

psychological needs that, when met, lead to intrinsic motivation: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. School of the Air helped fulfill these needs for us. Although we couldn't see it, School of the Air gave us a sense of belonging to a community. We would check in with our teacher every school day, and we could hear the voices of other little kids experiencing the same wonder as us. We had a sense of competence because we were learning from materials designed to be at just the right level for us (optimal challenge). Moreover, seeing as there were no other kids, no TV, no video, no clubs, no shops...absolutely nothing, we were free from distractions and totally focused on completing our lessons. Not surprisingly, we also finished them in haste. And finally, we also had ample autonomy because, apart from having to be present for our morning roll call, we could study whenever we wanted.

Deci and Ryan (2000) also postulate that students in autonomy-supportive environments show higher levels of motivation and learn more than students in controlled environments. My brother and I can vouch for this, too. We were proactive and engaged. We used to burn through those materials so fast that we would finish two weeks' work in one week. There were no school rules for us, no sitting in crowded classrooms waiting for a bell to ring, either. In fact, there was no watching a clock at all. We were interested, excited, confident, and this translated into performance, persistence, and creativity. In fact, we were so creative that once we had finished all our materials, we would just check in for roll call in the morning and then knock off down the creek catching snakes and lizards until the next lot of materials arrived.

Now I find myself here in Japan. My neighbor lives only inches away from me, I have over a hundred channels on my TV, and a convenience store is always in walking distance. Like everyone else teaching in Japan, I also find myself bound by various institutional constraints. These controls are often a necessary fact of life as a teacher, but learner autonomy seems to me to offer us some balance in regards to overbearing control. That, combined with my own learning experience, makes me think that we can use learner autonomy to motivate our students to reach higher and achieve more. If we can give our students a sense of belonging, then they will work hard for their community. If we can give them a sense of success, then they will gain the confidence to push their boundaries. And if we can give them a sense of choice, then they

will be motivated to take control. My brother and I thrived on the ability to take control of our learning. We ended up being sent away to boarding school in our high school years. However, my School of the Air experience set me up to thrive at distant learning when doing my Masters as an external student. The ability to take control of my learning was a motivating experience that I hope I can pass onto my students.

#### References

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## Greetings from Learner Development SIG Member Bill Mboutsiadis

### LD SIG 会員紹介 : Bill Mboutsiadis

Hello everyone. My name is Bill Mboutsiadis. I have been asked to introduce myself since I'm a recent LD SIG member and to discuss my understanding of learner development. I hope to meet more of you during the various events that are now being developed. As LD programme chair, I've had the pleasure to connect with some of you via emails and so I'm looking forward to meeting you in person this year. In this introduction I will also explain my ongoing understanding of learner development by specifically discussing what learner autonomy means for me and how it is realized with my learners in our shared learning environment.

I arrived in Japan in March of 2010 with my family to teach at Meisei University in the West Tokyo area of Hino City. I have been teaching in ESL environments for most of my career though my initial experience was teaching at a university in Bratislava, Slovakia. Turning down a JET teaching offer back in 1996, I started teaching English for Academic Preparation at the University of Toronto's English Language Program. Since then I've always wondered how things would have turned out for me if had chosen to go to Japan. Coming here has thus fulfilled a long-time goal to have a Japanese EFL teaching opportunity.

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It has also been a great chance for my children's growth and learning. My second son Alexander was born in Niigata in December of 2010. Finally, a major motivating factor to come to Japan was to re-energize my career after a recent loss of plausibility and purpose in my teaching. The professional development possibilities and academic rigor in applied research here in Japan have been a major motivating factor to better myself and has contributed to a re-evaluation of my professional belief system. Most memorable so far has been the many individuals with whom I've met at various conferences who have welcomed me as if I'd been here for a long time. I've been learning on a daily basis here. With the LD SIG, I have found a great sense of a community of practice which brings out the best in everyone. This is what I have been missing the last 10 years of my career.

### Learner autonomy development

As soon as we take our first breath as human beings upon leaving our mother's womb, we



are born learners. We are learners in the survival of life. The recent birth of my two sons in 2009 and 2010, have demonstrated to me, as to all new fathers, the curious love of

learning. They both are independent explorers of the world. My wife and I give guidance and try to create an environment of encouragement for learning and growth. John, my three-year-and-three-month old son, is constantly trying to do things on his own. He literally pushed me away and wants to do things by himself. He demonstrates a desire to have control of his learning through his curious exploration of the environment around him. I have come to realize that I should give time for him to figure things out on his own. With my watchful eye and positive feedback I am facilitating his learning through experiences that he is creating and not simply being directed towards instructional behaviour from me. Knowing when to intervene and when not to is key to maintaining an unobtrusive observation.

In the future, as my children enter educational settings, there will be attempts to curtail their independent learning through the conforming influences of formal institutions. This is unfortunate and can be stifling for learners. A loss of control and ownership of their learning

process will occur. I would hope their learning environment would encourage them to be independent critical thinkers and encourage them to seek out truth and knowledge.

I believe autonomy in learning is the taking back of this loss of control in one's learning process. The ability to take charge of one's learning is very powerful because it builds learner agency. Agency creates motivation through nurturing curiosity and thus developing a belief that something positive is happening to one's self and that there is independent control that is facilitating this experience. A confidence is thus created that allows a learner to be a risk taker in the learning process. This regained control shifts the responsibility of learning to the learner as opposed to being dependent on the educator (Holec, 1981). According to (Benson, 2001), "the autonomous learner is one that constructs knowledge from direct experience, rather than one who responds to someone's instruction" (p. 70). As in my son's case there is a natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning. Autonomy may be displayed in different ways to different degrees depending on each learner and the learning situation. Autonomy can be developed if given the appropriate conditions and preparation and is a more effective form of learning than non-autonomous learning. Autonomy can be illustrated by the famous quote of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), "You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself." Furthermore, within my practice I try to be less of an instructor and more of a facilitator. My students are discouraged from relying on me as the main source of knowledge. I try to encourage my students' own capacity to learn on their own and with their peers. I try to encourage them to make decisions about what they learn. This all takes time and patience since it is basically a re-socialization that needs to take place.

At Meisei University in Japan, the instructors in the International Studies Department have been given great autonomy in instruction and curriculum development. The instructors have come together and decided the textbooks for particular courses. On the other hand, the department that manages the required general English courses has basically mandated the textbooks. In all classes where a text is required we, the students and I, negotiate the chapters of the text that they would like to cover. In some other classes I have gone off the textbook and used my own material to liven up the class since the text is so disconnected

from the learners' reality. The most autonomy I have in my teaching context is by being the chair of the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) autonomy learning courses. International Studies majors are required to take four autonomous learning classes over the first two years of study. These classes are quite unique in Japan and take place in a CALL room. I am lucky as the chair of the CALL autonomy learning courses since I am constantly learning and trying to make a positive learning environment for my students and instructors. We are constantly adapting and improving the course. There is no text book for the class. Most of materials are developed, provided and introduced to the students. Students are also encouraged to seek out other sources for their learning that may include online websites or other out-of-class learning opportunities. The class is not streamed by proficiency levels due to the logistics of booking the CALL room. This mixed class context allows for each student to seek out their own comfortable level of learning. Students have a choice of their learning activities on a daily basis. The activities include a variety of online learning sites, in-house software, graded readers and some DVDs. The students are assigned a similar term project but it allows for self directed creativity and expression.

Within my classes I try to give as much choice to my learners as possible. In the autonomy classes there is absolutely no testing of any kind unless the students try some online quizzes. At the end of the term I set up advising sessions where we look at the term's activities and their progress and together we negotiate their final mark. This situation is quite unique and can be explained by the fact that Meisei is a private university which allows

some freedoms. The English teachers have been given great autonomy in designing the curriculum. This autonomy would be very limited in a more conservative national university. Finally, autonomy in learning in general, as I see it, is not necessarily a final destination. It is also not something to be taught by some individual. It is a life-long path of continual discovery by both the learner and educator of what it means to connect with the world in the search for ultimate truths in life.

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