

A Collaborative Preface: Four Incomplete Views of *Autonomy You Ask!*

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Near the shore. Some maps on a table. An unopened bottle of Bacardi next to the final banana. Some footprints in the sand. Gentle breeze.

Mike: Well, Steve, putting science fiction aside for the moment, we've got to write a Preface for the Anthology—something that gives the readers an overview of the whole process. How on earth are we going to do that?

Andy: And when Mike says on earth, he means on Earth, Steve.

Stephen: Well, I think it all started happening for me sometime in January 2003 when you told me 25 teachers had been chosen to write papers for the Anthology. I felt a bit of a rush when I read your email, because my name was on the list. But, I'll admit that I wasn't sold on the idea of collaborating with anyone. It just seemed like a lot of trouble. Especially when I started reading about all the other projects and all of the discussion that was going on. Later on, though, I changed my mind. In fact, I ended up learning a lot about the whole process of researching and writing. I mean about the importance of other people.

Denise puts down her surfboard. Approaches the table.

Andy: So, how did you get involved, Denise?

Denise: Well, when this project first started and the process was outlined to the group, I was struck by the flexibility it allowed the contributors. Our collaborations could be more or less involved, depending on individual schedules and circumstances. In my case, I teach in a corporate, not an academic environment. Early in the process, I was teaching a lot of hours and had several business trips. Others in the Anthology group were finishing up academic terms, had final exams and papers to grade, so it allowed everyone to pursue their own version of collaboration according to their needs and time constraints.

Andy: Aha...

Denise: Still practicing that reflective listening, Andy?! Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, so you and Mike asked us to introduce ourselves to the whole group and to choose another project that we would like to work closely alongside. I guess we then took our own paths through that collaborative phase from February to May—before swapping our first tentative (and completely incomplete!) written drafts ahead of the weekend retreat at Momoyama University in June 2003.

Mike: Momoyama?

Denise: Yes, Momoyama, Mike. What happened, Steve, was that each project gave an in-depth poster presentation of their work. We really found space to deepen our understandings because we had these fantastic small-group discussions around the posters that lasted for a good couple of hours. What a great experience the Retreat was! From the initial meet and greet session in the pub on the Friday evening to the feedback from Tim Murphey and Naoko Aoki on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, the energy everyone put into each other's projects was very nurturing and supportive. . .

Andy fiddles with some binoculars, then starts eating the final banana. Denise begins to ponder the different maps.

Denise: For me, the collaborative aspect seemed like such a natural way to explore issues of learner autonomy. That's because I perceive teaching to be inherently collaborative, and I'm always interested in how other teachers are doing things. I am always trying to find ways for my students to explore their own learning, too.

In fact, I went from being all over the map about what to do to finally having a focus and direction. I had a lot of ideas about my own teaching and projects I was pursuing, but the Retreat made me realize that I needed to get more of my students' voices into things. This was only possible because of the collaboration during the Retreat.

Stephen: That's great, Denise. But did we decide on the exact contents of the Anthology at the Retreat? Or did that decision come later?

Mike: Well, if I might come in there, here's a quick overview: An exploration of the development of autonomy within Japanese educational contexts; 16 projects in separate chapters; 2 critical reader responses at the end of each chapter; 3 guest chapters; a focus on group-based and individual work, with learners' voices, shared insights, and lots more...

Stephen: Mike, that's a great plug for *Autonomy You Ask!*, but I think we're getting ahead of the game. We didn't say anything yet about what happened right after the Retreat. . .

A contemplative pause. Mike turns back from the sea, a shimmer in his eyes.

Mike: Yeah, you're right.

Stephen: As I remember it, the Retreat seemed pretty positive for everyone. I mean, it was a good idea. But, to tell the truth, before it happened I thought the whole idea was a bit too 'touchy-feely' for me. I remember thinking: "Am I writing a paper or joining a cult?" As I said, I wasn't actually there at the Retreat, but later I did get some faxes from people who went—I mean some faxed comments about my paper. And those comments really did make me feel better about what I was doing. There wasn't anything negative written at all. But I don't know if that was how it worked for everyone, because I heard two people dropped out.

Denise: Yes, one of them was me! Unfortunately, I didn't make that deadline at the end of July for the near final drafts! This was due mostly to my own procrastination, but I also feel my project was less focused from the beginning than most, and that I only really got started at the Retreat. There was just not enough time for me after that to get a near final

draft completed.

Mike: But...

Denise: Let me finish, Mike. Now I wish that the whole collaborative Anthology process had started with a retreat, because then I would have known how supportive and safe my fellow contributors were! In the end, I think teachers have so much to share about teaching, learning, students, and autonomy; we know that so well from our different experiences of working on this book together. . .

Stephen looks over his sunglasses. Standing in the shade, he smiles.

Stephen: But Denise, even if you didn't finish your draft, you stayed in the group, and that's really impressive. I mean here we are trying to put the Preface together, and cutting Mike and Andy off at last! But one other thing. What about the title, *Autonomy You Ask!*? How did we come up with that? Does anyone remember?

Denise: Well, what do you expect if you brainstorm ideas over beers? Let me take you back to the pub on that Saturday night of the Retreat in June. At some point, someone—who shall remain nameless—had the bright idea of calling the Anthology: *Everything You Wanted To Know About Autonomy But You Were Too Busy Teaching To Ask!*

Andy: Can I just say something there?

Denise: If you must...

Andy: Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time, but how many librarians would want to catalogue a title like that?

Mike: Yeah, so we got it down to *Autonomy You Ask!* And that, in a word or three, is a very long story cut short!

Denise & Stephen: Are you sure it all happened like that?

Andy & Mike: Well, that's what we'll tell the readers. They're sure to believe it. . .

A juggler appears. Watching the waves.

To access teaching and research materials for different chapters
in *Autonomy You Ask!*, go to:

<http://www.miyazaki-mu.ac.jp/~hnicoll/learnerdev/aya/>

and click on: AYA! Resources Site.

User name: ***bananas***

Password: ***ancicat78***