

OPENING REMARKS TO THE PLENARY TALK BY RICHARD PEMBERTON AND MIKE NIX

Andy Barfield

It was a great honour to be asked by Alison and Kay in July 2011 to introduce Richard and Mike at the Realizing Autonomy Conference. We were close friends and had worked on many different projects together. The SIG had originally extended the invitation to Richard to participate in the conference in full knowledge that he had been diagnosed with cancer in July 2010. It was a wonderfully supportive act of friendship by the SIG, and we were all hoping that Richard would be able to make it from the UK to Japan for the conference. That was Plan A. Unfortunately, from August 2011 onwards Richard was able to travel no more than locally in Nottingham. Plan B was for Richard to take part in the conference with Mike through a live video feed, but we started to realize that wouldn't be easy to do. Other options were explored and discussed, and eventually we came to Plan C: Mike and Richard would make an audio or video recording via Skype, and Richard's participation would be prepared in advance and then played in 2-3 minute audio clips with Mike talking his part of their joint lecture directly to the audience. And that's how it turned out in the end.



From his home in England Richard did take part and, with customary humour, recorded his participation in the conference on his blog later the same day: "Today I managed to give a co-presentation at the Realizing Autonomy Conference in Nagoya, Japan. All the while safely tucked up in bed at home. Very relaxing! I'd very much been looking forward to attending the conference at first, but realised after the trip to Jamaica that it wasn't on. Plan B was for me to present 'live' to the conference from here, but that would have meant being online in the middle of the night—we all decided my sleep was more important. So we went with Plan C—a pre-recorded version. It seems to have gone well: many thanks to Mike Nix for putting it all together." This is a typically modest representation on Richard's part: just a week before in Nottingham he had got home from hospital where he had been having a bit of a rough time, to say the least. To prepare his audio clips for the conference in the very week after leaving hospital, Richard showed incredible strength of mind and courage, creating with Mike a truly

original plenary session for the benefit of everyone at the conference. Taking part meant everything for Richard.

Until a few hours before the plenary, I was still unsure about how to introduce Richard and Mike. There was hesitation and uncertainty. What should be said? How might things be put? What line—personal or professional?—would it be appropriate to take? All of a sudden, it became clear. I could see Richard smiling and hear him laughing. “You’ll know what to say, Andy,” I remembered Richard telling me just a few days before. It would be about friendship, personal and professional commitment, and it would start with a joke, not an apology, and this is what I said:

I quite understand if, like me, you’re feeling a little confused. This is, after all, the conference of the book, and there’s a film being made of the conference of the book for a book after the film from the conference of the book...that’s going to be published in a newsletter. Perhaps that’s why some people say: those who can, do; those who can’t, teach, and some of those who teach start to learn, and those who start learning enjoy life and learner autonomy conferences (and the books and films that go with them). Which brings me to Richard and Mike, our joint plenary speakers this afternoon.

A friend of the Learner Development SIG even before it started, Richard was one of the driving forces behind the landmark 1994 Taking Control conference in Hong Kong. He then co-edited the proceedings from the conference, published in 1996, in between setting up a self-access centre at his university in Hong Kong and starting his PhD. (Richard and I did the same PhD programme, and we’ve been close friends for many years.) Ten years later Richard was instrumental in organizing the Maintaining Control conference in Hong Kong, co-editing the proceedings again.

Both conferences were extraordinary events in the learner autonomy field.

It is difficult to appreciate the lasting contribution Richard has made in the development of learner autonomy in different contexts in Asia and Europe. He’s the quiet guy, modest and always good-humoured, working behind the scenes with teachers and learners, never claiming the spotlight. More than a few people, though, will say: “It’s Richard who got me started in learner autonomy and saw me through. He supported me and made me believe my learners and I could do it.”

Richard has long been a friend of the Learner Development SIG: an invited speaker of the SIG in 2002 to the JALT international conference; a contributor to Autonomy You Ask! (I’m not trying to sell the books—in fact we don’t have any copies of AYA left!), but perhaps his greatest act of friendship comes in his taking part in the conference today. Under extraordinary personal circumstances Richard’s participation is a triumph of courage, grace, generosity, and commitment to others.

And, of course, Richard's participation today would not have been possible without the absolute dedication and friendship of Mike these last few months. Mike knows Richard from 2002 when Richard came over as the SIG's invited speaker, and in Learning Learning later that year they produced together an exploratory discussion of developing learner-friendly evaluation systems. So, Mike and Richard have a history of collaboration going back a long way.

Mike has been actively involved in the Learner Development SIG since the 1990s, and we work together at the same faculty at Chuo University in Tokyo. Like Richard, Mike is a very close friend and wonderful colleague to work with.

So, let's celebrate friendship, commitment, and generosity of spirit today.

It really is a great honour and pleasure to welcome Richard and Mike for their uplifting friendship for the Learner Development SIG.

Please welcome our friends and colleagues Richard Pemberton and Mike Nix.

<p>To cite this article: Barfield, A. (2012). Opening remarks to the plenary talk by Richard Pemberton and Mike Nix. In K. Irie & A. Stewart (Eds.), Proceedings of the JALT Learner Development SIG Realizing Autonomy Conference, [Special issue] <i>Learning Learning</i>, 19(2), 76-78. Retrieved from http://ld-sig.org/LL/19two/rp-welcome.pdf</p>
