Of Fish, Perceptions, and Stereotypes

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Having started this paper hoping to articulate a flexible, multi-contextual framework for autonomy which would break with stereotyped 'Western' or 'Asian' versions of autonomy, my interest has been drawn to those stereotypes themselves—to the prescriptive perceptions of learners, and of autonomy itself, which can so inhibit the potential for autonomy. I've sought to offer a kind of pastiche of thoughts—of students, ancient thinkers, modern writers, and my own—rather than a rigid academic argument, in order to show how my thinking has moved to the idea of an autonomous zone of interdependence. *I suggest this zone as a space that allows learners to learn without the constraints of stereotypes.*

　この論文を書きはじめたときは、「西洋版」あるいは「アジア版」というステレオタイプ化された autonomyから脱却し、柔軟で文脈が変わっても使えるautonomyのフレームワークを作りたいと思って いた。しかし、そのうち、ステレオタイプそのものが私の興味を惹くようになった。つまり、autonomyの 可能性を大きく損なう危険のある、学習者やautonomy自体の規範的認識に興味をもったのである。
　私はここでは、厳密な学問的議論ではなく、学生、古代の哲学者、現代の研究者、そして私自身の考 えを集め、まとめることによって、私の考えがどのように "autonomous zone of interdependence" とい う概念に移っていったかを提示する。この "autonomous zone of interdependence" は、学習者がステ レオタイプに制約されずに学ぶことを許すスペースであると私は考えている。

CONTEXTS FOR FISHING

If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day.
If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.
– attributed to Confucius (551-479 BC) and often cited by modern-day proponents of
autonomy in language learning (e.g., Ellis & Sinclair, 1989, p. 2)

ANCIENT VOICES IMAGINED

M = Master   A = Acolytes (1-4)

A1 *How wise your words are, Sensei! Now I can see what I need to do—I will teach them to fish from the ocean! I will teach them our way of fishing.*

M *Forgive me my child. How will you do that? Do they not live inland?*

A1 *I know they have never seen the ocean—but this is the correct way. I will teach them deep-sea fishing!*

A2 *Your words are wise, Sensei, but . . .*

M *Yes?*

A2 *Well . . . Where I am, too, there is no ocean. They could not understand; it would be impossible for them to be able to fish like us. They cannot even eat fish from the ocean, so why should I waste their time and mine trying to teach them?*

M *Have they never tried? Have they never tasted deep sea fish?*

A2 *They haven't, so they can't: Their culture makes it impossible for them.*

M *So they cannot fish?*

A3 *No, they cannot fish like us, but we can find the way which suits them and make them do it that way. They do not know of oceans, but they have many streams, so let us teach them only fresh water fishing. Let us decide 'their way,' the best way for them to try.*

M *And do you know what is best for them, what 'their way' is?*

A4 *Let us not decide for them. They know their fish and their streams better than we do, so they must decide. They can tell us the way of fishing that suits them and their culture best, and then we can teach them all in accordance with that way.*

M *And may each one not fish differently? May it not be that some of them would excel in the art of ocean fishing if they knew of it and had the opportunity? Could they not work together to find the best way for each of them to fish?*

Why does each one of them want to fish?

Do they all want to be taught?

Where will they be fishing—all of them in the same place?

Do they each have the necessary equipment?

A Changing Focus

This chapter differs in many ways from the others in *Autonomy You Ask!* It's not really a 'project' based on a piece of action research in the classroom, so much as an attempt to pull together ideas and perceptions which I've been wrestling with over the last few years—ideas and perceptions that concern forms of autonomy which are not culturally biased or contextually specific. My original intention was to try and articulate a framework for autonomy which would work whatever the context, culture or constraints, and whoever the participants are. In the process of exploring this framework, however, my focus has shifted to the question of autonomy and stereotypes, and it is this that is now the central concern of this chapter.

The question of contexts for and constraints on autonomy is not new of course—and I certainly make no claim to any originality here. Rather, I have tried to put things into a different perspective: During my initial research, and increasingly during the collaborative process of creating this Anthology, the focus of the paper changed, and I have come to address more and more the question of stereotypes—particularly the stereotyped perceptions of learners, of groups of learners. I am still, of course, concerned with articulating a framework for autonomy which would work in different contexts. However, it has become clearer to me that many of the constraints which shape how the learning process works in practice, or how autonomy may (or may not) work in our classrooms, stem from stereotyped perceptions of others, of individuals and groups, of what they are and what they are able to do.

I've been perplexed, even irritated at times, by what I perceive to be blinkered thinking concerning the potential for autonomy in language learning, and by perceptions of which kind of approach to developing autonomy may be effective or ineffective in so-called 'East Asian' contexts, but more particularly in Japan. (This is true not only of those who would challenge the claims made for autonomy, but also of many who seek to promote it.) Such perceptions cannot be ignored or glossed over: Whatever the approach, it can only be understood in terms of the perceptions of learners and of learner autonomy that it rests on. It is therefore quite natural that whatever approach to fostering autonomy I consider, whatever theoretical and practical elements I posit as being essential to an autonomous approach, the question I find myself returning to time and time again is that of perception—stereotyped perceptions in particular.

I would like to suggest, in this chapter, that autonomy is essentially about understanding that individual learners construe the world in different ways and allowing them the space to do that. This means that an understanding of the differing perceptions, or constructs, of the participants in the learning process—learners and teachers, as well as administrators—is what really counts in the end if autonomous learning is to be effective. When those perceptions are based on stereotypes, they can become powerful constraints on the potential of autonomy in the classroom.

One practical outcome of this exploration of stereotypes is a questionnaire to elicit teacher and learner perceptions of possible approaches, rather than just perceptions of autonomy

per se. The questionnaire is not a research tool for this chapter, producing data for analysis; rather it is the outcome, arising from the specific issues explored in the chapter.

CHANGING VIEWS OF AUTONOMY

A 'WESTERN' VIEW

A standard dictionary will give two definitions for autonomy. The first will be the idea of self-government by a country, region, or organization, the second, "the ability to make your own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by someone else or told what to do" (Collins COBUILD, 1995). Although the idea of autonomy has clearly been around in non-Western contexts for a long time (witness the proverb often attributed to Confucius at the start of this chapter), it is the 'Western' concept which has dominated. This is a reflection of the increased concern in Western thought, over the last two hundred years, with the individual, more specifically with "the capacity of the individual to act as a responsible 'member of society'" (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 2). This has also been the dominant voice in EFL literature on autonomy over the last two decades. Holec (1981, p. 1), for example, articulated "the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in … the society in which he lives." Trim's (1997) definition for the Council of Europe was more explicit:

> By autonomy, we mean that individuals are willing and able to take charge of their own affairs in a responsible and effective way. This means not only that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to do so, but also that they recognise the rights of others and accept the necessary constraints of living in a society in a co-operative spirit. (p. 15)

There is an ambiguity here: on the one hand, freedom from restraint; on the other, a responsibility to "recognise the rights of others," which obviously involves a degree of self-restraint.

A simplified table of the elements of this 'Western' view of autonomy might look something like Table 1.

Table 1 Elements of a 'Western' Model of Autonomy (from Brown, 1998, p. 10)

DIMENSION	TENSION
individual political/social	individual : social responsibility : freedom

The dimensions are the two threads of the dictionary definition above: individual and political/social. There is a potential tension between the notions of the individual and the social, implying a more specific tension between the ideas of (individual) freedom and (social) responsibility—both important elements of autonomy. Coming to terms with these tensions involves developing what Trim (1997, p. 15) calls "socially responsible independence of thought and action [which is an] ultimately political objective." The "political objective" of Trim's context was the nurturing of individual responsibility and freedom as part of the development of democratic processes across (Western) Europe, specifically the European Union. In this sense, such a political dimension clearly impacts on the fostering of autonomy in the language learning classroom—but is this

'Western' view appropriate and desirable for all contexts in which language learning might take place? Recent voices within the field seem to suggest otherwise.

A Broader View

Some Modern Voices

> *Different cultures interpret autonomy in different ways . . . Different teaching and learning contexts require different approaches to the promotion of learner autonomy.*
> Barbara Sinclair (1997, p. 13)

> *[C]oncepts of autonomy and individual responsibility come laden with Western values . . . To make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity.* Jeremy Jones (1995, p. 229)

> *[The apparent ascendancy of] the Western approach [does not mean] that autonomy as a concept or an educational goal does not exist elsewhere, but rather that a notion of autonomy will be very different in different educational contexts.* Alistair Pennycook (1997, p. 44)

> *[Surveys of cultural types are often] based on over-simplified and over-generalized views of learners' 'culture' . . . [and] tend to present cultures as static determinants of learner behaviour rather than as dynamic systems subject to change.* Richard Smith (1997, p. 10)

> *We should not jump to conclusions about innate characteristics of learners (e.g. Japanese passivity) but rather examine the educational environment.* Alison Hoffman (1997, p. 6)

> *It should not be surprising if [learners'] values and perceptions of learning have been influenced to a considerable extent by the values and perceptions that they have commonly experienced within their sociocultural group. This does not mean, however, that they have been passively moulded by them or that all individuals will conform to the common pattern.* William Littlewood (1999, p. 78)

My response to these voices:

- There is not just one fixed model of autonomy—the model will vary according to the context and to the initial reason for autonomy. Each context is different, with different implications for autonomy; individuals within each context will also vary, with similar implications for their own autonomy.
- The kind of 'Western' model described above is not sufficiently wide or flexible to embrace different contexts and cultures—e.g., the Asian contexts that Jones and Littlewood describe above may not traditionally encompass the drive for individual responsibility that Trim (1997) articulates.

A few years ago, in an attempt to go beyond the 'Western' model of autonomy, I proposed a broader set of elements, which might form the basis for a more flexible model (see Table 2 below). It seemed to me that the *reason* for autonomy and its *context* were key areas which

should be included in the model because they might shape and constrain how autonomy manifested itself, impacting on the dimensions and the possible tensions involved. Recognition of different contexts and reasons for autonomy is, therefore, essential in avoiding the imposition of one approach onto all contexts.

Table 2 Elements of a Broader Model of Autonomy (from Brown, 1998, p. 14)

REASON	CONTEXT	DIMENSION	IMPLIED TENSION
philosophical pedagogical practical	culture nation institution class (= group) gender learning history …	individual social psychological political	responsibility : freedom, rights individual : social

The four dimensions have become generally accepted by supporters of a more flexible concept of autonomy. Sinclair (1997) outlines the four dimensions in the following way (cf. Benson 1996):

- **Individual**

    "stresses individual learning styles and preferences. In this form of autonomy individual choices take precedence over collaborative learning."

- **Social**

    "in contrast . . . recognises that learning takes place through interaction and collaboration, as well as through individual reflection and experimentation."

- **Psychological**

    "focuses on the importance of the psychological or 'internal' capacities of the learner, such as cognitive and learning styles, motivation, attitudes, aptitude and so on. There is a focus on the learners' responsibility for their own successes and failures in learning."

- **Political**

    "in contrast . . . has, as its prime goal, a political end, and the learning process is shaped by this. An example of this is the view of autonomy promoted by the Council of Europe." (p. 12)

The elements and categories in Table 2 are obviously not discrete items, but are interconnected, each affecting to what extent the other will come into play. The plurality of reasons and contexts demands a wider range of dimensions and will determine the balance of those different dimensions. The political dimension, for example, is a clear outcome of a philosophical purpose (as in, for example, the kind of autonomy described by Holec and Trim above, and referred to by Sinclair, where the idea of individual responsibility and freedom within a democratic Europe is as important as pedagogical reasons for autonomy).

What, though, are the practical classroom implications of this new view? The broader framework implies a more flexible manifestation of autonomy, but much still depends on perceptions by learners and teachers of what these elements are—perceptions of the context and how the elements are practically constituted in forming a more concrete model for autonomous learning in the classroom.

STEREOTYPES AND PERCEPTIONS

A SCALE OF STEREOTYPES

It is true, then, that the understanding of what autonomy is and can be in different cultures/contexts—and how it might manifest itself in the language classroom—has become broader and more flexible in recent literature in the field. However, it seems to me that many of these views are still rooted in stereotypical views of 'other' cultures and involve (albeit subconsciously) degrees of cultural imperialism and imposition. Perhaps this can be more clearly seen if views of autonomy are located on a 'stereotypical scale,' as in Table 3 overleaf. In the table, lower numbers at the top of the scale represent stronger stereotypes (narrower, prescriptive perceptions of what autonomy is and/or what learners can do); higher numbers at the bottom represent less strongly stereotyped positions (broader, more descriptive perceptions).

At the strong end of the scale, the stereotyping is two-dimensional:

1. Stereotypes of particular *learners* and their *contexts*: what learners are, what they can or cannot do, their capacity for autonomy.

2. Stereotypes of *autonomy*: what it is, what it could or could not be, the kind of classroom practice it implies.

Point 1a. on the scale focuses on *autonomy*, whereas 1b. involves stereotypical views both of *autonomy* (the limited 'Western' view), but even more so of the *learners' capacity* ("They can't do it, so why bother?"). For the rest of the scale, the stereotyping of the learners and their context (1. above) is predominant. Points 2 to 4 on the scale accept the possibility of different models for autonomy, but construe the learners and their context differently. As Mike Nix (personal communication with the author) put it:

> At the top of the scale, the learners are seen as synonymous with the context . . . or determined by it—learners in Japan are Japanese learners—but as you go down the scale, the possibility of different types of learner in one context increases—learners in Japan are all sorts of different learners who do their learning in their own different ways in the Japanese context.

This serves to underline the importance of the *Context* category in the 'broader view' of autonomy (see Table 2). A view of the context which is too prescriptive and limited belongs at the stronger end of the stereotype scale; moving towards the weaker end of the scale involves a focus on the potential of individual learners, rather than predetermining them by their context. An awareness of the context, without having a preconceived stereotype of what learners can and cannot do is important, so that a particular view or form of autonomy is neither imposed nor unilaterally withheld because of perceptions of the cultural context.

Perceptions: They are the determining factor here in deciding what form of autonomous learning can and will be allowed to work. Fransella and Bannister (1977, p. 7) observe that "Nobody has ever responded to a stimulus. They respond to what they *perceive* the stimulus to be." This seems to me to be an essential perspective: The same stimulus can lead to very different perceptions. On the one hand, the perception can be *descriptive*, observing and accepting in a non-judgmental way; on the other, it can be *prescriptive*, unilaterally pre-empting what the reality will be. This, of course, is where the stereotypes are born, whether in the learner, the teacher, or other participants in the process.

Table 3 A Scale of Stereotypes in Autonomous Learning Contexts

| More stereotyped ↑ | **1a. Imposing a Western View**
"This is the way to be autonomous; this is the way to learn."
I will teach them our way of fishing.
This is the easy one to spot! And it's been widely targeted over the last decade (e.g., Holliday, 1994, 1997; Pennycook, 1997). There is an arrogance in the cultural imposition.
"Asian/Japanese learners can't do it yet; we have to train them."
- -
1b. Withholding Alternative Views and New Knowledge
"They can't do it—they'll never be able to, because they're different from us, so what's the point in trying?"
They cannot even eat fish from the ocean, so why should I waste their time and mine trying to teach them?
In some ways, this is more arrogant than the imposition of 1a, an elitist denial of access to new areas of potential knowledge.
"Japanese students can't be autonomous, so we shouldn't try to make them."
- -
2. 'Othering'—Creating a special category for 'them'
"They can't/don't do it 'our' way, so we need to label/categorize 'their' way and devise a form of autonomy appropriate for them."
They do not know of oceans, but they have many streams, so let us teach them only fresh water fishing. Let us decide 'their way.'
This shows an apparent degree of cultural sensitivity (relative to 1a. and 1b.), but still maintains the barriers of stereotype, by unilaterally limiting the kind of autonomy to which learners have access—an indirect imposition, keeping 'them' away from the 'top table.'
"East Asian cultures are 'collectivist,' so autonomy in these cultures can only be a group-based autonomy."
- -
3. 'Self-othering' / Self-labelling
They can't/don't seem to do it 'our' way—'their' way must be different. They need to tell us what 'their' way is and label it appropriately, deciding for themselves what form of autonomy is appropriate for them.
They know their fish and their streams better than we do, so they must decide.
This seems less stereotypical than 2.—and more benevolent—but is still a form of labeling. Although the 'culture' labels itself, learners are still placed into a box which doesn't allow for individual differences.
"We Japanese are shy. Harmony of the group is more important than the individual."
- -
4. All individuals are different.
"Learning experience / context and cultural background may affect learners' and teachers' expectations of what should happen in the classroom, but may not really indicate how their thought processes work, what they want to happen in the classroom."
May each one not fish differently? May it not be that some of them would excel in the art of ocean fishing if they knew of it and had the opportunity?
This is the zero-stereotype end of the scale, where individual (or groups of) learners are empowered to make their own informed and reflective choices about the kind of autonomy they enjoy. |
| Less stereotyped | |

REMEMBERED VOICES

(Not, of course, verbatim, because they are my memory—my perception if you like—of what was said, simply paraphrased.)

1. November 1998, Japan; a presentation by Leni Dam, prior to the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Conference, in which she describes the autonomous learning approach she uses in her classes in Copenhagen.

   - Reaction from a British teacher:
     But this is just a methodology. You're just giving us a list if activities and telling us what to do. How is this different from other 'methodologies'?

   - Reaction from an American teacher:
     This wouldn't work in Japan. My students couldn't do what you do; they're not autonomous and could never be. They're too passive.

2. November 1998, Japan; the JALT Conference. The question and answer session at the end of a presentation by David Little.

   Q: *That's all very well for where you teach [Ireland], but Japanese students can't do that. They're not as autonomous as Western students.*

   A: *Well you say that, but I'm not sure if my students (in Ireland) are as autonomous as everyone seems to think 'Western' students are. They're really quite dependent.*

3. Summer 1999, Japan; a seminar for high school teachers. Comment from a Japanese teacher.

   - *Japanese students are shy . . . We Japanese are not individualist.*

These voices seem to echo the voices on the scale of stereotypes. It is difficult to avoid making stereotypes, giving prescriptive labels to particular contexts, rather than essaying a non-judgmental observation of our learners *as they are*.

AVOIDING THE PRESCRIPTIVE STEREOTYPE

It is important not to automatically accept perceptions at face value, but to examine them with a critical eye. William Littlewood (1999), citing "culture-based studies of East Asians and Westerners," notes that "East Asians have a greater tendency to perceive themselves as *interdependent* selves," although "individual variation is important" (p. 79). I find myself inclined to balk at blanket self-perceptions like this (see also the "We Japanese are . . ." comment of the Japanese teacher above), largely because I often suspect that there is a degree of *self-display* involved, rather than genuine self-perception. Saying "I/We perceive myself/ourselves this way"—usually the status quo—*may* be genuine, but it could just as well be a case of subconsciously conforming, displaying the generally-accepted notion of what the society concerned 'perceives' itself to be.

There is also, however, the opposite danger of falling into the trap of using stereotypes to argue against stereotypes. Although rejecting a stereotype, we may still follow the discourse 'agenda' of the stereotype—"Japanese students are passive": "No they're not, they just conform to the behaviour that's expected of them." Or even a modification of the 'agenda': "No they're not; many of them are passive, but many others are very outgoing." The 'counter-stereotype' is

still a stereotype. It still labels. The very act of labeling falls into the trap.

So, can we develop a more flexible approach? One which (a) doesn't require or tempt us to pre-determine what 'kind' or flavour of autonomy is appropriate for a particular cultural group, AND (b) is not unilaterally rejected along the lines of "They can't do that" or "That wouldn't work here," AND (c) allows for differing perceptions of individual learners and teachers? Such an approach would also give space for learners' constructs of the learning process to emerge and shape what happens in the classroom. It would also give teachers the opportunity (and perhaps the stimulus) to reconstruct prescriptive and uninformed perceptions of their learners. Exploring what this kind of approach might look like is the focus of the next section.

INTERACTION AND INTERDEPENDENCE

AN AUTONOMOUS ZONE OF INTERDEPENDENCE

SOME STUDENT VOICES

These voices are from student diaries written during and after a first-year English Department orientation course ('English Learning Workshop') at Assumption Junior College in Osaka. This Workshop aimed at fostering autonomy in the context of a consciousness-raising approach to language learning (Brown, 1998). Names are pseudonyms.

> Hitomi: *I remember my elder brother tech [= taught] me to ride a bike, Many many times I tried but I could not do. So my brother was angry and went to his room.*
> *Then I try again alone, and finally I could do. I was very very happy!!! My brother was very surprised. Maybe I think he was very angry again because I don't need him.*
> *I remembered this when we had our English Learning Workshop. We must learn our <u>own</u> way. This is very important I think.*

> Keiko: *English study at Assumption is different from my High School. This is good I think. Because we don't do grammar study then sentence practice BUT using natural English from newspaper or tape and THEN do grammar study. But it is difficult for me.*

> Maki: *Noticing is interesting but I want more grammar. Please explain grammar to me.*

> Mayumi: *This way is little difficult but interesting! I like doing groupwork to help each other with English.*

> Sachi: *I like Noticing because I can study grammar which native speakers use.*

> Yuki: *I can't understand these guys. Why don't they talk? I always ask questions or talk . . . I don't like to work in groups, it's easier alone.*

And the same student in an interview at the end of the course:

> Yuki: *I still like to work alone, but I can understand why we do groupwork now. I guess its important to communicate, not just be alone. But its hard for me.*

These comments from students are by no means exhaustive: They are just a small taste of the kind of comments some of my students produced in their diaries. For my purposes here, a few observations can be made about them:

- Individual students are different—they reacted differently to the same approach.

- They appear to be learning in different ways.

- They have different views about the approach used in the classroom.

- They all construe the world differently.

- Their ideas can change.

The final student's comments would appear to reflect the individual-social tension I identified earlier (see Tables 1 and 2), and her final diary entry hints at a self-awareness of the need for balance between responsibility and freedom.

DEPENDENCE, INDEPENDENCE AND INTERDEPENDENCE

This pair of tensions—individual / social, responsibility / freedom—has become a pre-occupation for me. Autonomy is often equated with independence and diametrically opposed to dependence, but this can be one of those stereotypes! Autonomy doesn't entail a kind of isolated independence, even in so-called 'individualist' Western societies. As Little (1991, p. 5) has noted, that kind of "[t]otal detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism." Interaction with others is, for me, an essential feature of autonomy: Learners are not confined to a point somewhere on an arbitrary cline between the two poles of independence and dependence, but can rather locate themselves in a less polarized zone of interdependence. In Kohonen's (1992, p. 19) words, "Autonomy . . . includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways." That is to say, interdependence is not a characteristic of an exclusively 'social' or 'collectivist' context for autonomy, but is "our essential condition" (Little, 1991, p. 5).

To satisfy my own preoccupation with this question, I attempted a visual representation of the relationship between dependence, independence, and interdependence. A common perception of dependence and independence as opposite poles of the same cline might be represented as in Figure 1.
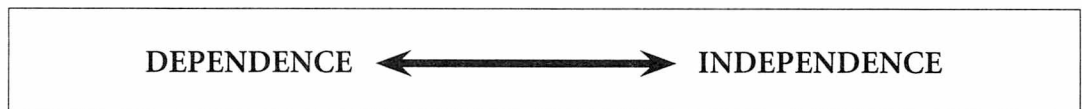
DEPENDENCE ⟵⟶ INDEPENDENCE

Figure 1 A simple cline of dependence and independence

Individuals, however, are not permanently fixed at one point of a one-dimensional cline like this. Their orientation at a given time may vary according to the context, their mood and the combination of people around them, amongst other factors. Figure 2 (overleaf), then, is an attempt to represent a more complex relationship between dependence, independence, and interdependence.
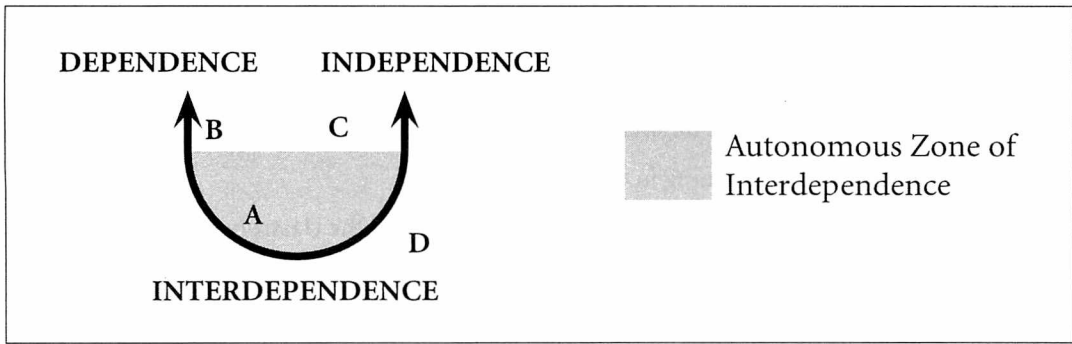
Figure 2 Dependence, independence, and interdependence: A 'horseshoe' scale

The shaded area in Figure 2 is an autonomous zone of interdependence—a learner at Point A, for example, would be 'in the zone.' ('Independence' is interpreted here as the 'isolated independence' I discussed above.) Moving around the 'horseshoe,' towards either the dependence (e.g., Point B) or the independence pole (e.g., Point C) of the scale, entails moving out of this autonomous zone—into an area which I would consider to be non-autonomous. Being somewhere in the middle of this horseshoe scale, however, doesn't automatically imply autonomy: Most of us, I am sure, know many learners who are partly dependent, partly independent, but who are neither autonomous not interdependent in the sense I've been talking about. I picture these learners as belonging somewhere outside the horseshoe (e.g., at Point D).

Interaction in the classroom is an expression of this interdependence, as well as an opportunity to promote it. It is a means of mediating between the social and individual dimensions—not only with regard to autonomy, but in a wider sense, as individual beings living in a social world. This is not just a matter of working together in groups however: Interdependent autonomy involves learners being *reflective*, *critical*, and *collaborative*. Critical reflection is essential in moving learners beyond where they are at any given moment; purposeful collaboration takes interaction beyond a kind of going-through-the-motions groupwork towards a truer interdependence. (The notion of 'critical collaborative autonomy' is discussed by Murphey, 2001, and explored by Mike Nix in Chapter 15 of this volume.)

KELLY AND VYGOTSKY

For me, this also makes sense in the context of my reading of Kelly and Vygotsky. Kelly's (1955) articulation of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) offers a viable theoretical framework for the kind of autonomy and the focus on perceptions that I've tried to explore here: Each individual will construe the world in his/her own way, developing their own personal constructs. PCP is not merely concerned with the individual in isolation, however. It places individual constructs in some form of dynamic relationship with others. Stringer (1979) emphasizes the same point, that the *individualist* view and the *social / role-oriented* view are both important.

I have also found that Vygotsky's concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the General Genetic Law of Cultural Development (GGLCD) mesh well with my thoughts on autonomy and with PCP. Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defines the ZPD as the "distance between the 'actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving' and the higher level of '*potential* development as determined through problem solving' under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." In other words, interaction with others (here "more

capable peers") is an essential plank in the process of individual development. Explaining the GGLCD, Vygotsky (cited in Daniels, 1996, p. 6) notes that:

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes . . . 1. on the *social* plane . . . 2. on the *psychological* plane . . .
> 1. between people as an *inter*psychological category... 2. within the child as an *intra*psychological category.

The individual's internal development, then, is inextricably linked with her/his social and interpersonal development: The role of interdependence in the development process is central.

These concepts suggest the kind of interdependent or collaborative autonomy I have been trying to articulate. 'Collaborative autonomy' is not a contradictory term: As Tim Murphey (2001, p. 136) notes, with reference to Vygotsky, "the concepts [of collaboration and autonomy] actually go hand on hand. The more that people interact and collaborate, the more choices they become aware of and the more autonomously they can act."

Although Kelly and Vygotsky appear to come from different directions (Kelly from the individual, Vygotsky from the social), they meet in the middle: They are both concerned with the individual operating in a social world. And this location of the individual in the social context connects with the individual-social thread and with the notion of interdependence in autonomy which I have discussed.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

So, what of practice in the classroom? I'm really exploring a form of autonomy which is interactive, based on interdependence in the learning process, and flexible enough not to fall into the pitfalls of the stereotypes I've described. The next step in my research will be a survey of teachers, to explore their perceptions of autonomy and of their learners. However, the 'double-stereotype' problem I discussed above means that this is not as straightforward as asking *Are your students autonomous?, Do you/could you foster autonomy in your classroom?* or *Do you think it's important to do so?* Aside from the question of potential stereotypes of learners, the preconceptions of *autonomy* would make it very difficult to get accurate and reliable responses. (For example, the question *Are your students autonomous?* involves not only a perception of the students, but also a perception of what autonomy is, which would make accurate analysis of the answer difficult.) The questionnaire I have prepared (accessible on the *Autonomy You Ask!* website) is less conventional—and I am indebted to Mike Nix for the idea.

In the questionnaire, several types of class are described in some detail, corresponding broadly to the range of stereotypes (and non-stereotypes) I have tried to describe here, including:

- a heavily teacher-centred class;

- a teacher-centred 'interactive' class;

- a class where 'Western-style' autonomy is imposed/demanded;

- two types of autonomous/interdependent class.

These labels are not used in the questionnaire: Respondents will only have the detailed description of the class types. For each classroom situation, the respondent is asked the following questions, with responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Agree to (5) Strongly Disagree.

1. Does this kind of thing happen in your class?	(1)----(2)----(3)----(4)----(5)
2. Could you imagine it happening in your classroom?	(1)----(2)----(3)----(4)----(5)
3. With sufficient preparation/practice/training, could you imagine it happening in your classroom?	(1)----(2)----(3)----(4)----(5)
4. Do you think this is a useful kind of approach in a language classroom?	(1)----(2)----(3)----(4)----(5)

I hope that the questionnaire will not only be a survey of teachers' perceptions, but also play a role in stimulating reflection among teachers on the following issues:

- the stereotypes which unilaterally constrain the forms of autonomy which students have access to;

- what autonomy is and can be; and,

- their own classroom practice.

More importantly, I hope that, as you have read this far, you are inspired to respond to the questionnaire on the website and that you gleen something from it—enough, perhaps, to reflect a little on your own perceptions in the classroom.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

ANDY BARFIELD

A man goes into a restaurant, sits at a table, studies the menu long and hard, asks the waiter a few questions about each dish and finally comes to a decision: 'I'd like a coffee.' The waiter protests, says this is not possible, that it is lunchtime and one cannot sit at a table and just order a coffee, that his function is to serve lunch…My friend says he has indeed come for lunch, but would prefer to start with the coffee. …But when he has finished his coffee, my friends then inquires as to what the waiter has by way of dessert…the man eats his lunch…backwards! And sure enough he ends with an apéritif…My friend is *changing nothing* in the social code, all he is doing is inverting it. (Boal, 1992, pp. 183-184)

Steve Brown's chapter invites us to consider how we can develop a more flexible approach to visualizing forms of autonomy founded on interdependence in the learning process. One way in which I feel invited is to imagine how the social order of classroom learning can be inverted for other orders of doing things to be conceived.

A student/teacher goes into a classroom…

In indulging our imaginations, it seems to me that we can play back and play forward, pause, pan in and out on both our preferred and freshly imagined ways of ordering teaching and learning, by asking the question 'What if?' When we find it difficult to run such 'alternative' films, we are, I believe, caught in stereotype thinking, perception, and action—or, to (re-)interpret Boal, trapped in *ritual*. Boal comments:

When a social code does not answer the needs and desires of the people to whom it is addressed, and thus those people see themselves as forced to do things which run counter to their desires, or obliged to abstain from doing things which they want to, then we can say that the social code has turned into a *ritual*. A ritual is therefore a code which imprisons, which constrains, which is authoritarian, *useless*, or at worst, necessary *as the vehicle for some form of oppression.* (p. 184)

Making such a connection between Steve's exploration of the constraints of stereotypes and Boal's parallel view of rituals helps me perceive the power of stereotypes differently. I begin to gain finer insight into my own understanding of autonomy by noticing that I need to see and listen much more clearly to my own/others' ways of being in the world. Through bringing alternative mini-films into focus, I become more critically aware of the roles that I and others play: Is this the one and only choice that we have at this moment? What might the other options be? What decisions can we take together to make this work better for you (and me)?

Is that perplexing? Sometimes, but it is also exciting to ask such questions and talk about them together. Steve's chapter helps me find the appetite for eating lunch backwards with my students and colleagues. *Itadakimasu!*

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2

DICK ALLWRIGHT

RETHINKING 'AUTONOMY': THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Writing about autonomy is notoriously difficult (see Allwright, 1988, 1990). Firstly there is the problem of settling on an acceptable conceptual definition, and then the problem of deciding what that definition implies for any particular context (making the conceptual definition 'operational'). It can help, initially, to make a strong distinction between global conceptual thinking, not concerned about contexts, but about the *global principles* that stem from the universal 'human condition,' and *local thinking,* and *action,* which can be seen as attempts to give local expression to the global principles. (For a further exploration of such ideas, but in the context of teacher and learner development, see Allwright, 2003.) Unfortunately some people then infer that 'practice' is simply a matter of 'operationalising' global principles. However, trying to find locally appropriate ways of honouring our apparently global principles very quickly calls into question the very 'globality' of those principles (the universality of the 'human condition'). Put positively, and if we work at it hard enough, this can helpfully inform our thinking about our principles, both globally and locally.

Another problem is 'agency.' Steve Brown writes "Perceptions. That is the determining factor here, deciding what form of autonomous learning can and will be allowed to work." But who gets to decide such things? People, like myself, writing about autonomy are, almost by definition, not people who see themselves as in need of persuasion about its advantages. So we end up in the awful irony of at least seeming to want to tell other people how *they* should respond to what *we* see as their 'universal human condition' (of needing to develop their 'interdependence,' say), when what we want ultimately to tell them, in a way, is precisely that it really is none of our business, because they really *ought* to be doing all the thinking for themselves.

From this irony arises another, that if we really believe in people being given space to be different (a key aspect of the global thinking in Steve Brown's contribution), then one of those differences will concern the extent to which people wish, for whatever reason or reasons, to act, and to be seen to act, 'autonomously,' in the sense of minimising direct dependence on (not interdependence with) others. Rejecting autonomy must be a real option, in other words.

And then there is the third irony, that even if learners do actually want to be, and to be seen to be, 'autonomous,' it is unlikely that they will already know how to be as autonomous as they could in principle be, and therefore someone is going to have to train them to be autonomous. And no matter how we run the training, the training time is itself going to be a period of increased 'dependence.'

This is really a very tricky 'minefield' to try to negotiate, then, and one that is only made more tricky by the stereotyping described in Brown's chapter. In a way the most colossal act of human stereotyping we can imagine is perhaps to be found in the underlying idea that there is such a thing as 'the universal human condition' (or 'our essential condition,' Little, 1991, cited by Brown). But only if we accept some such notion can we proceed with our thinking about globally valid principles. If we cannot accept such a notion, then 'autonomy' must remain a purely local phenomenon, that must be allowed to develop (or not) purely in response to local conditions, and therefore be as different (or similar) from place to place as local conditions dictate.

That will still probably leave us with a severe problem of stereotyping, in any particular place, but again it will remain a local problem, to be treated in a local way.

Will a survey questionnaire help? I would like to think so, but I fear that such questionnaires as the one proposed by Brown are very difficult to interpret usefully (i.e., validly). For example, the first question exemplified is: "Does this kind of thing happen in your class?," and the respondent is asked, on a 5-point scale, to agree or disagree. But how will the respondent have interpreted 'this kind of thing'? As the whole 'package,' for example, or only in terms of isolated bits of it? And how will the respondent interpret the response format offered? By choosing 'strongly agree,' for example, am I making a statement simply about the frequency with which such things happen? And if I 'strongly disagree,' am I saying that frequency is very low, or zero? Notice also that I may 'strongly agree' that 'this kind of thing' happens, perhaps even frequently, but still want to say it is not every kind of thing (or even the most important kind of thing) that happens. And the next question: "Could you imagine it happening?" reduces 'this kind of thing' to a singular entity, thus reinforcing the whole package interpretation of the first question, and of course is likely to read as a very odd question to anyone who has just 'strongly agreed' in response to the first question. And the third question then goes on to pre-suppose a negative answer to Question 2, and the fourth question reinforces the idea that 'this kind of thing' is really intended to characterise a whole approach, although at first sight it is less ambitious than that. Note also that the fourth question could also be answered positively by someone who in principle would think autonomy a good idea, but only for others.

I can't help thinking about alternative sorts of question. For example:

1. *How closely does this resemble **what actually happens** typically in your own classroom?*

2. *How close is it to **what you would like to happen** typically in your classroom?*

This could be done by asking the respondents to rank (or preferably rate) each description in terms of its degree of fit to their typical experience. And then an open invitation to comment on the following:

3. *If what typically happens in your classes is not very close to what you would like to happen there, what gets in the way, do you think, and makes what actually typically happens in the classroom the way it is?*

I'm not yet convinced by the above suggestions myself, and partly because they are just my first reactions. More generally, however, I must note here that I am not optimistic about the overall productivity of survey questionnaires. I am much more optimistic with regard to the use of a questionnaire as a way of getting people to start thinking about a topic which will become the focus of face-to-face discussion. The problems of ambiguity raised above then become far less important, because they can be 'ironed out' in discussion. Necessarily this is likely to mean that far fewer people can be included in the work for understanding, but since we seem doomed to never be able to get statistically significant samples anyway in our field, then perhaps that is something of a non-issue.

To return to the main thrust of Steve Brown's argument against the stereotyping that bedevils discussions of autonomy, I think we could most usefully open up again the issue of 'autonomy' itself, and consider the possibility that 'autonomy' is not perhaps the concept that needs to be at the centre of our thinking. Brown himself offers us an alternative key term, the 'essential condition' of *interdependence*.

I suggest building on Steve's valuable suggestion and starting with 'interdependence,' instead of 'autonomy.' And then we could stop talking about autonomy as a goal, and think instead

about harnessing 'interdependence' to 'development.' If we can accept that 'development' is a matter of 'developing understanding' (see Allwright, 1999), then we can turn our minds to how learners and teachers might spend time together in class *interdependently* developing their understandings of what happens there. Of course, they will all, including the teacher, develop different understandings, but we don't need consensus, only an agreement to work for developing understandings. And this work will need to be collaborative, and continuous, with no pretence that any final understanding will ever be reached, or need ever be reached. But these continuously developing understandings can be harnessed, by learners individually and/or collectively, with or without the teacher, to help make their classroom experiences more positive ones, for each and for all.

What I have just described above is *Exploratory Practice*, an approach that serves to foster 'autonomy' by focussing on 'understanding.' For an introduction to its principles, and to several examples of classroom practice, see the special issue of the journal *Language Teaching Research* entirely devoted to Exploratory Practice (Volume 7, Number 2, 2003).

One final comment: I feel I have reacted to Steve Brown's paper rather than fully responded to it. By focussing on the often crippling problem of wholesale stereotyping in our field he makes a valuable contribution to the field. It deserves much fuller discussion than is possible here.