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Thinking About Learner Autonomy/Learner Development

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What is "learner autonomy"? What is "learner development"? I love thinking about these questions, but I don't believe there is any definitive answer to them. I tend to go back and forth on what I think they might mean. One of the reasons I enjoy being a member of the LD SIG is that it brings me into contact with other people who are thinking about these questions too and who are finding new ways to envisage learner autonomy and learner development and to realise them in their practices of learning or working with learners and other teachers. Similarly, I am attracted by an inclusive practitioner research approach, such as Exploratory Practice (Hanks, 2017), because it involves collaborating with learners to understand what puzzles them. My understanding is always evolving from my experience with learners, as well as from what I learn from my peers in the LA/LD community. My understanding of learner autonomy and learner development—these terms which I can't exactly define—is also shaped continuously by the insights that come to me from my wider reading in the field of applied linguistics and even wider reading of anything (novels, poetry, journalism, popular science, biographies etc etc) that looks interesting and that opens my eyes to new ways of seeing myself and others and the world we live in. Dick Allwright and Judith Hanks propose that the aim of inclusive practitioner research is to understand the "quality of life" in the classroom (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Reflecting on my first experience of

exploratory practice with my seminar students (Stewart, Croker, & Hanks, 2014), I questioned then whether this might not be too broad a term, and suggested that "quality of learning" might be more appropriate. But now I'm not sure. I think I like the openness and inclusiveness of "quality of life" better.

In my current thinking, *learner autonomy* and *learner development* are not quite the same thing. *Autonomy,* to me, conjures up notions of freedom, agency, power, identity—notions that warrant a critical, problematising stance in research and practice. *Development,* as I see it, focuses more on the individual learner and their change and growth. But actually, since all individuals live in a society, this also entails being critical. A few years ago, Tim Ashwell and I came up with this definition of learner development:

> *Learner development* entails the development (in all senses: intellectual, emotional, social, physical, spiritual) of the individual. As individuals, we are responsible to ourselves and to others. And as adult members of society, we have a responsibility to ensure that our society is just and fair and that it provides opportunities for the development of every individual living in it. We are responsible for passing on the knowledge that we have gained through experience in the same way that we are responsible for reaching out to others to learn from their experience. (Stewart & Ashwell, 2014, p. 22)

At the time, this felt like a bit of a stretch. To be honest, we were attempting to justify a collaborative practice of learning, which was the focus of an anthology of research articles of which we were two of the editors (Ashwell, Miyahara, Paydon, & Stewart, 2014). Our formulation echoes elements of previous definitions of autonomy: the "Bergen definition" of learner autonomy (Dam et al., 1990), for example, alludes to the responsibility of learners, while the "Shizuoka

definition" of teacher autonomy (Barfield et al., 2001) sees learner-teacher autonomy as a continuous project that teachers undertake in collaboration with their learners to develop and understand their own autonomy. However, because we were defining learner *development*, our focus was on individual learning or cognition, as much as it was on social practices. Moral responsibility was the solution Tim and I came up with then to bridge the gap between the individual and the social, but I still wonder whether or to what extent this entails collaboration between learners. The notion of collaborative learning seems like an ideal way to manage classroom relations, but does it actually capture the experience of learning or of learner development?

Talking to Chika about the connection between "collaborative learning" and "learner development" while writing this piece, she makes the point that through collaboration students get to engage in shared affective experiences. In Chika's view, "Both teacher and students in a classroom try to maximize their positive emotions and minimize negative ones through interaction with others and this will affect how much they share their knowledge as well as how to negotiate with others." In this way, collaboration has to enhance the quality of learning/teaching. I would agree that affect is much more important in collaborative practice as our emotions are infectious (negative as well as positive ones). But I think collaboration is about more than just emotions. When we collaborate, either we are simply sharing knowledge we have already acquired for a common purpose, or we subordinate our will to others and agree to something someone else suggests. Power is a dimension that I wanted to highlight, and that is something that is quite different to affect. Thus, collaborating in a classroom practice that is designed to facilitate learning might not in fact lead to either learning or autonomy.

As this last point suggests, I believe that learner autonomy cannot be understood without taking issues of power into consideration. Since my research focus is more on teachers than learners,

I've recently been reading and writing about concepts such as power/knowledge (Stewart & Miyahara, 2016) and agency (Stewart, forthcoming) in a way that actually questions the existence of autonomy. This isn't to say that I don't believe autonomy exists; rather, what I'm thinking at present is that it's more interesting to explore where new practices, new ideas, and new organisations come from.

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The Learner Development Journal (LDJ): Problematising Practices

Tim Ashwell, Andy Barfield, Huw Davies, Darren Elliott, Hugh Nicoll, Alison Stewart, & Koki Tomita

The following discussion between members of the LD SIG committee focuses on publicly documenting the ongoing development of *The Learner Development Journal* (LDJ) and shedding light on important questions about the future direction of the journal.

Launched in November 2017, the LDJ is the Learner Development SIG's online, open-access journal. It is published once a year and is devoted to practitioner-driven research, reviews and interviews exploring learner development issues in second language education. The inaugural issue of the *The Learner Development Journal* on "Visualising Learner Development" (issue editors: Darren Elliott & Hugh Nicoll) appeared in November 2017. A year later the second issue on "Qualitative Research into Learner Development" (issue editors: Chika Hayashi, Masuko Miyahara, & Patrick Kiernan) is approaching publication, while writers for Issue 3 of the LDJ on "Learner Identities and Transitions" (issue editors: Christina Gkonou, Jim Ronald, & Yoshio Nakai) are currently sharing first drafts with the journal's editors and Review Network members for open or blind peer review.

Looking ahead, the first Call for Papers for Issue 4 on "Exploring the Supervision Process Across Diverse Contexts: Collaborative Approaches" (issue editors: Sabine Little and Michelle Golledge) went out in September 2018, and in early 2019 the Journal Steering Group (JSG) will be appealing for editors to tender proposals for Issue 5 and to bring together a group of contributors to explore a different learner development theme.

Unlike most other journals, the LDJ is committed to group-based professional development and shared exploration where members of the SIG and others can inquire into specific learner development themes in a collaborative and supportive environment. Not unsurprisingly, this shared commitment does not come without a bewildering array of challenges—and opportunities—for writers, reviewers, and editors, as well as the Journal Steering Group (JSG) that oversees each issue.

We hope that this discussion—which took place online between July and October 2018—helps readers of *Learning Learning* and all the members of the Learner Development SIG become more familiar with the range of concerns that people working on the LDJ currently have, and why.

We warmly encourage you to share your thoughts and questions in response to this discussion (in the next issue of *Learning Learning*). We hope too that SIG members will step forward and take part in future issues of the LDJ as writers, reviewers, editors, or steering group members. We're looking forward to hearing from you!

Discussion

Alison (founding member of the Journal Steering Group): We wanted to let you know that the Call for Proposals for Issue 4 of the Learner Development Journal resulted in 4 proposals, all of them from outside Japan. We have now accepted a proposal by Sabine Little and Michelle Golledge at the University of Sheffield on Learner Development in Supervisor/Supervisee Relationships, and are looking forward to meeting them on Skype in the next week or so. We have also invited the authors of another proposal to send in their proposal again next spring for consideration for Issue 5. Meanwhile, Issue 2 is coming on apace and we have just received copies of all the articles for proofreading.