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Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching:
New Research Agendas. Alice Chik, Naoko Aoki, & Richard Smith, 2018. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 137 pages, ISBN 978-1-137-52998-5, Hardcover ￥7,245, eBook ￥5,795.

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Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: New Research Agendas (hereafter dubbed ALL&T), edited by Alice Chik, Naoko Aoki, and Richard Smith was published in early 2018, but had its origins in the RenLA Research Agenda Project first outlined in December 2012. At that time, Alice, Naoko, and Richard were just a year into their 2011 to 2014 roles as co-conveners of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy (RenLA). The Research Agendas in their 2012 versions are still available online here <https://ailarenla.org/lall/december-2012/>, a web page essential to the contemplation of how difficult and poignant our research and publication efforts so often turn out to be.

First, and most obviously, ALL&T became one of Naoko's final publications; second, the project's first public expression took place at AILA2014 in Brisbane, and it took an additional four years to shepherd the chapters through to publication, and finally, the 2012 ReNLA web page includes a collection of tributes to Richard Pemberton, who had died in January of that year. This, in a sense, brings us full circle to this issue of *Learning Learning*, to our remembrances of Naoko, and to the continuing challenges of research, scholarship, writing, and publishing in the face of what may often seem literally insurmountable obstacles to development, progress, and sustainability in both the personal and public spheres of our lives as teachers, academics, and researchers.

For most of this year I have been reading and re-reading ALL&T, in a rather disorderly fashion. Throughout these now many months I have been puzzling over several questions:

1. Are our efforts as researchers and writers–perennially thinking about how to define "learner autonomy" and "learner development" merely Sisyphean (see Alison Stewart's essay, this issue) , particularly when we try to apply our tentative definitions to the task of understanding where the field has been and where it's going?

2. Is attempting to identify and argue for "new research agendas" a similarly difficult, perhaps even a presumptuous effort?

3. Is there a special value to new ideas in education research and practice, or, do our attempts at timeliness trap us in bandwagon effects? Do the obstacles to freshness inherent in the time it takes to edit and publish a collection of chapters represent a further, and perhaps final confirmation of the dangers of pedagogical and theoretical arrogance?

4. Yet, aren't these efforts at surveying a field, making generalizations about trends, directions, and agendas an essential and inescapable aspect of our roles as academics, researchers, and scholars?

5. And finally, what are the practical obstacles (and the obstacles in the current political economy) to getting our work into the hands of readers who may benefit from our efforts, assuming, that is, that most classroom teachers are not too burned out to devote some time to reading and thinking

about theoretical and practical puzzles in a field of study?

As I am now a retired professor living in Miyazaki, far from an academic and commercial hub, availability and price of books and research papers are foremost among these concerns for me. There are also, I should acknowledge, a number of other equally personal issues at play, that led me to look forward to the publication of the ALL&T collection. First, and now sadly, is the fact I met both Richard and Naoko shortly after they founded the LD SIG together, sharing our first discussions of learner autonomy in Hong Kong in 1994. I followed their work over the years, and took great interest in Richard's work in the practical and theoretical approaches to the literature on and practice of teaching in difficult circumstances, and in Naoko's explorations of learner identity, narrative, and voice, and genre-challenging approaches to academic writing. I was also fortunate in that I could attend the ReNLA symposium in Brisbane in 2014, where I had a symposium participant's interest in seeing how the proceedings would be published. In many ways, the ALL&T collection does stand as a testament to the ways the editors' and contributors' work helped to both confirm the critical hope that learner autonomy/autonomous learning and teaching began with (see Paulo Freire, 1970, 1994, and Henri Holec, 1979, to cite only two), and helped to expand the community of its authors and practitioners. I was, I have to admit, somewhat disappointed, therefore, on two counts: (1) The time it took to actually bring the essays into print, and (2) the cost of the publication itself.

Eventually, as I thought over these questions through this year, I wrote to Richard and Alice asking if they still felt the five chapters sufficient as an articulation of "new agendas" for the field, and if they had any comments on the publication of the collection and on its price, and thus its relative inaccessibility to teachers and research practitioners with limited funding and/or access to major research libraries. Both Alice and Richard were gracious in their responses, agreeing that open-access (i.e., free) publishing models have many virtues. Happily, chapter 2–"Learner

Autonomy in Developing Countries"– is open access through Springer, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057%2F978-1-137-52998-5_2.pdf>. Richard mused in retrospect on whether including 'New' in the title was a good idea, particularly given that project took so long to complete. With those caveats aside, however, both Alice and Richard feel the chapters can continue to prove themselves valuable to readers.

The collection itself opens with an introductory chapter by the editors, arguing that "new research agendas" are needed to respond to "changing perspectives on language teaching and learning."(p 2) The five main chapters focus on "Learner Autonomy in Developing Countries" (Smith, Kuchah, and Lamb), "Language Teacher Autonomy and Social Censure" (Xuesong Gao), "Learner Autonomy and Groups" (Palfreyman), "Learner Autonomy and Digital Practices" (Chik), and "Researching the Spatial Dimension of Learner Autonomy" (Murray).

For me, the threads that bind the individual chapters together return us to a cluster of familiar themes:

– Constraints on autonomous learning and teaching – chapters 2, 3, and 4 especially;

– The central paradox of the independence/interdependence puzzle (all chapters, perhaps);

– The affordances of digital practices - chapters 2 and 5, in particular; and,

– Learning environments ('the spatial dimension'); whether our focus is on classrooms (or the lack thereof) and the attendant constraints, virtual spaces in a variety of contexts, or the use of dedicated learning spaces such as self-access centers and other social learning spaces (most explicitly, Garold Murray's chapter).

What I have gotten most from musing on these issues is that our primary commitment as teachers must be to pedagogies and the development of publication models that support the construction of democratic classrooms. I am particularly interested in further teasing out the relationships between (and potential lessons in) chapters 2, 3, and 4, all

of which explore quality of life questions for learners and teachers in our shared and troubling times. The fact that the book has raised so many hard-to-answer questions for me about learner autonomy/autonomous learning suggests that ALL&T is well worth reading for those of us interested in puzzling through some of the knots that engagement with pedagogies and research for learner autonomy/autonomous learning necessarily confront us with. I wonder whether others would find this too? I therefore hope that readers of *Learning Learning* will encourage your libraries to purchase the collection. In addition, I would like to share the book with member(s) of the Learner Development SIG with a view to creating a correspondence around any ideas and issues that catch the interest of and/or challenge fellow readers of this book.

My shared review proposal is this then: that you contact me, and I will send you the book to read and respond to. You send me your response to both the book and this incomplete review and we then invite others to share their views in response so that a continuing and collaborative review can be published in the next issue of *Learning Learning* in 2019. (And please do return the book to me once you have written your review!) Naoko, I feel, would enjoy a co-constructed and on-going review and discussion of one of her parting gifts to us.

References

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