The Teacher's Role in Learner Autonomy

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The significance of the teacher’s role in an autonomous learning environment is becoming clearer and more evident as more attempts at instilling and researching learner autonomy are being made. When the interest in learner-centred education surged especially after the second world war, the pendulum swung from an extreme of teacher- and book-centred education, to another extreme where teachers were actually removed altogether from classrooms, for example in 1962 (Powell 1981). Since then, there has been a more rational and tranquil search for more a successful implementation of learner autonomy.

While the major part of the enquiry on learner autonomy obviously converges around the learner, the role of the teacher is not ignored. As is rightly pointed out in the literature, teachers unknowingly are already exercising learner autonomy to a smaller or greater degree. Without disregarding the fact that a good number of teachers see their job as essentially one of telling or showing things to other people (see Powell 1981, Cornwall 1981), and that there are many students who do not wish to accept more responsibility for their own learning (see Axiaq 1998, Powell 1981, Cornwall 1981), it has to be acknowledged that teachers do have autonomy thrust upon them, though they don't always know it (Little 1994), and they do practice it (Balbi and Bordi 1996). In reality, every teacher has to interpret the syllabus, and every teacher has got to mediate the learning materials, even if they are compulsory. Every teacher has got to articulate a set of classroom procedures and processes. As Little (1994) argues, the task for teachers, therefore, if they could be brought to realize that they have this autonomy whether they like it or not, is to exercise and develop learner autonomy.

There is, therefore, the recognition of a need for a systematic approach in teacher education, and in the execution of the profession, in terms of the development of a more conscious and accurate set of skills. It has to be acknowledge that learner autonomy contributes to the self-esteem and independence of the individual. Furthermore, by more closely identifying the learner with the choice and conduct of the learning, it generates a greater sense of commitment and involvement. This is a trend that goes hand in hand with the communicative approach advocated by the Council of Europe, and with the project of European Citizenship (eg. Holec ed. 1988; Shiels 1992).

What are, therefore, the skills that the teacher needs to be aware of, and to strive to develop further in a context of learner autonomy? The teacher needs to realize that her main task is no longer that of knowledge transmission, but more in the area of task setter, counsellor and resource person. As the learners take on more responsibility for establishing their learning needs, for choosing their methods, for looking up informa-
tion themselves, they will seek the teacher, above all, for guidance and for feedback on the way they choose to proceed.

There are a number of characteristics that the teacher of the autonomous learner needs to develop (Camilleri 1997a), most important of which involve an ‘awareness’ of self. The teacher of the autonomous learner:

Is aware of her own personal influence on the learning process. She is aware of her own beliefs, attitudes, skills, and practices relating to autonomy; she is conscious of her own learning experience and her level of autonomy as learner; she knows her students' affective and cognitive characteristics and their attitudes and skills relating to autonomy.

Understands pedagogy. She understands the principles of the underlying theory of learner autonomy and the practices in the everyday classroom events that emerge from the underlying theory.

Is skilled in management. She can manage a class where students participate actively in decision-making and in the use of a variety of strategies and materials useful to them. She can observe students with a view to enhancing their individual learning styles, and in helping them cope with a degree of uncertainty in the day to day learning process.

In classroom practice, the teacher acts in a modified learning environment by creating a more relaxed atmosphere from one continuously threatened by examination pressure; by providing a great variety of material from which learners choose the most interesting and appealing to them; by giving guidance, encouragement and feedback (Štros 1995, Skinner 1996, Davies 1987).

From an imparter of information, the teacher becomes more of a manager, a resource person and a counsellor.

The teacher as manager

The teacher no longer imparts knowledge, but is a manager of activities; she is no longer a source of facts, but a person who can see links. She must be able to map out the most likely paths available to the student and also the likely consequences of following any particular path. She has, therefore, to be good at planning, both for individuals and for groups, short-term and long-term. Researchers have repeatedly affirmed the importance of collaboration, as well as the social and affective dimensions in autonomous learning (eg. Percy and Ramsden 1980, Abercrombie 1981, Camilleri 1997b).

Among the most difficult areas that the teacher needs to develop are new assessment procedures. These are necessary both to indicate learners’ progress, and to diagnose
problems. Furthermore, she has to find out how to fulfill external criteria for judging achievement, for instance, as laid down by external examining bodies.

The teacher has to be a role model. She can do this, for example, by publicly undertaking self-evaluation, and by working together with other colleagues. Only then, can students emulate her example in activating regular self-assessment procedures, and in nurturing a collegial working environment. Smith (1983:130) refers to role modelling as serving to raise learners’ aspirations, and says that, in fact, ‘the most successful mentors have themselves benefited from experience as learners’.

To what extent, and in what ways, can the teacher help learners manage their learning process? It has been recommended (eg. Ellis and Sinclair 1989) that teachers negotiate with learners course content and methodology, and that they share information about the learning process (the cognitive, metacognitive and affective dimensions) and encourage classroom discussion about it. It is advisable that learners be allowed to form their own conclusions about learning and be respected for their individual points of view. This means that teachers create a learning environment where learners feel they can experiment with learning. However, as Potts (1981) points out, it would be wrong to introduce learner autonomy without any preparation by, for example, asking students blank questions like ‘What do you want to do?’ as a starting point for a programme. Students are too inexperienced or too conditioned for that to be liberating. It is not giving a person autonomy to throw him into the water without teaching him how to swim. Therefore, questions like the following are more likely to be helpful:

- Do I want to work on my own or with others? Why?
- Which topic do we want to work on together? Why?
- How can we share the work?
- What are our objectives?
- How do our objectives relate to our learning needs?
- Against which criteria shall we evaluate our work?
- How do we want to present our end product?

Time for reflection and discussion of questions like these is very valuable for learners for clarify their decision-making process, and to enhance their metacognitive strategies.

The teacher as resource person

The teacher as a resource person optimizes learning conditions by helping learners be aware of a wide range of alternative strategies, and by, for example helping them develop an awareness of learning styles.
Teachers are encouraged to move away from over-dependence on the textbook towards a more creative and independent relationship (Skinner 1996, Christophorou 1994). Teachers must not only be able to analyze and evaluate textbooks, but by using their imagination, flexibility and creativity they will make textbook material more interesting and motivating.

Published textbooks, for example, are commercially produced for global use. As a result, it is highly unlikely for any textbook to be ideally or completely suited to an individual teaching situation. It is the teacher’s job to find ways and means of using the textbook in ways that best suit learners’ needs. There is no doubt that classroom teachers know their students’ needs and interests, their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses better than any textbook writer does (Christophorou 1994). Furthermore, learners should be encouraged to extract the relevant information, to devise their own questions and tasks, and to learn to exploit the visuals in the most useful manner.

The teacher needs the support of the school in fulfilling her role as a resource person. While she can, together with the students, make available a wide range of materials, and maximize the way these are utilized, it is imperative to have libraries, computing equipment with access to the internet, resource centres and the like made accessible to learners.

**The teacher as counsellor**

The teacher as counsellor is able to accompany individual learning processes, and to respond meaningfully to learning problems, often in advance of a student perceiving a need. She must be proficient in identifying symptoms of what one might call learning distress (Davies 1987).

Percy and Ramsden (1980) in their report on research of learner autonomy in higher educational English institutions, emphasize the relationship of learner and tutor. The students involved in the experiments agreed that the tutor should be guide and referee, and that the rapport with the tutor must be good. The students felt that it was essential that a bond, both academic and personal, ought to grow between tutor and student. The tutor will thus give a sense of security and belonging to compensate for the amorphous learning environment.

There is, however, a problem: What is the correct balance between help and independence? Potts (1981), for example, refers to being trapped in a dilemma of wanting students to have autonomy, and wanting them to adopt the values he believes in. As far as possible the teacher is not intended to be prescriptive. The learners should have the freedom to decide which alternatives to adopt or reject. The role of the teacher is crucial in creating from the beginning an atmosphere of trust and confidence within which learners feel free to exercise their independent judgement and pursue their interests. Even when students exert pressure intended to compel the teacher to behave...
in a more conventional manner, it must be resisted without provoking disabling anxieties (Powell 1981).

The teacher can be a counsellor if she is available for a relatively long period of time during which a relationship can evolve naturally. Smith (1980) appropriately points out that such relationship will change, develop, and eventually decline, since dependency of learner on teacher should gradually decrease. While outgrowing the need for a mentor is natural, it is realistic to expect some pain or difficulty when the relationship becomes less intense or terminates. Tutors generally appreciate being told by learners that their guidance has been useful.

Conclusion

In autonomous learning, learner and teacher are partners in the learning process. The teacher is the learning expert, and the learner is the expert on him/herself. The development of learner autonomy is a complex process and the teacher must not expect instant results. Autonomous learning must be graded very carefully. The teacher who accepts responsibility for providing an environment that helps students learn how to learn more effectively faces no easy task. It is a responsibility of a high order, one with much potential for rewards for both teacher and learner. Together they will need to feel their way and to take some risks. Eventually both will be able to share in the satisfactions that their persistence will almost surely bring.

There is likely to be more success when autonomy is presented as an alternative, and not as a replacement for an existing approach. The main purpose is to start the learners on their own journeys towards self-knowledge and self-reliance.

References


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