

Reinventing the wheel? A conversation about the Independent Learning Association Conference in Wellington, New Zealand,

「車輪の再発明」？ ILA大会（於：ウェリントン、ニュージーランド）

についての会話

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Alison: Spending a week in New Zealand to attend the ILA conference was a refreshing break from the pressures of everyday work at the end of a hot and humid summer in Japan. Wellington was enjoying the first days of spring; there were daffodils in the Botanical Gardens and in the buttonholes of Wellingtonians, including that of the Vice-President who came to deliver the Mihi, a traditional welcome chant in Maori to the hundred-odd delegates from all over the world. The hospitality and warmth of the organizers, plentiful refreshments during each day, memorable social events, including a journey by boat across the bay followed by a bus ride up a precipitous cliff road to a farm lodge for the conference dinner, added to the smooth running of the conference itself, all made for a constructive and congenial atmosphere in which to share new research and practice.

Steve, when we were talking about the conference on the final evening, one of the things that struck both of us, as I remember, was the emphasis on defining or redefining the big concepts: What do we mean by autonomy? What is agency? How does identity fit into the picture? Do we need to revisit them, or is it better to let them fall out of fashion and go with the next best thing? In the first plenary, Mike Levy from the University of Queensland introduced us to Gartner's Hype Cycle which shows typical public attitudes to new products or ideas rising sharply at first to a *peak of inflated expectations*, then falling just as sharply into a *trough of disillusionment* before rising again more slowly this time up a *slope of enlightenment* to a *plateau of productivity*. The final plenary speaker, Peter Gu cleverly recycled the Hype Cycle into his talk about strategies, a concept that he maintained has gone through precisely this trajectory. Is this true of all the concepts that we deal with in the field of independent learning?

Steve: Yes, I think it probably is true. Though I'm not sure that a trough of disillusionment is the right phrase—perhaps a period of re-evaluation would be a better way to describe it. (Having said that, without rigorous re-evaluation of concepts which no longer seem quite adequate, then a trough of disillusionment seems the natural next stop.)

Somebody commented to me after the colloquium that you were involved in, Alison ("Learner Autonomy or Personal Autonomy: Language, Identity and the Struggle for Participation" led by Naoko Aoki), that they recognized the same debates over defining terms that they'd heard ten years ago. But actually I don't think that was the case. I saw that

discussion not so much as reinventing the wheel, but rather as a necessary re-evaluation / reconstruction of the terms and concepts we use, making sense of them in ever-changing contexts and in the light of our continually-developing understanding.

And actually things have moved on. We weren't debating what we mean/understand by autonomy per se but rather, as part of a process of de-/reconstruction, we are exploring terms which can more accurately convey what we mean by autonomy—and goodness knows how baggage-laden that particular term is! Agency and identity were two of those terms which particularly resonated with me, and I found myself making connections with Kelleen Toohey's conceptualization of learner autonomy as “socially-situated agency” (Toohey, 2007, p. 232) based on her work with Bonny Norton (Toohey & Norton, 2005). This positions learners in particular social contexts which will constrain/enable their access to different practices and resources . . . and to potential identities.

Alison: Yes, that idea of *situatedness* was one that stood out for me too and this was something that came out in various interesting ways in a number of the presentations I went to. Andy Gao from the University of Hong Kong and the second plenary speaker drew on Ahearn's definition of agency as a “socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112) to conceptualize agency as a reflexive and reflective capacity that stands between the choices we make and the goals we set for ourselves as autonomous individuals and the society in which we exercise those choices and work towards those goals. Andy's examples were taken from a variety of Chinese contexts: a novel about learning English during the Cultural Revolution, the narrative of a disabled learner, “English Corners”—public gatherings where people met to practice speaking English, language choice and group identification among mainland students in Hong Kong. These examples were particularly resonant coming from China, a country that is emerging as a new superpower whose identity appears to be undergoing considerable change. The constraints on individuals there are quite different from those individuals face in other contexts, such as here in Japan, and a good reminder for us to reflect on the limitations we and our learners face at home and the kinds of actions we can take to overcome them or do something else instead.

This resonates with the work on identity and personal constructs that you talked about in your presentation, too, doesn't it, Steve. The student who became accustomed to giving and receiving hugs from her host family during her study abroad found she had to negotiate this kind of behaviour with her own family. What is normal in one context may not be in another. Another presentation that brought this aspect of place home to me was “The Power of Place: Autonomy and Space” by Garold Murray, Naomi Fujishima and Mariko Uzuka describing the creation and development of a “social learning space dedicated to language learning.” The key role in the development of the English café at their university was played by student administrators, and thus it is a social space, but, as the title implies, it was the physical place itself that acquired a particular significance for the learners who used it, offering them affordances for language use and learning that they couldn't get elsewhere. Since my own presentation focused on the concept of affordances, I found this particularly intriguing.

But going back to the concepts (or back to basics as Andy subtitled his talk), there was quite a bit of discussion about this thing called agency—and not necessarily agreement.

Steve: That's right. In your colloquium, Naoko was talking of agency as an ability, though I'm not entirely sure I fully understood what she wanted to say (perhaps something she could elaborate on this here in *Learning Learning*?). In the discussion session after the colloquium, someone mentioned the importance of intent as an essential element of what we understand by agency. (And again, that element of intent seems to me to connect very strongly with the concept of self-direction, another autonomy-synonym which popped up regularly in Wellington.) That seems to make sense to me. Agency without intent is not agency: seeing it as only an ability or capacity seems to me to be very limiting.

Tanya McCarthy, in her poster session, was considering the question of how controlling or directive language advising should be. She spoke about being quite directive in early sessions with her first year university students, as they don't have enough background knowledge of strategies or experience of making decisions about their learning, but then gradually ceding control to them. The point being that even with intent, learners still need appropriate information to make meaningful choices—a kind of informed intent, leading to a more effective exercise of agency. And perhaps, harking back to Naoko, that's where the issue of ability (i.e., as an informed capacity) fits into the question of agency?

In his plenary, Peter Gu spoke of the decline of interest in learning strategies over the last decade or so, suggesting that this was perhaps partly due to the way they had been dealt with—as tools which are somehow just given to learners. A better approach, he argued, would be to talk of *strategic learning*, which puts the focus back on to learners and the whole process of learning, rather than on the strategies, the tools. This would be a more autonomy-friendly approach than conventional strategy training: focusing on learners' understanding of their own learning (and awareness of themselves as agents of their own learning), it would enable them to make informed choices which are appropriate for their context.

Alison: I agree, turning the concept on its head from learning strategies to strategic learning can help us see that what is important is the learner's understanding of what they want and how they can achieve that. Strategic learning isn't merely the application of meta-cognitive strategies, it isn't learning to learn; rather, it's a considered and deliberate planning of the best way to achieve particular learning goals. And that has quite different implications for the role of teachers or advisors.

Steve: As practitioners, I think we need to consider how learners (and teachers) are able to exercise their agency as individuals within the constraints and/or opportunities of differing social contexts, as they construct identities as L2 learner-users. This, I think, then brings us closer to a reconstructed understanding of autonomy.

References

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