

This article by Frank Lacey came to us originally via Leni Dam – one of the SIG’s featured speakers at the IATEFL Pre-Conference Event in Exeter next April. Leni had asked Frank, her former student on an in-service Diploma course, for his thoughts on teacher education for learner autonomy (see p. 25). Frank’s story of transformation from scepticism to enthusiasm is of wider interest, though, for the insights it provides into uncertainties along the way in implementing a pedagogy for autonomy, hence the decision to make it into this issue’s feature article. If you have a story to share in relation to your own development as a teacher and/or learner in connection with learner autonomy, please let us know.

Autonomy, never, never, never!

Frank Lacey

Once upon a time it was my firm conviction that it was the teacher's responsibility to teach and that ideas of giving students responsibility for their learning were at worst a refusal to take responsibility and at best naïve nonsense.

I, the teacher, was paid to do a job. I had a responsibility. In addition I loved teaching and enjoyed the interaction with my students. These same students scored extremely high results year after year in state-controlled exams, and I as a teacher had a very good reputation among both students and parents. My teacher-controlled classroom with a teacher-controlled curriculum worked. Tampering with this successful model would be foolish, but I did.

It was, however, not a case of Saul on the road to Damascus – a sudden change of practice upon seeing the light – but rather a long and very painful process which took over three years. As for any teacher worth his or her salt, being a teacher is an integral part of how I define myself as a person. Thus these 3+ years were full not only of hard study but also existential considerations. What was I doing? I, who had a reputation of being a strong teacher in control my classes, was flirting with the idea of autonomy. An idea which, it appeared, was diametrically opposed to everything I stood for.

Leni Dam

Leni Dam did it! She held a short course at my school extolling the virtues of autonomy. In the discussions I vehemently opposed the arguments she put forward (insisting that the teacher must take responsibility etc.). Leni countered with examples of work which her students had produced, especially logbooks. These were impressive, but ... After the course I was not finished arguing and continued discussing the matter with Leni. She suggested that I should test my arguments academically by joining an in-service teacher

training course (a pedagogical diploma course in foreign language teaching). This I took as a challenge and being convinced that my convictions were right I decided to prove it.

I started in September 2004. Leni was the course coordinator and main lecturer. The first weeks were frustrating. Nothing happened. Where was the teaching? We the participants discussed various issues. We had some interesting and fun discussions but when was Leni going to start teaching us? And the exams were looming! I had to do something – otherwise I would fail. I embarked upon a course of studies with a focus on my own teaching. I conducted experiments in my classrooms, had students fill out questionnaires and filmed my teaching. I took control of my learning and with horror realised that I myself had become an autonomous learner!

But it is hard to teach an old dog new tricks. After the first module of six months I did give my students greater influence and had more cooperative elements than before but if I am honest it took all six modules before I took the final steps to introducing autonomy in my classrooms.

After nearly three years of patient coaching and tentative experiments I took the final steps in February 2007, introducing autonomy and logbooks in two (out of five) classes. I maintained a teacher logbook, which in retrospect is at times almost amusing.

Teacher's logbook

The teacher's logbook illustrates some of the challenges faced when embarking upon autonomy. At the beginning I was very sceptical of the benefit and feasibility of using, for example, logbooks. On 14 February in my teacher logbook I write "I truly do not believe that logbooks make sense".

On Thursday 1 March I express fears that the students cannot manage without me:

Worry 1! If we take a book like "Hooligans" (a 70 page book which I previously read as a class novel, with the students reading a chapter at home, which we then discussed the following day) there is so much in that book that is between the lines and won't be understood by the kids unless it is brought to their attention.

Worry 2! Will the class maintain their progress without my dynamism? Small group work is not conducive to my group jokes and loud voice and big arm movements.

The fear of losing control after years of being in control – and of being respected for exactly that reason – was not inconsiderable. I had read Dam (1995) and Little (1991), who discuss the problems teachers face when giving control to their learners, but when I actually took the step to introduce autonomy the feeling of losing control was daunting. Previously I would sometimes have lessons where the students were not very active or were poorly prepared but now I experienced chaotic situations which I felt were a stain on my professionalism:

5 March. Oh dear! 2 periods with 7b followed by two periods with 7a. 'Chaos', 'confusion' were the words that spring to mind. Kids dreaming up nonsense projects and me saying why? and how? and with what results? Kids wanting everything from grammar books, to cardboard, to video cameras.

At first I was very stressed and struck by what Dam calls the "Octopus Syndrome". I was everywhere at once, scaffolding weak students while at the same time trying to find cardboard, books and video cameras and trying to make sure that everybody looked like they were working. It takes time to get used to the idea that they are in control of their learning.

It was difficult for the students to come to terms with their new-found freedom and at times there were lessons which were near anarchy:

10 April. Easter holidays finished. 7b wow what a lot of crap. Unmotivated students... I had the impression that they wanted me to take responsibility and my task was to send responsibility back to them... this they didn't like. I corrected 4 logbooks (Judy H, Kathy, Eli and Natalie) they were to put it mildly not impressive. These kids are not working and I end up controlling by saying that I am not satisfied.. so we revert to the earlier situation where it is the teacher that controls... oh dear!

This illustrates the teacher's dilemma in the autonomous class. On the one hand giving control to the students but nevertheless the teacher still

having responsibility to ensure that they are learning. In other words, when is it appropriate to intervene?

There are many moments of doubt and uncertainty. On 7 May 2007 I wrote in my logbook:

7b were a pain ... very little activity. Basically 2 periods of whinging. Only Dave, Niall and Dan seemed to be doing anything.

7a were more active – not wildly so but a lot better than 7b

Emanuel no work done since last Monday – that's one week! I am doubting the wisdom of autonomy after such a terrible class.

In such situations it is important to have somebody to talk to. In my case my wife:

I talked to Heidi. Talked about the problems I would face if I introduced autonomy into my German classes. It is difficult in English, where the kids are quite capable, but in German where they are linguistically much more handicapped it would be impossible.....but Heidi pointed to the success that Aine has experienced and none of my German learners are as weak as she was... mmm – interesting... maybe it would work in German.

(Aine is a particularly interesting student, she is extremely weak, and despite four years of English she is weaker than most beginners. Aine spoke her first self-initiated English sentence in the fourth week of this experiment. Aine's logbook entry is basically the first understandable written English that she has ever produced. On 27 March she produced one of many faultless and impressive sentences: "I am working quite well and I am happy with the results, I have got". And on 30 March: "I read books and talk engesk quite well and talk with people and communicate". The books were books intended for the 5th grade, but so what? For the first time in years, Aine was at ease in English classes, because she could choose. On 30 April she writes:

I fink this is a good and I can talk engelsk and a can see at I can talk engelsk with people and can a little it understand engelsk. I learn engelsk and I is very happy because I hav learn engelsk and I am a happy because I learn engelsk.

She could of course be writing this to please her teacher, but previously, English was the subject that Aine liked the least. Now she is having success and benefiting from peer scaffolding.)

Autonomy means listening to the students and after the afore-mentioned unpleasant experience (7 May 2007), in accordance with Deci's (1995) recommendations, I avoided diagnosing but asked the students what we should do:

8 May. Talked to 7b about my frustration. They said their problem was that it was "embarrassing to speak English and that there were things they couldn't say". We talked about the problem, agreed that we have to work on supporting each other and then had a super English lesson.

In addition, a lurking threat was that a discontented parent might phone to complain about their child's lack of learning (the school is a private one and the parents are very active and regularly phone). Then I would be in the position of having to admit that I didn't know what their child was doing! I would have to admit that I, the teacher, was not in control of my class. Again, received wisdom tells us that good teachers are in control of their classes and bad teachers are not. Would ordinary parents understand the paradigm change I was trying to introduce? And all the time there were the nagging questions – Am I doing well enough? Should I not be more in touch with what each group is doing? True, their logbooks were a detailed recording of their work but I didn't have these home with me all the time. Mentally, the process was very taxing. Whereas before I had two classes to prepare for and two classes to relate to, not to mention the other classes that I teach, I now had 36 students in different constellations going in very different directions that I had to juggle in my head. But as the teacher logbook illustrated there was, in contrast to my fears, parental support for the changes I had introduced: "8 March, parent-teacher meeting. Parents liked the extreme degree of 'student differentiation' and the fact that kids spoke and wrote large amounts of English".

Autonomy yes, yes, yes

After five exhausting autonomous months (and three years of postgraduate studies) I was converted. And, yes, this was somewhat humiliating after vociferously opposing all things autonomous, but therefore all the more thorough. Below are some of the reasons that I decided to choose autonomy.

School knowledge becomes action knowledge (Barnes 1976)

Judy H was the most vociferous opponent of logbooks, but then was the student who wrote most in her logbook (!). She showed several examples of bridging the gap between school knowledge and action knowledge. On 15 March she writes: "Today I'm sick again, and saw ... Harry Potter with no subtitles and I understand it". She had previously explained that she couldn't understand a film unless she read the subtitles and therefore didn't listen to the language. It is because she had a logbook and

had accepted that her learning was autonomous that she was able to take this initiative.

On 24 April she wrote: "I talk English to training (we have two girls at badminton training..they come from another land) and I talk English my self, when I am alone".

Judy H is a feisty girl who wants to decide things and therefore often ends up in conflicts with teachers. Now she does not have such conflicts, as she is given the opportunity to choose, and she is now working harder and learning more than ever before.

Cathy started her logbook (28 February) by writing on the first page: "I don't know. I would like to talk English without feeling stupid". Five weeks later she used one of her days (4 April) during the Easter holidays to speak English with her dad. She explained further: "I'm talking English at home and I write english letters to a penfriend. I want to be better at expressing myself". And on 14 April: "I have also been chatting on Arto.com which is the English edition of Arto.dk". She continues on the 17 April: "I have been chatting on arto.com for about an hour and a half ... it's a fun way of working.. I want to know how young people talk to each other". This is yet another example of the engagement of autonomy and the use of logbooks leading to an awareness that language learning is not limited to the classroom – she is clearly bridging the gap between school learning and action learning. Cathy also very clearly is using metacognitive skills to evaluate her learning and to choose a learning approach.. On 23 April she writes: "In the latest weeks I think I have improve my English writing. And im a bit proud of myself". This is an impressive display of independence for a 13-year-old. She can evaluate her learning and praise herself. At the same time as she is doing all of these things, she is peer scaffolding the weakest student (Aine).

Idel writes on 11 April:

We have to get started again after the hollidely. I have been using English in my hollidely, with my best friend Therese. It was only for fun, we almost talked english all day ☺.

Katrina explained on 13 April that she had changed the language on her mobile phone to English.

Four days ago I took my mobile on english so I could learn some new words but I could almost all the words, so I now is my mobile on Deutch so I can learn more Deutch.

Here we have a student who is taking responsibility for her learning. She then evaluates the results and chooses a more appropriate course.

Similarly, Mehmet writes that on Easter Sunday he watched an English film and he then writes half a page about the film in his logbook. Previously, he would only have done this if it had been a homework assignment. Now, however, he is giving himself homework! On 23 April he writes:

Today I also have been loke at Idel's logbook and she wirting at a special way an I was think can we write on tha way. Yes said Frank and sow I thinks what a intresent way to wirte logbook an sow I will try to wirte on the same.

Here, Mehmet is evaluating his (and Idel's) work and following his evaluation decides on how best to proceed.

Nico on 21 April:

I have been chatting on an online football game called hattrick. I have improved my communication skills when I have written with people from other countries on English....

On 23 April:

We have learnt a few new words 'benefit', 'accomodation' and 'tribe'. We are both getting better [Nico and Pete] at reading and understanding texts because if there is a word I don't understand he does and if he doesn't I do.

Here, Nico demonstrates useful cooperative learning skills, scaffolding and metacognitive skills and is also going beyond school English to “action English”.

When I collected the logbooks at the beginning of May and said that I would give them new logbooks, because I wanted to use the old ones when writing my report, many students were upset... “I couldn't just take their logbooks!” They had established a “relationship” with them, somewhat like people do with a diary.

Autonomy and logbooks: two sides of the same coin

Something which became apparent during the course of my studies was the fact that logbooks and autonomy are two sides of the same coin. The only way that a responsible teacher can change to autonomy is with logbooks. These allow the teacher to monitor (not control) student learning. Without logbooks it would be impossible to provide the necessary scaffolding, as the teacher would be removed from the student's learning process. Likewise logbooks without autonomy don't make sense. The whole point of logbooks, as experienced in this study, is that they are not only documentation but also communication. This communication only achieves authenticity when the

students are working autonomously, since this means that they have knowledge about what they are working with that the teacher does not share. Thus the logbooks have important information for the teacher. English and the use of English become authentic – not just a school subject, but a part of their real lives.

The challenges involved in introducing logbooks were less than anticipated. The students seemed to easily accept the logic that if they were to take responsibility for their learning then they had to be able to document their work.

Little (1999) says that the use of writing is also supportive of oral communication. In my study the students' logbooks created a basis for the discussions that took place in the classroom. Logbooks and their intrusion into their private world encouraged the learners to see that their English learning is not limited to the classroom, thus enabling them to bridge the gap between school knowledge and action knowledge. Some of my students increased ten-fold the time they spend learning English. And it has allowed weaker students to work with tasks that support their learning. For example, previously I made a special effort to find simpler tasks for the very weak student I described above (Aine, 7a). In this way, she was not part of the class, but on the contrary she was demonstratively excluded. Now however she, like every other student, is involved in solving her self-chosen tasks and has thus become part of the class.

Paradoxes in autonomy

An advantage of which I was unaware when I started, was the incredibly detailed insight into the academic performance of each and every child that logbooks give. The industrious student can clearly demonstrate his/her diligence, but the student who is not making an effort clearly demonstrates his/her lack of effort. I believe that there are some interesting paradoxes in autonomy:

Autonomy means me giving control to students.	<i>but</i>	Logbooks give me more control/insight than I have ever had before.
The class unity is lost in the many small groups.	<i>but</i>	Weak students are, just like strong students, working on their self-assigned tasks, and thus are no longer segregated in the class, but are part of the class.
The teacher has no preparation	<i>but</i>	The teacher is <i>extremely</i> busy scaffolding individuals and groups

The students have responsibility for their learning	<i>but</i>	Through scaffolding, the teacher takes more responsibility than in a traditional class
---	------------	--

Changes in teacher learner roles

The introduction of autonomy leads to very definite changes in teacher/learner roles. The most important change is that focus is moved from teaching to learning. The students achieve ownership of their learning. The teacher no longer knows all the answers, meaning that communication in the FL classroom becomes authentic and the language becomes the means as well as the goal. The degree of educational differentiation is enormous compared to traditional teacher-controlled lessons. The teacher must ensure scaffolding but is not alone in this responsibility. The willingness of students to accept responsibility for their learning and the amount of peer scaffolding which I have experienced is impressive. Another alteration in the teacher/learner role is that it is no longer the teacher who has all responsibility for evaluation of unsatisfactory work. The fact that the students accept responsibility for evaluating their work removes a point of conflict that is common in the traditional classroom, where students can see the teacher as an opponent, who “gives” them bad grades. In the autonomous class teacher and learner are on the same side, exploring the FL world together.

Now, six months later, all five of my classes (both German and English) are working autonomously. All my students maintain logbooks which are written in the target language.

I have for the past three years had a homepage which I have used to communicate with students and parents and as a display window for student's work. This has now been extended to include a class logbook where students document what they are working on. Thus students, by accessing the class logbook (which is usually displayed via projector in every lesson), can inspire each other and sceptical parents can see that the teacher has by no means abdicated but is fully up to date with what each and every student is doing. This solves the problem I mentioned above under ‘Teacher logbooks’ about not being completely up to date on what each student is doing.

Introducing autonomy was a painful process and despite my enthusiasm I am sure that I would not have completed the transition from teacher-controlled teaching to autonomy if it had not been for the structure that the Diploma course offered and the unfailing encouragement of Leni Dam.

The result

My bright students have taken off. In one class of 14 year olds one student is reading *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams and another is on the second book in the trilogy *Northern Lights* by Philip Pulman. At the same time weaker students are freed from the terror of language classes where their inadequacies are cruelly exposed.

All in all our language classes have changed from being a spectator sport to a participant sport.

References

- Barnes, D. (1976): *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dam, L. (1995) *Learner Autonomy: From Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Deci, E. (1995) *Why We Do What We Do: The Dynamics of Personal Autonomy*. London: Penguin Books.
- Little, D. (1991) *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (1999) ‘Metalinguistic awareness: the cornerstone of learner autonomy’. In Missler, B. & Multhaupt, U. (eds.) *The Construction of Knowledge, Learner Autonomy and Related Issues in Foreign Language Learning: Essays in Honour of Dieter Wolff*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag.



Frank Lacey, who is originally from Ireland, has been teaching German and English in Denmark for 20 years. He moved to Denmark from Ireland to marry Heidi. They have since adopted two children from Vietnam and China whom they have reared bilingually. Much of Frank's teaching and his

