

# **Team-teaching as Negotiating Autonomy and Shared Understandings of What We Are Doing**

or (with a nod towards the late Raymond Carver)

**What do we talk about when we talk about autonomy?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the proposition that teacher autonomy might be realized where teachers are empowered by their institutional context to learn about student learning, and act upon that learning. This was something my colleagues, Matt Laszewski and Marie-France Champagne, and I have talked a lot about during recent years, culminating with their dispensing with a timetable altogether in recent collaborations. The measure of autonomy is then found in the discourse of team teachers by what they assume, what they question, how they reinvent a course or a program, and how they come to shared understandings of what's happening, and how they might impact upon those processes. Tasks then are ideally always appropriate to the moment.

This paper examines teachers' interactions on two intensive pre-masters programs. The approach is interpretive, making use of interview data, accounts, and action research methods.

## **Introduction**

I'm going to start with my questions upfront.

What is the relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy? Is it possible that there is no necessary relationship at all between the two constructs? More provocatively, is it possible that too much stress on realizing learner autonomy may be detrimental to teacher autonomy, which in formal language learning contexts, it is argued here, can be understood as something much more important than learner autonomy. My final question here is also a rather prickly one: is it possible for teachers working independently of each other to really be autonomous?

For these questions to make sense, it is necessary for me to define where I am coming from, which is largely the purpose of this closing paper. A couple of months ago, I met with an old friend and colleague, and mentioned – with reference to this Symposium – a nagging dissatisfaction with the constructs of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. Before I had a chance to elaborate on what I meant, he agreed with me, and went further. The constructs in fact got in the way of talking about what teachers and learners actually do, and it was these prosaic, unsexy things that we needed to talk about, not loftier abstractions such as autonomy. So what *do* we talk about when we talk about autonomy?

This skepticism stems largely from my work and the learners I work with. I have come to the conclusion that learners' preferences for certain formal forms of learning have little in common with their capacity to exercise autonomy in their own learning, including language learning. Indeed, as adults – albeit often young adults – they usually have strongly held views on learning, and have proved themselves empirically to be successful at learning.

Within the specific context of this symposium, therefore, I have set myself a rather awkward task, and I'm going to attempt to make that task less awkward by extensive cross-reference to

papers presented at this symposium. It remains my intention, as stated in the abstract, to attempt to investigate certain constructs empirically – something that Benson (2002) notes is too rare in our field. One goal of this preliminary discussion on AUTO-L therefore is to focus the discussion on what exactly we mean when we talk about (teacher) autonomy.

## **Teacher autonomy: definitions and meanings**

One of the more widely accepted definitions of learner autonomy (LA) is “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001: 47). My preferred definition of teacher autonomy (TA) is by analogy, “the capacity to take control of one’s own teaching”. As with Benson’s definition of LA, the construct of “taking control” is more easily investigated than some others, such as “taking responsibility”, and appears to neatly cover the gist of longer, more detailed definitions such as the Shizuoka Definition (Ashwell et al., 2001).

Other important attempts to define TA include those in the volume edited by Sinclair, McGrath and Lamb (2000). McGrath frames TA in terms of both self-directed professional development and in terms of freedom from control by others. To the former, he co-opts various educational traditions, including those of the teacher as researcher (Stenhouse, 1975), action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1989; Burns, 1999), and the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983, 1988). For the latter, he co-opts Benson’s assertion in the same volume that freedom from control by others implies the capability to act self-directedly. For McGrath, it is “obvious” (p. 102) that the promotion of LA is one of the responsibilities of the autonomous teacher. Despite this assumption, his model of development for the autonomous teacher, building on work by Thavenius (1996), is a useful start, and refrains from defining TA in terms of LA.

Lamb (2000) looks at TA in terms of critical reflection, proposing a progressive professional development. His conclusion that it is necessary that “teachers perceive ‘the pupils’ as worth becoming engaged with (Sleeter and Grant, 1991: 67), and this requires a fundamental critical review of beliefs and values” (p. 127), suggests the possibility of basing TA on LA. Smith (2000) explores the notion of teacher-learning, defining TA “at least partially in terms of the teacher’s autonomy as a learner” (p. 90). Rather than exploring what this might mean in terms of, say, action research, Smith offers a case study of a collaborative network of English teachers learning Japanese.

Benson (2000) suggests that the exercise of TA is possibly constrained by:

1. **Policy factors** (i.e., factors external to the school)
2. **Institutional factors** (factors internal to the school)
3. **Conceptions of language**, including dominant conceptions of what the target language is, and ideologies of correct and standard usage
4. **Language teaching methodologies**, defined in terms of “academic expertise and professional assumptions” (p. 116).

Benson effectively posits the teacher as a conduit for dominant ideologies, and as the innocent charged with explaining and justifying constraints to learners: “From the learners’ perspective, the teacher may appear to be the most important constraint on the exercise of their right to autonomy” (ibid). This assertion is problematic on two counts: first, it is deterministic, in that it denies the possibility that it is the teacher’s own theories (rather than Theory) that might be the constraint, or in other words, personal agency. Second, as Benson now acknowledges (2002), learners – even when they themselves are teachers – are unlikely to frame their learning in terms of “autonomy”.

Returning to the “Shizuoka Definition”, Ashwell et al. (2001) argue that TA, like LA, is based on the principles of critical reflective inquiry, empowerment and dialogue. TA ultimately involves the autonomous teacher in a continual search for better answers to the different problems

inevitably arising in individual teaching and learning situations”. This appears to constitute critical reflective enquiry; it is part of my argument here that this is only really possible through dialogue between teachers working together (possibly virtually), who enter into that dialogue in a spirit of open enquiry.

Finally, in this Symposium, Cotterall and Crabbe (2002) argue that any connection between teacher and learner autonomy lies in expertise surrounding the learning of a language, and see learner-initiated dialogue between learners and teachers methodologically as a means of revealing the diversity of learners’ experience as language learners. TA is not defined, and arguably .

Possibly because of the two contexts in which most of these papers appear, they tend to assume that relationships between teacher and learner autonomy is axiomatic. This contribution will question that assumption. As for Cotterall and Crabbe, dialogue is central to the investigation; here though, I argue that:

1. dialogue, adopted in a spirit of open enquiry, is a necessary part of “the capacity to take control of one’s own teaching”
2. the goal of doing so is not to enable learners to take control of their own learning, which is presumptuous on our part, but to enable them to learn (some aspect of a) language
3. the construct of learner autonomy, or the overriding goal of enabling learners to take control of their own learning, may itself be a constraining factor on a teacher’s freedom to make the right choices for her learners.

## **Constraints**

Another way of framing the constraints from which teachers need freedom is shown in Figure 1 on the next page. Lovat and Smith explain their understanding of the teacher’s operational decision-making space as a kind of residue – what’s left after everyone else has made their decisions about what needs to happen. Again, this might be a little too deterministic, in denying the possibility that teachers have any agency in determining their own decision-making scope. I like to think that this figure accommodates the four categories of constraints on TA identified by Benson (2000), but goes further by situating where both conceptions of language and language learning/teaching methodologies might lie. Thus standard language ideologies may be imposed by the system, the institution, teacher’s colleagues, or might form part of the teacher-self. But as Pennycook (1997) has noted: “common terms such as ‘communicative competence’, ‘authentic materials’ or ‘student-centred education’ ... [have] rapidly achieved a moral status backed by dominant beliefs in liberal, progressive education” (p. 39). This critique was directed specifically at the unquestionability of autonomy. What I am looking at here is freedom from control as much by autonomy as freedom from control by standard language ideologies.

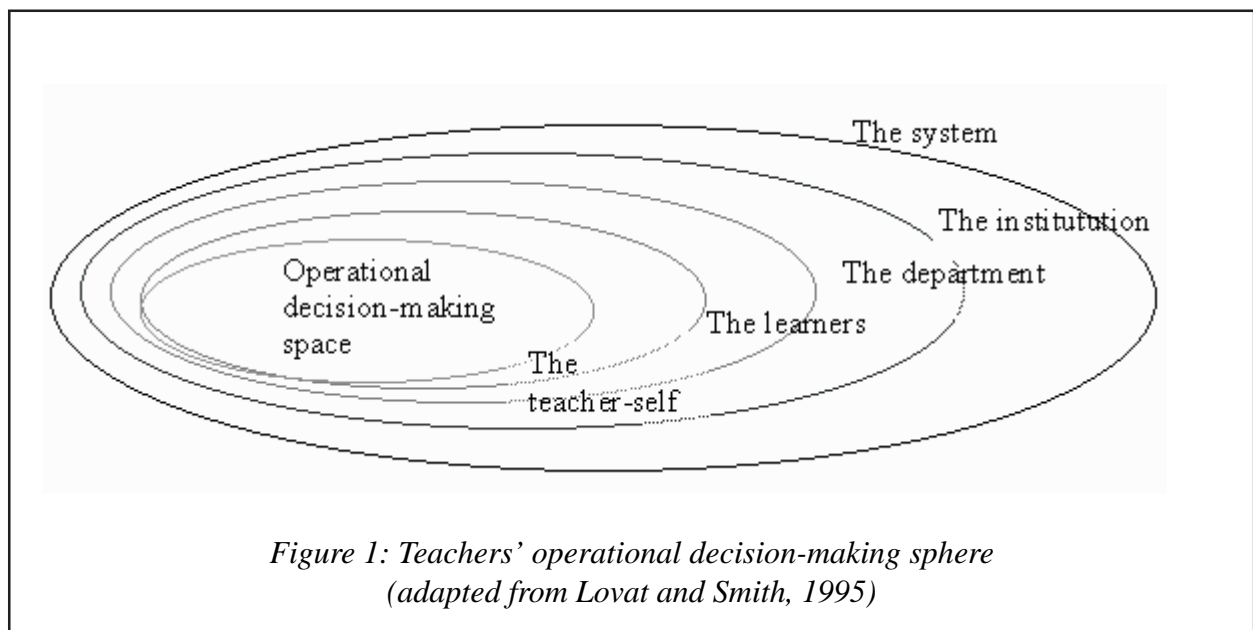
I hope that this rejection of learner autonomy in favour of learner language learning is not misunderstood as a form of retreat. Far from it: it is perhaps best understood in terms of TA as freedom not only from internalized control by others. Perhaps an example is useful here. A specific instance of control is the timetable, which serve many purposes, not least as a comforting constant presence, for both teachers and students. this is not necessarily a bad thing. In our work at AIT, we came to be trapped by a particular representation of the timetable which had assumed an almost iconic status as the embodiment of autonomy (see Walter, 1998) even as we rejected textbooks as an unjustified constraint on, among other things, learner autonomy. Recognizing this, we have recently rejected the timetable in favor of a rather pure form of negotiated curriculum.

I use this by way of illustration. Freedom from control is heady stuff, and certainly not something to try at home, and represents a point towards the end of any journey towards professional development. And this gets to the crux of what this paper will be about. I also don’t believe that it

is really possible to cast off controls working individually, precisely because it is so hard to question the very constructs that enchain us. Dialogue therefore is needed, with teachers as critical peers, willing to question each others' assumptions and explore new avenues for questioning, and in the process, reinvent a course or a program continuously, arriving at shared understandings of what's happening, and how, as teachers, they might impact upon those processes.

## Context of the study

The context of this study is the Asian Institute of Technology, an English language-medium post-graduate institute of engineering, technology and management. Language teachers work together in various capacities: as individual teachers responsible for parallel courses within the same program; as teachers working on different components of the same course or intensive program (co-teachers); and as colleagues jointly responsible for teaching an entire course or program together (team teachers). Students may study in a wide variety of fields, and their language learning goals are invariably instrumental to their disciplinary goals.



## So some further questions for discussion

- How can teachers use constructs such as autonomy without becoming used by them?
- At what stage do constructs lose their explanatory value/utility, and become no more than theoretical clichés?
- Can teachers be truly autonomous if they are working on their own?

Can teachers working together, sharing a common understanding of a set of key constructs, be truly autonomous?

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