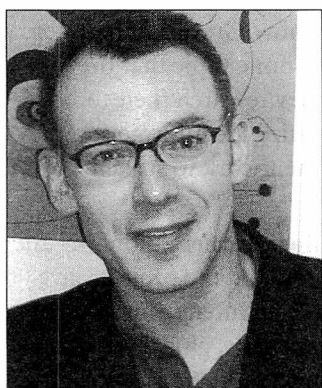


Writing Autonomy; or 'It's the Content, Stupid!'



Mike Nix

Chuo University

mikenix1@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp

This chapter used to be an investigation of approaches for fostering academic literacy and learner autonomy in group project work, entitled *Developing Critical Collaborative Autonomy: It's the Content, Stupid!* Through collaborative discussion with other Anthology writers, it has been transformed into a reflection on the ways in which I have tried to understand—through research and particularly writing—how my students develop their autonomy and academic literacy. I have made the process of thinking that accompanied this shift in my concerns the central focus of the chapter, and, rather than erase the traces of the previous *Content, Stupid!* draft, I have returned to critique them from these new viewpoints. I hope that the rather emergent, discordant and self-referential way I have written this chapter highlights issues and dilemmas that resonate with other teachers concerned with how we research, theorise and write about the development of learner autonomy.

本章は、グループ・プロジェクト活動においてアカデミック・リタラシーと学習者自律性を育成するための方法に関する、*Developing Critical Collaborative Autonomy: It's the Content, Stupid!*というタイトルの研究報告から発展している。この前研究報告はやがて、論文集の他の執筆者との協働的ディスカッションを経て、研究活動、特にライティング執筆活動を通して、私の学生がどのように自らの自律性とアカデミック・リタラシーを向上させるかを理解しようとしてきた方法に対する内省へと形を変えてきた。私は、自分の考えを変えたこの思考のプロセスを章の中心に据えることとした。だからといって、これまでの*Content, Stupid!*の原稿の記録を消してしまうのではなく、むしろそれを新たな立場から批評することにした。いく分突飛で、時に矛盾を抱えながら、私自身の経験に基づいた考え方で本章を書いたが、私の考えが、学習者自律のディベロップメントについて、いかに研究し、理論を確立し、記述するか、ということに関わってきた他の先生達が共鳴してくれるような問題点やジレンマを映し出してくれることを願う。

WHERE TO BEGIN?

“You’ll need more tables than you think” —Elenore Bowen Smith’s advice on doing ethnographic fieldwork. (Quoted in Clifford, 1986, p. 1)

Tuesday June 22nd 2002. It feels like it has been raining non-stop for the last two weeks, and there’s still another five weeks of the rainy season (and classes) to go! Sitting in my office, I’m hot and sweaty, too tired to concentrate, and in my usual panic over class preparation. Spread out, in a disorganized heap on the table in front of me, are the self-evaluations, reflections, notebooks, project logs that have been coming in from my third-year Advanced Speaking and Listening classes—60 students in all. Last week, we finished the first research, discussion and presentation project of the course. Now I have just 3 hours to make sense of all this material, decide how to organize the next project cycle, and get ready for class! Where to begin?

I’ve been doing these group projects in my classes for several years now. Groups of between 3 and 6 students work together for 5 weeks on a political, legal or economic topic that they have chosen to investigate. For the first 4 weeks of the project cycle, they research their topic for homework and then work together in class to share, discuss, and organize the information they have found. In the fifth week, they give a 15-minute presentation of their work to students from other groups before leading a discussion on their topic.

I see these projects as a way of helping my students develop both their learner autonomy and academic literacy. They are majoring in International Business and Law, and the projects give them an opportunity to work, in English, on academic issues they have an interest in; some of the topics they have chosen in the last project cycle include the death penalty, global warming, domestic violence, child abuse, and free trade and globalization. I hope that their motivation to understand these topics in more depth will encourage them to apply the academic literacy skills they have studied in their first two years of English courses and reviewed in the first few weeks of my third year course. This academic literacy includes language skills such as reading for key ideas, note-taking, and using paraphrases and examples to explain topic-related vocabulary. It also involves critical thinking skills—such as identifying problems and their causes, comparing solutions, and evaluating different viewpoints on an issue—that students can use to articulate their own arguments about the topics.

I also intend these projects to be a space for groups of students to decide amongst themselves how to organise their exploration of the topics. This involves them thinking, for example, about which specific issues to focus on, how to explain, connect, and organize their individual research into a coherent, collective understanding of the topic, and how to present their research clearly and persuasively. This space will, I hope, encourage them to experiment with, and reflect on, how to effectively engage in English with an academic issue. So the idea here is that the projects will promote a mutually reinforcing development of learner autonomy and academic literacy. Or something like that, anyway!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Heidi Evans Nachi, Tim Murphey, and Steve Brown for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter, and everybody involved in this project for the thought-provoking discussions that also contributed significantly to the development of the chapter. Particular thanks go to Andy Barfield for his generous support and astute feedback, which kept me writing at times when I thought I might not make it.

Effectively developing academic literacy through project work of this kind requires a version of what Murphey and Jacobs (2000) call critical, collaborative autonomy. Without this critical, collaborative edge, autonomous group project work may become a space of negative autonomy. In this space, individual students fall back into familiar but unhelpful learning habits, and groups largely fail to take collective control of their learning by exploring and reflecting together on effective ways to organize their academic work. When this happens, group project work may not contribute much to the development of either students' academic skills or their understanding of academic issues.

From the previous draft of this paper, 'Developing critical collaborative autonomy: It's the content, stupid!' (June 2003)

But recently I've been thinking it doesn't quite work that easily. Students seem to get bound up in the content of their projects, because that's what they're interested in, and lose sight of whether they are using their language skills effectively or not. They may, for example, read and make notes in Japanese, because that seems like an easier or better way of understanding the topic, and then translate their research laboriously and awkwardly into English when they explain it to their group. Noticing this has made me think that I need to find a way of focusing the students back on the language skills themselves. Perhaps some more explicitly metacognitive framework for planning and reflecting on the use of those language skills is necessary if these projects are really going to help the students develop their academic literacy autonomously.

So, for the first time, in the project cycle just finished, I have asked groups to discuss, at the beginning of every class, how to organize their work and then record their decisions on a project log. (See the *Autonomy You Ask!* website for example project logs.) I've suggested that they set goals for their use of English in class (explaining key vocabulary in English, for example), allocate roles to group members (such as discussion co-ordinator or note-taker), and plan stages for their work (such as sharing research, organizing information with mind maps, doing vocabulary development work, and deciding what to research next). I've also asked them to take time at the end of the class to reflect together on how their work went and set goals for next week's class. Recently, I've read an article by Tim Murphey and George Jacobs (2000), and I'm excited because there seem to be connections between their idea of 'critical, collaborative autonomy' and what I think I'm trying to develop in my classes with the group planning and reflection. I'm wondering if I'm also trying to develop a version of 'critical, collaborative autonomy,' but I need a bit more time to think about that one.

This paper discusses action research I conducted in the academic year 2002 to encourage a more critical, collaborative approach to project work. This action research had two parallel elements. To promote collaboration, groups used a project log to make collective decisions about their project work. Alongside this, students wrote weekly reflections on their individual and group work to help them become more critically aware of the effectiveness of their ways of working.

From the previous draft of this paper, 'Developing critical collaborative autonomy: It's the content, stupid!' (June 2003)

Anyway, this group project logging and reflection thing is my big, new ‘autonomy’ idea for this year. It seems like it might be a way for students to develop their academic literacy more autonomously as well as help me develop my understanding as a teacher of what learner autonomy in group project work involves (and also perhaps to write an academic paper or two on that). I want to have plenty of feedback from the students to help me see what kinds of decisions they are making and how their awareness is developing (and also to quote in those papers maybe). So, in the last class, I asked them to hand in their notebooks, the group project logs and reflections, and an individual end-of-project self-evaluation and reflection.

And now, I’ve got all this paper in front of me and just 3 hours before the next class! I flick quickly through some of the feedback about the project logs to get a sense of the main issues it raises. Most of the comments seem to be very interesting and useful insights about autonomous, group project work. Some of them are unexpected; all seem to be saying something different. I feel like I need more space—more tables—to spread them all out, make the connections, recognize the patterns, see the big picture. I need more time and energy to make sense of it all. Where to begin?

FALSE STARTS

“The problem of beginnings is one of those problems that, if allowed to, will confront one with equal intensity on a practical and a theoretical level”—Edward Said (1975, p. 3).

Actually, it’s not Tuesday 22nd June 2002 at all. In reality, I’m writing this on Monday 4th August, 2003, and I’ve just made up that story about that hot, sweaty, panicked Tuesday morning in June 2002. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I’ve imagined or dramatized the situation, and state of mind, I would have been in sometime in June 2002, as I tried to make sense of all the feedback that I really did receive from my third-year Speaking and Listening classes at the end of their first project cycle. Indeed, the sense of excitement that I imagined for that day, turning into frustration and confusion as time and space close in, were real on many occasions last year when I tried to understand what the comments from students in those classes were telling me about the development of learner autonomy and academic literacy.

And those feelings are all too real now, already 4 days past the deadline for my near final draft for *Autonomy You Ask!* Today my office is strewn with reflections, notebooks, and project logs from students, and now also the different earlier drafts of this paper and comments on them from Andy, Cathy, Jodie, Miki, and Tim. And it *does* all seem too much to make sense of. I’m still wondering where to begin.

The way I now want to write this chapter has changed radically, dramatically, since I discussed a previous draft of it with other members of the Anthology team at the Anthology Retreat two months ago. I have tried starting this new draft with a story because we had talked a lot at the Retreat about the lack of time to reflect on our teaching, to listen to what our learners are telling us, and to learn from it ourselves. We also discussed the importance of foregrounding teachers’ and learners’ voices in our research and writing, as well as the benefit of using narratives to highlight the conflicts and dilemmas in our attempts to understand our students. So the start of this chapter is a fiction. But it’s a fiction that expresses what I have realized are some of the real conditions in which I try to develop my thinking as a teacher—the lack of time, energy, and space to reflect.

Indeed, the question of how I represented the process of reflecting on and developing my understanding of learner autonomy and academic literacy in the previous version of

this chapter has now become a key issue for me as I write this current draft. I look again at the previous draft, the one I shared at the Anthology Retreat called ‘Developing critical, collaborative autonomy: It’s the content, stupid!’ It tells the story of me gradually, carefully, learning how to develop ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ in my classes as I move through three stages of reflection, following each of the three project cycles in the course.

In that draft, I describe each of these moments of reflection as if I had been able to make sense of the all the feedback from the previous project and then incorporate those insights into a new, improved framework for ‘critical collaborative autonomy’ in the next project. At the end of the whole process, I realize I’ve been wrong about trying to focus students’ metacognition on their use of language skills as the starting point for developing their academic literacy autonomously. I see again that it is the students’ interest in learning about the topics themselves that motivates them and provides the springboard for the development of autonomy. And I recognize that all the planning and reflection that I ask the students to do should start from the students’ engagement with the topics—with the content, stupid! It’s a narrative that reads as if I had all the time and space in the world to reflect on the feedback from my students and coolly develop my understanding of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’!

I’m struck now that the rational, contemplative tone of that previous draft misrepresents the rushed, incomplete understanding that I actually brought to my teaching in those classes last year. It is that dissonance that I have tried to express by interspersing the uncertain introspection of the fictional opening and early sections of this current draft with segments from the previous draft. The objective, authoritative voice of the teacher-researcher at the start of that earlier draft—elaborating the issues, describing the research project, laying out the theoretical framework for the research—now seems more of a fiction than the hot, flustered figure scrambling through the papers littering the table that I imagined at the start of this chapter. No sign of my dilemmas, panics, and rushed decisions at the start of the previous draft! No sense there that the idea of ‘critical collaborative autonomy’ was something I stumbled on as the course progressed rather than the conceptual starting point for the whole ‘research project,’ as I had made it seem. I realize now that all the coherence is retrospective, the writer making sense of practice after the fact.

Andy Barfield points out, in a comment on the ‘Content stupid!’ draft, that I describe what I am doing as an ‘action research’ project, as if I had isolated a particular problem to address in my teaching. The figure of the ethnographer struggling to make sense, from inside, of a complex network of multiple meanings and viewpoints seems more appropriate now. I notice how the way that draft starts conflicts, not just with my lack of conceptual clarity at the time, but also with the more ‘ethnographic’ attempt to make sense of all that disparate feedback in the later sections of the draft. It’s as if the researcher and the ethnographer in me are fighting for control of the text.

However, I also recognize there a cyclical narrative that recurs in my write-ups of my ‘action research,’ and which seeks to reconcile this conflict. I start out as the teacher-researcher laying out the theoretical rationale for ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ and identifying the research questions at the beginning of the paper. I then switch into teacher-ethnographer mode, making sense of my students’ responses to the framework for planning and critical reflection I have given them. In this phase, I represent myself as learning from and with my students. I’m happy to have my ideas modified and complicated, in an on-going process of developing understanding in which I assimilate all these new insights from my learners into fuller, more complex models of what ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ involves. But these new insights are never allowed to challenge my basic starting assumptions as

teacher-researcher that the development of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ itself is a Good and Necessary Thing.

Autonomous group project work needs to be collaborative not just because group members must co-operate to complete the project successfully. More than this, I understand effective collaboration as the process through which the group members’ different perspectives, knowledge, and ways of learning and using English become a positive asset for their project work. In terms of content, this means the integration of their individual knowledge and research into a more complete understanding of the topic. For the organization of their work, it entails considering different ways of setting goals, sharing tasks, and planning time in order to make the best collective decisions. And for the development of English academic literacy skills and awareness, it means recognizing and learning from the group members’ different ways of learning and using English. In short, successful collaboration is what makes the whole group project greater than the sum of its parts.

This kind of autonomy (perhaps all kinds of autonomy) must also be critical because learners need to be able to recognize alternative, and potentially more effective, ways of learning and using English to those they are familiar and comfortable with. To carry out project work successfully, learners have to reflect on, evaluate, and adjust not just their learning, but also the way the group is working together and the development of the project itself. Reflecting critically on group work is perhaps more challenging than individual self-reflection because it implies evaluating others as well as yourself. But the potential range of individual understandings within a group also opens up the possibilities for seeing other, better ways of working. Critical reflection is, therefore, the key for making autonomous group work collaborative.

From the previous draft of this paper, ‘Developing critical collaborative autonomy: It’s the content, stupid!’ (June 2003)

TEXTUALISING AUTONOMY

All this talk of drafts, narratives, fictions makes me realize that I have made the problem of understanding how to develop learner autonomy into a question of understanding through writing, both for me and my students. Understanding *from* writing—from all those reflections and project logs and self-evaluations I get students to write; and understanding *by* writing—my trying (and usually failing) to make sense of all that feedback by writing coherent narratives for academic papers. It’s as if my students’ experiences and interpretations as learners are only significant for me when they become textualised.

This recognition raises questions for me about what an ‘ethnographic’ understanding of classroom practice involves. I am reminded that ethnography has itself been described as a form of textual practice, as “writing culture” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The ethnographic text tries to assimilate the multiple and dissonant subjectivities that make up a culture, and which the ethnographer has sought to collect and record in the field, into one all-embracing objective written account. This seems very similar to the way that I collect feedback from my students in the classroom and then take it back to my office where I try to incorporate all the different responses into one coherent understanding that will inform the development of my teaching and that I can write up in comprehensible academic papers. When Marcus and Fisher (1986, p. 68) point out that “...ethnography’s neat textualization of the immediate experiential data of

fieldwork conceals... the fieldworker's imperfect, shaky control of material about which he later writes with authority," I recognize the conceit in my own writing about my classes—except that my writing doesn't seem that neat anymore.

MAKING SENSE OF DIVERSITY

A key concern for me, then, in both this version and the previous draft of this chapter, is how to make sense of the diversity of ways in which my students carry out their academic project work. This diversity is both the reward and the challenge for me in trying to frame these projects to encourage learner autonomy. It emerges when students start to experiment with, and reflect on, different ways of doing these projects—of organising their work as a group, of using English for academic purposes, and of articulating their own perspectives on the topics. But that variety of approaches also presents me as a teacher with a dilemma. Should I require, model or encourage students to conduct their project work in ways that I think will be most useful for them in engaging academically with their topics? And, if so, in which ways? Or should I accept that the diversity of approaches they adopt is an integral feature of their developing academic literacy and learner autonomy?

In the 'It's the content, stupid!' version of this chapter, I posed this question in pedagogical terms. I was concerned with how to develop the framework for students to plan and reflect on their work for each new project cycle, on the basis of their feedback on the previous cycle. How could I encourage all the students to utilize ways of, for example, delegating research tasks that some students had found useful in the previous project cycle, whilst still creating space for them to explore their own ways of sharing the research?

Now, re-writing this chapter, a new set of rhetorical and temporal concerns have also come into focus. How did I try to understand the different approaches students were adopting through making them record and reflect on them in writing? How did time pressure limit my understanding of this feedback? And how did I try to create coherent, holistic models out of the diversity, both as the course was progressing and as I wrote it up in the earlier draft?

I'd now like to consider both sets of questions together by briefly re-interpreting, in light of these new concerns, my discussion in the previous draft of the three stages of reflection that followed each of the three project cycles.

MAKING SENSE OF (TOO MUCH) DIVERSITY

Let's go back to that fictive morning in June 2002, when I am hurriedly trying to take in all the feedback from students at the end of the first project cycle. Here are some of their (real) comments, about using the project logs—to set goals for their use of English, to plan their research and in-class discussions, and to allocate roles for group members—that I might have read then:

- *The project log was useful for our group work. I think the most useful section was the time-keeping. For I now have thought, whenever I worked with group, that it was very difficult to discuss, to share information and to exchange opinion in class. I think the project log is a very good idea to use time effectively.*
- *The project log makes us easy to decide the object of our project and our individual work (I'm a chairman, I'm a note-taker...and what I have to do for next class.) It made me have a clear consciousness of my own goal for each class and what I should improve.*
- *Actually we don't need it every week. We fixed our roles in class one.*

- *I noticed that to share role is effective, and to set questioner position is important because the person can improve our discussion.*
- *The project log is very useful as a whole, because we are easy to decide what we must do, or what we do next time. But it is difficult to set the role of each person for example, planner, questioner...etc. Actually we played all roles together.*
- *Especially, I think that it is useful to foresee the whole project. Project Log enables us doing it. I think having whole project plan is need.*
- *Project log was useful to chair group discussion... We can avoid the aimless discussion. But there was too many items we must write. For the log keeper, it must be a great burden.*
- *We made plans for our group work, and we tried to go according to plan. But it was difficult for us to do that. However, we learned from it. We made our group's work efficient. So it was useful.*

Scanning through these and many other comments, and connecting them with my observations during the project, I am initially excited that there are so many ideas here about different ways of organizing the project work. But faced with the task of rationalizing this into a new framework for the next project cycle, I feel overwhelmed by the diversity and volume of information. I notice that some groups are using the project logs as I imagined, to allocate time in class for information-sharing and discussion tasks, or to rotate roles such as discussion-coordinator or note-taker each week, for example. Others have been extending the project log beyond my original framework. They are using it to plan their work, not just for the current class, but also for the next class or to give them an overview of the whole project. Or they are allocating roles for research out of class as well as for in-class discussion. Other groups seem to be subverting the log by ignoring the weekly planning of class work, by fixing roles at the start of the project or by all playing a part in these roles together.

As well as this variety of specific ways of organizing project work, I notice two bigger issues in the feedback. Firstly, most students seem to be saying that the new focus on metacognitive planning is helping them to organize their project work more consciously and effectively. However, there also seems to be an undercurrent of dissatisfaction about having to use the project log project itself to record decisions as this takes up valuable class time for working on the topics. Secondly, I notice that students are giving less attention to planning and reflecting on their use of language skills than I had intended. They are focusing more on organizing their work in terms of the critical literacy component (identifying the causes of a problem, for example) and content-engagement aspects (comparing the situation for their issue in Japan and another country, for example) of academic literacy.

All this presents me with a number of dilemmas about how to re-conceive the planning and reflection work to help students further develop their 'critical, collaborative autonomy' in the next project cycle. At the time, I see two sets of choices:

1. Whether to let go of my (already shaky) control over the metacognitive processes by allowing each group to find their own ways of planning and reflecting, or to re-impose some sort of framework on groups for directing these processes?
2. Whether to accept the students' focus on critical-literacy and content-engagement, or to re-direct attention back to their use of language skills?

Now, in retrospect, I also notice that, at the time, I ignored another choice posed by the feedback: whether to continue using the actual project logs or not.

So what did I do to resolve these dilemmas and develop the framework for ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ over the next two project cycles? And—the questions that interest me more now—how did the constraints of time shape my response to this diversity, and how did I rationalize these decisions when I explained them in the ‘It’s the content, stupid!’ draft of this paper?

MAKING (TOO MUCH) SENSE OF DIVERSITY

RETHINKING PROJECT CYCLE TWO

For the second project cycle, I revised the framework for planning and reflection in the following ways:

- I gave the students an action log of their comments that referred to all the various approaches to organizing project work they had used in the first project cycle, and asked groups to adopt those they felt might be useful for the second cycle.
- I expanded the project log into a framework that I hoped would cover all of the approaches described in the action log.
- I required each group to make an overall plan in the first week for their work throughout the project, as well as to make a weekly plan of their project work at the start of each class.

In the ‘Content, stupid!’ draft of this paper, I explained that these decisions were based on an attempt to re-theorize my understanding of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy.’ I described this as an attempt to identify and map “the range of strategies that students had found useful in the first project [and] could draw on to collaborate more effectively in their group work.” I said that the feedback “suggested a much fuller and more complicated understanding of critical autonomy than I had started with,” and tried to represent this as a typology of strategies for collaborative group project work (see Table 1 overleaf). Explained like this, my approach in the second project cycle was to raise students’ awareness of all the options for collaboration but give them choices over which they used.

Looking back at this earlier draft, I now recognize that most of this ‘re-theorization’ happened *after* I decided how to develop the metacognitive framework for the second project. When I made those decisions, I didn’t allow myself enough time to adequately reflect on the feedback from the first project cycle, or to theorize that in a new understanding of how to conduct academic group work autonomously. Instead, I took the short cut of simply recycling back to the students all the various approaches that different groups had used in the first project. In effect, I passed my dilemmas back to the students for them to solve and left them to do the theorizing. I also see now that pressure of time limited me to revising the ways in which the project log was used rather than considering whether the project log itself was actually useful or not.

Re-visiting my previous draft, I now understand that this retrospective rationalization was structured by the assumptions about ‘critical collaborative autonomy’ that I had started the draft with. My claim that a fuller, more complete understanding of collaborative autonomy is emerging from the feedback looks like a way of reconciling my students’ focus on critical literacy and content-engagement with my belief that they should reflect on their use of

Table 1 Strategies for Collaborative Group Project Work

Setting goals	Strategies suggested by the teacher	Strategies introduced by the students
Allocating roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language skills e.g., Identify key ideas in note-taking; paraphrase specialist vocabulary and explain in English; make connections between ideas clear. • Language skills e.g., Discussion co-ordinator, note-taker, questioner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical literacy e.g., Find main argument; list up for and against positions; identify key points. • Content-engagement e.g., Make problems of education reform clear, understand about harm of dioxins. • Critical literacy e.g., Each member think about the solutions. • Content-engagement e.g., Each member research each kind of child abuse: Hiro – physical; Haru – sexual; Masa – emotional.
Short-term / this week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language skills e.g., Share information; make a mind map; identify questions for further research. • Content-engagement e.g., Get more information on causes of problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical literacy e.g., Discover and choose specific problems from general information shared today. • Content-engagement e.g., Compare the situation with the US.
Medium term / next week		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical-literacy/Content-engagement e.g., Discuss the whole topic in Week 1; focus more specifically on problems in Week 2, causes in Week 3, and solutions in Week 4.
Long-term / whole project		
Planning		

(adapted from, 'Developing critical collaborative autonomy: It's the content, stupid!')

language skills. I also recognize an ‘ethnographic’ attempt to represent my understanding of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ as a complete, though complex, system of strategies: I need to demonstrate that I can incorporate all the students’ different, subjective interpretations of how to organise autonomous academic project work into one objective, holistic model in the text.

For the second project cycle, I also revised the process of reflection. I asked students to write individual reflections after each class rather than the group reflections they had done in the first project. I also gave them a set of questions to respond to that I hoped would direct them away from summarizing their understanding of the topic (critical-literacy and content-engagement focused reflection) and towards their use of academic language skills. In the previous draft, I explained this as a way of helping the students to become more critically aware of which of the many metacognitive strategies would be most useful for their particular project. I think this rationalization does partly express my thinking at the time I made this decision. I was trying, perhaps, to find a way of helping students to make up for my own lack of theoretical guidance. But I sense now that it was also a way for me to gather even more ‘data’ about how the students were organising and understanding the progress of their work.

RETHINKING PROJECT CYCLE THREE

For the third and final project cycle of the course, I again revised the organization of the planning and reflection framework. This time, I allowed each group to design its own project log and to decide whether to reflect on their work individually, as a group, or not at all. Looking back now at my discussion of this decision in the ‘Content, stupid!’ draft, I notice that two stark contradictions in my understanding of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ have become almost impossible to reconcile by this point in the account.

Firstly, I explained in that draft that I changed the framework for the third project in response to a now unmistakable level of feedback from students saying that the project logging and reflection were taking up too much of the time they needed for their research and discussion. I noted that creating their own planning and reflection processes would enable each group to spend time on just those areas they felt were important. However, what seems significant to me now is that I still required groups to record their decisions in a project log (even if one of their own design), which is the very part of the process they felt wasted most time. And, ironically, most of the groups took the whole of the first class of the third project cycle to make their new project logs. I observe now that I couldn’t let go of my need to have students textualise the metacognitive processes of planning they went through, even though I had recognized that this was actually interfering with their investigation of the topics.

The second contradiction in this part of the ‘Content, stupid!’ draft concerns the diversity of approaches the groups were using to organize their work. I acknowledged in that draft that I could no longer reduce all these different collaborative approaches into one coherent account: “I...abandoned the search for one overall collaborative framework and accepted that there would be many different routes to critical, collaborative autonomy in my classes.” And yet, at the same time, I was still trying to find a way of conceptualizing all this diversity within one objective, systematic model. I attempted to do this by mapping “as a set of dichotomies, the tensions that seemed to be inherent in the way I had tried to encourage more critical collaborative autonomy in the project work.”

One of these tensions, I observed, was between *metacognitive work* and *content-based work*. I suggested here that the tension between planning/reflecting on how to engage more effectively with the topics and actually researching and discussing them seems to be “the central problem in developing more critical, collaborative autonomy in the project work.” One student put this

succinctly: “If we do so much reflection that we don’t have time to discuss much, then we don’t have anything to reflect on!”

One of the other tensions I identified was between *learning English* and *using English*. Here, I recalled that the original purpose of the projects was to enable students to *use* their language skills to do academic work in English. “I now feel that requiring students to go through explicit cycles of reflection and planning can be very powerful for the development of their academic literacy, but also runs the risk of positioning them as learners who have to practice certain teacher-imposed skills for the sake of practice not because they are useful to them.” One student observed, for example, that “*I understand what we should do in class. So I think I do not need write Project Log every week, only first time activity, we use this to decide whole project plan.*”

Re-writing this chapter, it seems that those tensions are much more of an issue for me than for the students. They exist because I demand so much weekly project logging and reflection; the students seem to have a much clearer sense of how a useful amount of metacognitive work can be balanced with their exploration of the content of the topics. And the tensions are also produced by my need to construct holistic models of ‘critical collaborative autonomy’ that incorporate every metacognitive strategy that every student in the class is using; individual students and groups seem to have found their own specific ways of working that don’t create these conflicts.

A BREAK IN THE NARRATIVE

The third stage of reflection in the ‘Content, stupid!’ narrative takes place after the end of the course and is triggered by an interview with three of the students who took it. This earlier draft represented my thinking at this stage as breaking with my starting assumptions about how to develop ‘critical, collaborative autonomy.’ The interview suggested that “I had got the relationship between reflecting on the use of academic [language] skills and the understanding of the content wrong. I had been asking students to reflect on their use of the [language] skills in order to grasp the topic better. The students seemed to be saying that reflecting on their grasp of the topic was the way into making more effective use of the [language] skills.” I attributed this shift in my thinking to new insights coming out of the interview:

One student commented that it was very difficult for them set goals and evaluate their work in terms of the academic skills because they were too abstract, and the students did not really know, for example, what good note-taking was. It was much easier for them to evaluate themselves in terms of goals focused on their understanding of the topic: “*Like if we are doing Iraq war, our project goal in this class is to make clear the situation in Iraq. So not skills goal... It’s going to be easier to set... because the topic is concrete.*”

Thinking again about the interview now, I see this break as the result, not just of more feedback on the project work, but also of a different kind of feedback. In the interview, the reflective discourse has shifted from writing to speaking, and from a monologic process of reflection to a dialogic one. This seems to have allowed the students to challenge the agenda I had set for reflection much more than they were able to do when responding to the focused questions I gave them for their written evaluations of the projects. I had intended to use the interview to get the students’ views on the typology of collaborative strategies and the framework of tensions models. In other words, I had hoped to organise the discussion around my own understandings of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy.’ However, the interview soon veered away from those models, and the students were much more able to raise their own concerns and to challenge my framing of the issues.

THE ‘WILL TO KNOW’

One crucial question for me now is: Who benefited from all that writing down of metacognitive planning and reflection that I asked for during the project cycles? To what extent did it help the students to develop awareness and take more control of the development of their academic literacy? And how much was it driven by my need to textualise understandings of autonomy, and even to provide the quotes that become the voices of learners in texts like this?

Clearly, my students do feel it has helped them to write weekly reflections on their learning and use of English. Most of their feedback on this part of ‘critical, collaborative autonomy’ was very positive (although some students did complain about the time it took):

- *It helped me to plan for the future. With writing reflection, I could think about what would be good for me to do next week. Writing reflection is important because I have motivation to do projects.*
- *By writing reflections, things which are vague and unclear become so clear.*
- *Weekly reflections were useful for making the group aims of each class.*
- *I think the reflections is very useful, because I can review what is good point or what is bad point clearly. For example, I can find today’s discussion is bad because our discussion is not to the point.*

The benefit to students of recording decisions on a project log each week, rather than just discussing how to plan their project work, is much more doubtful, especially after the first project cycle when they have already been able to experiment with a range of ways of organizing their work.

I’m struck now by how stubbornly I demanded even more project logging when many students were telling me that this was getting in the way of the research and discussion it was supposed to facilitate. I notice also the ambivalence in my previous draft about whether the project log was designed to provide a record for the students of their work to help them reflect better, or to help me understand more what they are doing. As David Little has implied, students may have the metacognitive skills to organise their learning autonomously, even if they can’t describe those skills (Dam, Little, Smith, & Katsura, 1999). Tim Murphey was making a similar point in a different way, I think, when he commented on my ‘Content, Stupid!’ draft that “studying the process of reflection might have become the ‘new grammar.’” Perhaps my focus on metacognitive skills is actually getting in the way of my students’ ability to develop their autonomous engagement with academic topics in the same way that a concern for grammatical accuracy may inhibit students’ ability to communicate.

I also wonder if my concern to textualise metacognitive awareness is actually preventing my students from taking more control of their own use of English. Michel Foucault (1980, 1981) has identified the ‘will to know’ as a characteristic strategy for exercising power in modern societies. He describes ‘incitement to discourse’ as an element of this strategy, and I recognize the ‘incitement to record and reflect’ in my approach to developing and understanding autonomy. He also sees power operating not through repression—thou shalt not—but through processes of surveillance and regulation (including self-surveillance and self-regulation)—a power that operates productively by saying ‘you must.’ For all the value that self-evaluation and reflection definitely have for my students, I also now see an element of (self-)surveillance and (self-)regulation at work when I tell my students that they must write a reflection on their learning every week, hand it in to me to look at, and share it with their peers. Perhaps requiring my students to do all this recording and reflecting, just at the point when I’m finding it hard to

keep track of their different ways of developing the project work, is a way of maintaining some of my waning control as teacher over students who are becoming autonomous.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this chapter, I have discussed how I have refocused my thinking about the parallel development of learner autonomy and academic literacy in group project work in the process of re-writing the chapter. This shift was prompted by collaborative discussions at the Anthology Writers' Retreat, which explored the possibilities for writing about learner and teacher autonomy in ways which break with the genre of the standard research paper authored by a disembodied researcher. These possibilities, we thought, might include the foregrounding of teachers' and learners' voices in the text and the use of narratives and fiction to locate ourselves within the contexts, processes, and dilemmas in which we develop our understanding of our learners and our own teaching. Those new perspectives helped me see how my thinking about 'critical collaborative autonomy' had actually been constrained by the structure and voice of the previous draft of this chapter, as well as by my predilection for textualising the students' every metacognitive thought (without having time to make sense of all that information) and my efforts to construct universalizing models of how learner autonomy develops.

I have been rather critical of my own demands for written reflection from my students and of my attempts to theorize on the basis of those reflections. However, that self-critique has led me to re-consider, rather than devalue, the role that reflection and theorizing can play in developing better frameworks for promoting learner autonomy. It has sensitized me to the question of whether the processes of reflection are helping the students to develop their awareness of how they do their project work or enabling me to collect data that will validate my role as action researcher or ethnographer. And I have realized the value to me of insights and challenges that come from exploratory, dialogic processes of reflection with individual students (such as an interview). These may be far more pertinent and penetrating than my attempts to understand what every student in the class is thinking from their monologic, written feedback to questions I have decided, the answers to which I can interpret within my own frames of reference without negotiation with the students.

I think I have also learnt a little about how the theorizing of practice can best contribute to a clearer understanding of the development of learner autonomy, both for myself and my learners. My theories should be able to take into account the diversity of practice that is a necessary and important consequence of the development of autonomy. And I need to develop those theories in a process of negotiation with the students, framing issues for dialogue with and amongst them, rather than either imposing my models upon them or expecting them to do all the conceptualizing for themselves. That means developing a common discourse with my students about key issues in the development of learner autonomy and academic literacy—not us all reaching an identical interpretation of those issues—so that each student can conceptualise for themselves what they need to do to use English more effectively for academic work. So, at the end of this process of re-writing and re-thinking, I now think that the key question to ask about reflective processes and conceptual frameworks for developing autonomy is: *Do they help both me and my students make sense of our practice in the classroom?*

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

JODIE STEPHENSON AND MIKI KOHYAMA

Mike's chapter reads almost like a diary, and we enjoyed the privilege of being let into his world. As teachers, we could imagine ourselves being in his shoes, in front of a desk with heaps of reports and reflections to scan through right before class starts. We could also relate to his busy schedule—trying to juggle teaching, research, writing, and other commitments all at the same time. We found his honesty throughout everything both refreshing and challenging.

We began to think about our own classes and the motives behind the decisions we make. Do we do things because we honestly believe that they will benefit students, or are we just settling for the easiest and quickest option? Or is there a more ambiguous, self-serving motive? Do we really listen to our students? Do we use modes of reflection that encourage dialogue and negotiation? Are we *really* encouraging students to be autonomous? How much are we willing to let go of our preconceptions and our control?

These are questions that we want to continue to ask ourselves as we teach. We want to keep questioning our motives and checking that we are doing the right things for the right reasons. We know that there will be times when we do wrong things for right reasons, or even right things for wrong reasons, and, like Mike, we hope to be able to realize this and respond humbly and honestly.

Mike's chapter also made us think about ourselves as writers. His frankness about the processes involved in his research and his writing challenges us to be real and honest in our own writing. We often feel pressured to write as if we had all of the answers: We have a problem, we look at the literature, we theorize, we collect data, we suggest reasons and solutions. In reality, things are usually not so simple, yet we usually don't reveal that in our writing. Mike shows us that writing about teaching doesn't have to be that way, and we realize that we can in fact learn more when the writer is honest about their struggles as well as their successes.

After everything, though, perhaps the biggest thing for us is the issue of time. It is not easy to find the time to plan and reflect when our days already seem crammed. But, since reading Mike's chapter, and thinking about it in order to write this reader response, we have become more aware of the importance of reflection, and somehow find ourselves doing it more during classes recently. This may just be a coincidence, but perhaps not. Perhaps it reminds us again of the importance of being in contact with other teachers and letting them, either in person or in writing, challenge our own theories and practice.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2**SULTAN ERDOĞAN**

As a teacher and researcher, Mike's reflective article made me look at aspects of the daily routines of my profession more critically. I think he very nicely elaborates the feeling of uncertainty which I'm sure all teachers have when trying to put anything new into practice. I'm amazed personally at how much time I spend worrying whether my students have got any benefit from the activities we do together. However, I think this anxiety is part of the process of teacher-learning, and one way of coping with and seeing beyond the 'veil' that this anxiety draws in front of us might be to share it with others, exactly as Mike does here.

It strikes me that, by practising what he preaches (critical reflection), Mike has been able to identify alternative paths towards establishing the interaction and negotiation between students and the teacher necessary for the development of critical collaborative autonomy. Since reflection has become a 'buzz word,' we direct our students to plan, monitor, and evaluate, and of course we encourage them to provide records of the underlying thought processes that they go through mostly in written form (diaries, journals, logs, etc.). Mike's experience led me to give a second thought to this matter. Could it be that my students sometimes get into a routine so that they start reflecting just for the sake of reflection? Could it also be the case that my image in the classroom as an authority figure poses difficulties for them when they are by themselves holding their pens indecisively above the paper? Most important, am I able to respond genuinely to the reflections that they put on paper within the busy schedule I have, so that my students will have the chance to negotiate? Mike reflects that his students could challenge him during the interviews as opposed to via the regular entries in their logs. I think this kind of a dialogue, where immediate response and negotiation can be enhanced, might have advantages over the conventional written form of reflection. Such written reflection cannot usually be exploited fully due to constraints such as lack of time and power relations, as is demonstrated through Mike's observations.

Also worth highlighting is the insightful experience Mike has had as a teacher-learner. It was very interesting for me to read how he started out with particular assumptions only to abandon them later on. The more his students showed diversity in their ways of thinking, the more Mike has had to make an effort to be able to see the issues through their eyes, an experience which challenges one's own beliefs and values about teaching and learning (and this can be painful sometimes?!). I want to congratulate Mike for his honesty about his feelings as a teacher-learner.

Finally, it has been thought-provoking to be reminded of the fact that we have a responsibility towards ourselves and our students to help the processes of teaching and learning be meaningful and beneficial. Considering current world affairs, isn't critical collaborative autonomy something that we all should self-critically think about offering to our students?