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Nine steps to learner autonomy

In this presentation, I will provide a theoretical rationale for a curriculum grounded in notions of learner-centredness and learner autonomy. I will then present, and illustrate with data from the classroom, a nine step procedure for moving learners along the continuum from dependence to autonomy.

The concepts of learner-centredness and learner autonomy

What I wish to do in this paper is to present a case for a learner-centred approach to language teaching. Such an approach …

> … will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (see, for example, Hunkins, 1980). However, the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught.
>
> (Nunan, 1988:2)

Learners who are able to play the kind of active role in their own learning that is implied in the above quote could be said to be autonomous. A great deal has been said and written about learner autonomy. One of the clearest articulations is by two of my my colleague at the English Centre, Phil Benson and Peter Voller, who have produced an excellent book on the subject. They adopt Henri Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning', and point out that in language education the term is used in at least five different ways:

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own
2. for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning
3. for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education
4. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning

5. for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own
learning.

(Benson and Voller, 1997: 1 – 2).

In a recent publication looking at the practicalities of developing autonomy in the classroom, Benson (2003) argues that

Autonomy is perhaps best described as a capacity … because various kinds of abilities can be involved in control over learning. Researchers generally agree that the most important abilities are those that allow learners to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes.

(Benson, 2003: 290)

Unfortunately, few learners come into any given learning arrangement with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow them to take part in the kind of pedagogical partnership spelled out in the preceding paragraphs. Teachers who are committed to concepts of learner-centredness and autonomy, must therefore help their learners to develop this knowledge and skills. They can do this by incorporating into their teaching a set of learning process goals to sit alongside language content goals.

Philosophically, learner-centredness and autonomy are rooted in humanism and experiential psychology. For an excellent overview of these traditions and an account of how they have shaped language education, see Kohonen (1992). In experiential learning, students are placed at the center of the learning process, and their immediate personal experiences are taken as the point of departure for the learning process. Humanistic psychology attempts to make sense of experience at the point where sociology and psychology intersect. Humanism facilitates personal growth, helps learners adapt to social change, takes into account differences in learning ability, and is responsive both to learner needs and practical pedagogical considerations (Kohonen, cited in Nunan, 1999: 6).

The concept of curriculum

'Curriculum' is a large, vague concept that has been variously defined. For many people 'The Curriculum' is a document that specifies the content to be covered in a course of study, along with principles for how it is to be delivered and evaluated. The following conceptualization from Stenhouse shows how comprehensive a curriculum proposal can be.

A. In planning

1. Principles for the selection of content – what is to be learned and taught.
2. Principles for the development of a teaching strategy – how it is to be learned and taught.
3. Principles for the making of decisions about sequence.
4. Principles on which to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and differentiate the general principles 1,2, and 3 above, to meet individual cases.

B. In empirical study

1. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of students.
2. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of teachers.
3. Guidance as to the feasibility of implementing the curriculum in varying school contexts, pupil contexts, environments and peer-group situations.
4. Information about the variability of effects in differing contexts and on different pupils and an understanding of the causes of the variations.

C. In relation to justification

A formulation of the intention or aim of the curriculum which is accessible to critical scrutiny.

(Stenhouse, 1975: 5)

Despite its comprehensiveness the model tells only part of the curriculum story, representing as it does the curriculum as plan. In this paper, I will argue that we also need to take into consideration the implemented curriculum (what actually happens in the classroom), and the curriculum as outcome (what students actually learn). In a truly learn-centred system, all three dimensions will be taken into consideration.

Learner training and autonomy: A nine step program

There are levels and degrees of learner autonomy. In fact, dependence and autonomy are not categorically distinct. Rather, they exist on a continuum. In my own classrooms, I work hard at moving learners along a continuum from total dependence on the teacher to autonomy. This is done by incorporating a series of steps into the educational process. Alt-

hough I have set the following steps out sequentially, some of the steps overlap, and can be introduced simultaneously. The is particularly true of Steps 4 - 9, which focus on learning processes, and can be introduced alongside Steps 1 - 3 which are more content oriented.

• *Step 1: Make instruction goals clear to learners*

A first step in giving learners a voice is to make instructional goals clear to the students themselves. If the evidence that I have gathered in many classrooms over many years is anything to go by, this is relatively rare. In a study I carried out some years ago into aspects of classroom management, there was only a single teacher who spelled out the pedagogical agenda for her learners. Here is an extract from the start of one of her lessons in which she sets out the agenda for her learners. She is using a mandated textbook in which the goals and objectives are implicit, and yet she is able to make the goals of the lesson explicit to the learners. She does so by actively involving them in the process, rather than simply informing them.

> T: Today we're going to practice talking about likes and dislikes, and we're going to talk about music and movies and stuff. OK? OK Kenji? Now, I want you to open your books at page 22, that's where the unit starts, and [inaudible comment from student] … What's that? ….. Yeah, that's right. Now, I want you to look quickly through the unit and find one example, one example of someone saying they like something, and one example of someone saying they don't like something? OK? One example of each. And I'm going to put them here on the board.

If you are producing your own materials, or adapting those written by others, it is relatively easy to make the goals explicit. Once again, learners can be actively involved, as the following example shows:

UNIT GOALS
In this unit you will:
• Make comparisons:
  "Which do you prefer, the bus or the subway?"
  "I guess I like the subway better."
• Make plans:
  "I'm going to fly to Spain for my vacation"

(Nunan 1995:85)

The unit could be completed by asking the learners to carry out a self-checking exercise such as the following. While this has been extracted from a commercial source, it is the sort of exercise that teachers can readily create.

Review the language skills you practiced in this unit. Check [√] your answers.

CAN YOU?
Make comparisons?   [   ] yes   [   ] a little   [   ] not yet

Find or give an example: ....

Make plans?   [   ] yes   [   ] a little   [   ] not yet

Find or give an example: ....

Give advice?   [   ] yes   [   ] a little   [   ] not yet

Find or give an example: ....

(Nunan 1995:92)

As I indicated above, I believe that the idea of making the pedagogical agenda explicit to the learners is relatively uncontroversial, and something which can be done with all but the youngest of learners. This provides a basis for learners to be involved in selecting their own goals and content. Dam and Gabrielsen (1988) found that even relatively young learners were capable of making decisions about the content and processes of their own learning. Learners, regardless of their aptitude or ability, were capable of a positive and productive involvement in selecting their own content and learning procedures. Furthermore, learners were also positive in accepting responsibility for their own learning.

• Step 2: Allow learners to create their own goals

The next step in giving learners a voice would be to allow learners to create their own goals and content. An interesting and practical way of involving learners at this level is reported in Parkinson and O'Sullivan (1990). They report on the notion of the 'action meeting' as a way of involving learners in modifying course content.

A mechanism was needed for course management: as the guiding and motivating force behind the course, it would have to be able to deal with individual concerns and negotiate potential conflicts of interest, need, and temperament. It would also have to satisfy the individual while not threatening the group's raison d'être. As foreshadowed in the orientation phase, the group would now experiment with a mechanism suggested by the teachers, namely a series of Action Meetings. ... [These] would provide an opportunity for individuals to participate (interpersonally and interculturally) in an English-medium meeting, negotiating meaning and authentic content. They would also be a means of facilitating group cohesion and motivation and would be a primary mechanism for ongoing program evaluation by the participants.

<div align="right">(Parkinson and O'Sullivan, 1990: 119-120)</div>

• *Step 3: Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom*

A logical extension of this idea is to get learners activating their language outside the classroom itself. The following classroom extract illustrates the way in which one teacher encouraged students to think about activating their language outside of the classroom.

[The students are sitting in small groups of two to four as the teacher addresses them.]
T: Well students, as you know, this morning we're going to be looking at ways that we can help learners improve their English - without a teacher, without, um, a class to come to. What've we got all around us that can help us? Well the first thing that we're going to be looking at are these things.[She bends down and picks up a plastic shopping bag.] Now in the bag - I've got a bag full of mystery objects in here - different things, but they all have one thing in common. We can use them to help improve our language. Now this is going to be lucky dip type activity. Have you ever done a lucky dip?
Ss: Yes, yes.
T: Yes. Where you put your hand in and you take one thing out. I'll do it the first time. Put my hand in and I'll just bring ..... something out.
[She pulls out a mirror.]
Oh, a mirror. Now how can this help us improve our language – you got any ideas? Irene?

S: We can help, er, our voc ... vocabulary.
T: Vocabulary's one thing, yes. How?
S: We can look, er, how we pronounce the words (Mmm). We can look in the mirror and see how our mouth moves.
T: Good. Yes, we can see how our mouth moves - by looking at our reflection in the mirror. For example, the sound 'th'. Can you all say 'th'?
Ss: No. [Laughter]
[The teacher distributes the rest of the objects in the bag and the students, working in groups, spend ten minutes discussing the ways in which the different objects they have chosen can be used for practicing English outside the class. The teacher then calls the activity to a halt.]

(Nunan, 1991: 182)

• Step 4: Raise awareness of learning processes

So far, I have talked about giving learners a voice in deciding *what* to learn. However, it's also important to give them a voice in *how* they learn. I have found that the best place to begin in this is to raise their awareness of the strategies underlying classroom tasks. This is something that all teachers can do, regardless of whether they are working with a mandated curriculum and materials, or whether are relatively free to decide what to teach and how to teach it. This is illustrated in the following classroom extract.

T: One of the things, er, we practice in this course ... is ... or some of the things we practice are learning strategies. And one of the learning strategies that will help you learn new words is the learning strategy of 'classifying'. Do you know what 'classifying' means?
Ss: No no.
T: Have you heard this word before?
Ss: No.
T: Classifying means putting things that are similar together in groups. OK? So if I said, er, I want all of the girls to go down to that corner of the room, and all the boys to go into this corner of the room, I would be classifying the class according to their sex or their gender. What I'd like you to do now in Task 5 is to classify some of the words from the list in Task 4. OK? [In the preceding task, students had read a postcard and circled the words that describe people. They were then given a three column table with the headings: 'color', 'age', and 'size'.]

• *Step 5: Help learners identify*
their own preferred styles and strategies

The next step in the development of a learner-centered classroom would be to train learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies. Detailed guidance on how this might be achieved are taken up later in the book when we focus on the learning process.

Once I have helped my learners to identify their own preferred styles and strategies, I begin to give them choices from a range of options. The notion that learners are capable of making choices has been questioned by some commentators. It has also been suggested that the notion of choice is a Western one, which doesn't work in Eastern educational contexts. All I can say is that it works in Hong Kong. I was also able to make it work in Thailand. There is evidence from other sources as well. Widdows and Voller (1991) for example, investigated the ability of Japanese university students to make choices. As a result of their study they found that students were able to make choices, and that their preferences were often markedly at odds with the content and methodology that they were exposed to in class. They report that,

> Students do not like classes in which they sit passively, reading or translating. They do not like classes where the teacher controls everything. They do not like reading English literature much, even when they are literature majors. Thus it is clear that the great majority of university English classes are failing to satisfy learner needs in any way. Radical changes in the content of courses, and especially in the types of courses that are offered, and the systematic retraining of EFL teachers in learner-centered classroom procedures are steps that must be taken, if teachers and administrators are seriously interested in addressing their students' needs.
>
> (Widdows and Voller 1991)

• *Step 6: Encourage learner choice*

In some foreign language contexts, the notion of student choice may be a relatively unfamiliar or even alien one. In such a case it is preferable to engage the learners in a relatively modest level of decision-making in the first instance. For example, if the data for a lesson include a reading passage and a listening text, learners might be asked to decide which they would rather do first, the reading or the listening. If teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of students doing different things at the same time,

then it can be put to a class vote. Then could then gradually be involved in making choices such as the following, in which the activity type and task is similar. The point is not that learners in different groups will be doing things that are radically different, but that they are being sensitized to the notion of making choices.

YOU CHOOSE: DO A OR B
A: Group Work. Think about the last time you went grocery shopping. Make a list of all the things you bought. Compare this list with the lists of three or four other students. Whose list is the healthiest?
B: Group Work. Think about all the healthy things you did last week. Make a list. Compare this list with the lists of three or four other students. Who had the healthiest week?

Once learners are used to the idea, they can be invited to make more elaborate choices, as in the following example. Here learners are asked to preview three tasks that they will be doing in a lesson, to identify the major skills focus, and to decide the order in which they will do the tasks.

YOU CHOOSE
a) Look quickly at the next three tasks and decide whether these are listening, speaking, reading, or writing tasks. (b) Now decide the order in which you wish to do them. Circle your choices.

I'll do this task ......

Task 1: A .... task   1st   2nd   3rd

Task 2: A .... task   1st   2nd   3rd

Task 3: A ....task   1st   2nd   3rd

These examples illustrate the point that even within the various points on the learner-centered continuum, it is possible to identify 'sub-continua'.

• Step 7: Allow learners to generate their own tasks

Having encouraged learners to make choices, the next step is to provide them with opportunities to modify and adapt classroom tasks. This could be a preliminary step to teaching students to create their own tasks. This

need not involve highly technical materials design skills, which would clearly be unrealistic. I have started learners on the path towards developing their own materials by giving them the text but not the questions in a reading comprehension task and asking them, in small groups, to write their own questions. These are then exchanged with another group to be answered and discussed.

• *Step 8: Encourage learners to become teachers*

At a more challenging level, learners would become teachers. There is nothing like the imminent prospect of having to teach something for stimulating learning. Lest this should be thought utopian, I can point to precedents in the literature. Assinder, for example, gave her students the opportunity of developing video-based materials with they subsequently used for teaching other students in the class. The innovation was a success, the critical factor of which, according to Assinder, was the opportunity for the learner to become the teacher:

> I believe that the goal of 'teaching each other' was a factor of paramount importance. Being asked to present something to another group gave a clear reason for the work, called for greater responsibility to one's own group, and led to increased motivation and greatly improved accuracy. The success of each group's presentation was measured by the response and feedback of the other group; thus there was a measure of in-built evaluation and a test of how much had been learned. Being an 'expert' on a topic noticeably increased self-esteem, and getting more confident week by week gave [the learners] a feeling of genuine progress.
>
> (Assinder, 1991: 228)

• *Step 9: Encourage learners to become researchers*

Finally, it is possible to educate learners to become language researchers. Once again, for those who think this notion fanciful or utopian, there is a precedent in the literature. Heath (1992), working with educationally disadvantaged children in the United States asked her collaborators to document the language they encountered in the community beyond the classroom.

> Students were asked ... to work together as a community of ethnographers, collecting, interpreting, and building a data bank of infor-

mation about language in their worlds. They had access to know-ledge I wanted, and the only way I could get that knowledge was for them to write to me. They collected field notes, wrote interpre-tations of patterns they discovered as they discussed their field no-tes, and they answered the questions I raised about their data col-lection and their interpretations.

<div align="right">(Heath, 1992: 42)</div>

Despite the struggle involved, students learned through the process of becoming ethnographic researchers that communication is negotiation, and they got to reflect on the important relationships between socializa-tion, language and thought. In substantive terms, all students moved out of the Basic English in 'regular' English classes, and two moved into 'ho-nors' English. As Heath reports, 'Accomplishments were real and mea-ningful for these students.'

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to articulate a vision of language education that is firmly rooted in the humanistic tradition of education. This tradition argues for a pedagogical partnership between teachers and learners. Such as partnership can only become a reality if learners have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to play an active role in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their own learning. The nine step pro-cedures described and illustrated in the body of this paper is designed to do just that.

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