learner autonomy from

³ A concrete example and full description of the contents of a one-day workshop can be seen in my article “How to develop autonomy in a school context – how to get teachers to change their practice” (Dam 1999).

colleagues and would like to try it out themselves.

- There are the ones who are sceptical about ‘this new trend’ in teaching and learning and want to challenge the idea (cf. Frank Lacey’s article in *Independence* 42).
- Finally, there are the ones who have been forced to take the course by their headteacher in order to develop and update their way of teaching.

For all groups the question for the trainer is how best to involve them in the process of change in their own classes. An important issue in this respect is of course to be able to meet them where they are, so to speak (the constructivist paradigm). It is important for the trainer to get to know as much as possible about the participants as a starting point for the workshop. It is similarly important that the participants get to know each other in order to feel ‘safe’. Especially because change – even changing oneself – is the central concern and it is therefore important to create an atmosphere of trust and openness within the group of participants.

If possible, relevant information, perhaps collected in the form of a questionnaire, can be gathered beforehand. Information of interest to the whole group can then be passed on. If information cannot be obtained beforehand, it is important to create a common base at the very beginning of a workshop:

- Who are we?
- What do we expect from the course?
- What do we expect of each other?

These questions can be shared in small groups at the beginning of the course and displayed on posters in the room under the heading: *Our expectations*. The resemblance with an ‘autonomous’ classroom where important discussions, reflections and decisions made are ‘kept’ for future use in the process of awareness-raising has begun (cf. Dam 1995, 1999 – among others).

4. *‘[A]wareness-raising and an obvious link with the teachers’ own situation are powerful components ...’ (Taylor 1990: 21)*

Another way of getting to know each other, and thus create an atmosphere of openness and

trust, is to show the group of participants a video sequence from an 'autonomous classroom' and have them discuss in smaller groups questions like:

- What did you notice?
- Things that you approved of / disapproved of?
- Any similarities or differences to your own teaching?

The results from these group discussions can be kept on posters to make clear that the reflections and views of the participants are focal points of departure for the contents of the workshop. Furthermore, the posters are an obvious starting point for debates and considerations about classroom practice that can be supported by relevant theoretical input. Looking at a video of another classroom makes it easier for the teachers to reveal aspects of their own classroom without being threatened⁴.

5. Get the participants actively involved in their own learning: Focus on learning rather than teaching

Apart from getting the teachers to discuss their own classroom practice – indirectly – in connection with watching another classroom, the content of the workshops is primarily awareness raising activities where the participants are the learners. The basic idea is that the participants (the practising teachers) are treated the way they are expected to treat their students. A crucial thing for the trainer to think about when planning the contents of the workshop is to consider how best he/she can support the workshop participants in getting actively involved in *learning* a special issue rather than to think how best he/she can *teach* the issue in question. The activities set up should resemble the activities set up in the autonomous classroom; only the contents of the activities will vary. Let me give a few examples.

Project work / Group work: A topic of interest and within the overall framework of the workshop can be chosen by a group of participants to work on. Similarly, an area of interest and within the curricular guidelines

⁴ One of the mistakes made in the very first workshops with Breen and Candlin was to ask the teachers to write down their problems on posters.

can be chosen by a group of students in the autonomous classroom (see Dam 1995: 42-45). In both cases, the presentation to the rest of the group will follow the same procedure/ plan:

- What did we focus on?
- Why did we focus on this? What did we want to gain from working with this issue?
- How did we work? Successes / problems on the way?
- With what result? A brief reference to where the outcome can be seen (on a poster) / read (in a report).
- Questions from the audience.

Dealing with homework: In the workshop, relevant literature on theory will be suggested by the trainer and chosen by the participants for homework and discussed in pairs or groups. Key notes will be written on posters for the other participants to see if and when interested. In the autonomous classroom, learners will e.g. read unprepared texts at home – chosen by themselves according to their level and interest and according perhaps to a suggested 'reading list'. Possible points of interest as well as new words will be discussed in pairs or groups in class – and also kept on posters. The outline of the posters in either setting will be similar, including the following headings:

- Title of text / reference
- Points for discussion / key notes
- New words / expressions / relevant vocabulary.

The point in both examples above is that the issue or topic or text dealt with is of relevance and interest to the group; therefore they will learn. On the other hand, their work can be 'used' by other members of the total group when and if needed or wanted.

Evaluation as an activity in itself: In both settings – the workshop and the autonomous classroom – evaluation is seen as the pivot of the learning process. Teachers trying to develop learner autonomy in their classes claim that evaluation takes too much time. It is therefore of utmost necessity that they themselves in the workshop try out different ways of evaluation that can be directly used in their classrooms (see Dam 1995:49-50). One of the tools in this connection is the use of a

logbook (see Dam 2008, which offers a detailed account of the use of logbooks in teacher education). In addition to awareness raising, evaluation gives scope for authentic language use.

6. *The organisation of the workshop room should resemble that of an autonomous classroom*

When entering the workshop room you should have a feeling of entering an autonomous classroom (see Dam 1994: “How do we recognize an autonomous classroom”). Hopefully, it should be obvious from the on-going activities in the room (see above), and the role of the teacher as well as the participants in that connection (see Dam 2003), but it should also be obvious as regards:

- the physical organisation of the room (e.g. participants placed in groups, the trainer working in the groups with the participants, etc.)
- the tools being used to keep track of the on-going process (e.g. posters, logbooks (see Dam 2006) and portfolios (see Miliander in *Independence* 43); and
- the on-going processes themselves (e.g. group work, cooperation, negotiation of aims and plans, evaluation of work undertaken, etc. [see Dam 1998]).

Other ways of supporting practising teachers

“The contention that experience of learner autonomy for themselves is a need for teachers if they are to promote learner autonomy of their pupils, excludes the possibility of teachers promoting learner autonomy without having had this experience for themselves.” (Trebbs 2008: 31)

There is no doubt that having experienced learner autonomy in initial teacher training, in in-service teacher training, or even in their own language learning at school⁵ is the best starting

⁵ We have reached the time where some of the first as well as later school pupils of mine are now language teachers at secondary or upper-secondary

point for teachers to develop learner autonomy themselves in their students. However, the above comment by Turid Trebbs highlights an important problem: not all practising teachers have had this chance. Fortunately, some of these teachers do change their teaching according to personal needs that have arisen (myself included). However, as this article is concerned with teacher *education* for learner autonomy, the question must be, how can teachers who do not have the chance to attend workshops or training courses be supported? Below I will mention a few possibilities for getting teachers involved in change towards the development of learner autonomy in their classes. Common to the suggestions is that they take into account one or more of the above mentioned criteria for change.

Narratives

There is no doubt that teacher narratives are important tools in this connection – the more the better, and from various classroom settings in various countries. Narratives have got the same ‘power’ as classroom videos: They lead you to a practice to which you can relate your own practice – and get inspired without being threatened. Therefore it is most welcome that a magazine like *Independence*, with presumably a large readership, in Winter 2006 started a new feature called ‘Autonomy: My Story’ where readers are invited to answer the following questions:

When, how and why did you personally get first interested in developing learner autonomy? (What were your first practical steps)? What phases did you go through as you developed your autonomy-related practice? (What or who influenced you along the way)?

The first story came from a Spanish teacher, Pili Uceira Diez (Diez 2007) who was influenced by – among others – Isabel Serrano.

Video recordings of teachers trying to develop learner autonomy in their classes

The importance of being taken into actual classrooms can’t be stressed enough in

level. I know that they are trying to promote learner autonomy even though they are up against ‘traditional’ colleagues.

connection with ‘spreading the message’ and supporting teachers. As with the written narratives, there is a strong need for video-data showing teachers and learners at work as well as the interaction between teacher and learners and among the learners themselves (cf. Dam 1998). As a result of the Nordic workshop held in Copenhagen in 2006 (Dam 2008), another video of an autonomous classroom is on its way: *Project work in an autonomous learning environment* showing one of Pili Uceira’s classes in the Basque country.

Teachers’ networks

Another possibility for support is that groups of teachers wanting to develop learner autonomy form networks and thus rely on peer education. In this connection, narratives, video recordings of the participants’ classrooms, logbooks, and portfolios from teachers as well as learners are powerful tools. There is a good chance that the network will resemble an autonomous classroom environment with its peer work, participants’ active involvement, etc. – in short – the teachers experience learner autonomy themselves.

Conferences

Last but not least, I shall highlight the many conferences that teachers can attend. Within the last few years, I think that the IATEFL conferences have improved a lot e.g. by letting workshops follow the plenary talks, thus giving interested participants the possibility to digest the contents of the talk according to their personal needs. Similarly, the recently distributed *Aberdeen Conference Selections* (Beaven 2008) has an easy-to-use format⁶. But I think that the following question is relevant to all conference organizers: How can a conference best be planned to address the above criteria for participants’ active involvement, thus supporting change and development in their institutional settings? (See Barfield and Smith 1999 for some good ideas.)

Concluding remarks and perspectives

In my view, the need for in-service teacher training and support is immense. However, a

⁶ In connection with this work, chapter 3 (pp. 38-70): “Professional development of teachers” might be of interest.

general trend in Europe seems to be that politicians claim the necessity for improved teacher education but are unwilling to pay the costs. It is therefore more important than ever to maximize the outcomes of the few opportunities there are. It is my hope that the ideas put forward in this article will be a tool in this respect – not only when it comes to the development of learner autonomy, but in general when it comes to supporting practising teachers in their professional growth.

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Self-access

Laying the Foundations for a Self-access Centre

Alex Ding

This piece is an attempt to map some of the challenges I am facing in setting up a new self-access centre (SAC) for international students at Nottingham University.

The Centre for English Language Education (CELE) at Nottingham University leads a number of (EAP) teaching and research activities: preessional and inessional teaching; running a Business foundation course; organising post-

graduate teacher training courses; creating tailor-made courses; and teaching modules on courses run by other departments. Research activities include exploring aspects of: academic writing skills; academic literacy; spoken English; turn-taking; quality assurance and standardisation; language policy; needs analysis; faculty liaison, and emerging technologies in EAP. Nottingham University has also set up a campus in Ningbo