Weaving threads of autonomy. The challenge for personal pedagogic change (reflections on my learner autonomy story)

pre publication version

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Part One
Irina's story

What has brought me to the learner autonomy concept is the fact that I have never stopped being a learner. Now I am convinced that my teaching career has gradually become a complex paradigm that embraces the skills of a learner, researcher, coach and facilitator. That is one of the reasons why my biggest concern in teaching is the question of how to teach students to learn. In other words, I keep working on how to lead my students to an effective, autonomous and inquiry-based way of learning. Nevertheless, all my initial attempts were only partly successful because my overall teaching style still remained teacher-centered, and autonomous elements in my teaching such as learner empowerment, reflective discourse, peer- or self-assessment were quite awkward and spontaneous. Later on I decided to try something new.

The turning point that changed my teaching style was my participation in a Fulbright exchange programme several years ago. Selected for this experience, I left the Czech Republic for a year and started teaching at University Prep Academy (UPA) in Seattle. All of a sudden, I found myself in a situation where I was expected to teach American high school students academic writing and world literature, which were subjects I had never taught before. I had to turn my teaching methods upside down and come up with something that would work for me as well as for my new students. It was a matter of survival at the beginning. Finally, the situation led to a great shift in my teaching approach and my whole personality as well. Along with teaching at UPA, I did a lot of observations there and had a chance to see how my American colleagues taught in English and some other classes. The most impressive discovery for me was the student-centered approach of those classes and the active, self-directed attitude of the students resulting in their entire involvement in the learning process. The traditional knowledge transmission model was not used here at all. I was also struck by how the students constructed their knowledge through reflective discussions, group and individual projects based on their own research and its findings. To my surprise, all of them

were cooperative and eager to learn; they also acted as if they were in the same boat in being responsible for what was going on. There was something in the air that made them feel an important part of the process. At that point I was not aware of the concept of autonomous learning and its theoretical framework. However, I had a great chance to watch its incredible impact on the students in my American colleagues' classes. Gradually, I started to develop my own autonomous teaching style and realized how beneficial it could be to put the students in the roles of experts, researchers, actors or critics in order to learn. That was a wonderful way of activating their motivation and our mutual exploration of new knowledge. A lot of projects, and task-based assignments resulted in successful student work. Taking different roles helped them see the subject from different angles and teach each other from new perspectives, sharing what they found out. Learning by implicit teaching became a part of our classes that naturally activated a self-directed way of learning in my students. They were eager to create their own handouts, quizzes, posters or other teaching/learning materials and share the chosen learning strategies among themselves. The role reversal became a part of my teaching as well. Depending on the task, I also played various roles, which definitely took me away from an instructive way of teaching.

When I arrived back in the Czech Republic for the next academic year, I couldn't wait to put into action ideas from my experiences in my secondary school English classes. The school where I worked at the time was a medical college with students who were 17–18 years old. With all my enthusiasm and new teaching concepts in mind, I set up several projects and anticipated that my colleagues and students would be supportive and cooperative. After a while, it was crystal clear to me that my return had turned out to be a disaster. No one expected me to teach in a new way. Neither my colleagues nor the academic authorities wanted me to share what I had learnt and developed within my American working experience. Moreover, the students who had never before been exposed to an autonomous approach had difficulty in accepting this change at the beginning as well. They were not used to making choices and decisions on their own; they had never done any long-term assignments before. Goal-setting, planning, implementing the projects, as well as using logbooks for their reflections on the learning process, were totally unfamiliar to them. However, after a challenging period of in which I got my students familiarized with new ways of learning, both implicitly and explicitly, they became more confident, autonomous and more successful in English. What helped them overcome most of the difficulties was their gradual but systematic involvement in a strategic way of learning and a constant reflection on its impact. When my students came out of their comfort zone of passive participants and accepted facing the

challenges as a part of learning, they realized how beneficial autonomous learning could be. All of them really enjoyed the final parts of the projects and were very proud of their final products—films, magazines, articles, and so on. In one respect, it was a big challenge to get them to the tipping point. On the other hand, the final after-project discussion showed that it was worth trying. One of the students said, 'It was so hard, but we've made a miracle.'

Chika's response

Your narrative includes various interesting incidents that you experienced through your explorative journey with the development of learner autonomy. In spite of your strong desire to help students experience 'an effective, autonomous and inquiry-based way of learning', your teaching practice started with a dilemma probably coming from the apprenticeship of observation. Consequently, as you acknowledge, you chose more teacher-centred teaching methods rather than trying to incorporate autonomous elements into parts of your teaching. However, your encounter with autonomous learning classes at UPA program made you become aware of various teaching approaches for learner autonomy and, as you explain, this critical incident even had an impact on your whole personality. Then you moved to the stage of action research to explore your own strategies for the development of learner autonomy. Moreover, as you crystallised your understanding of pedagogic knowledge co-constructed through interaction with your learners, you also realised important cooperative elements in the process of learner autonomy. At the 'experience' stage when you went back to the Czech Republic, you faced constraints which at first seemed beyond your control; however, you gradually overcame the difficulties and successfully engaged in the development of learner autonomy. Reading your story and noticing how it combines both successful and trial experiences, I would like to know what you think about the possible causes of your difficulties and how you overcame them, with a particular focus on the process of your personal and professional transformation throughout this journey. As I read through your story, the dichotomy of 'implicitly/explicitly' echoed repeatedly and impressed upon me that they were key words in your story. As you reflected about your experiences, as an observer you learned about autonomy at UPA implicitly, but when you as a teacher tried to implement autonomous elements into your teaching in the Czech Republic, your students engaged in this autonomous learning experience both implicitly and explicitly. So I want to know what you think about your use of the strategy; I would also like to see some concrete examples about

how your students experienced autonomous learning. Moreover, I wonder if you are conscious of this dichotomy—i.e., implicitly and explicitly—and if yes, what these terms have meant to you in terms of the development of learner autonomy. In addition, your narrative 'implicitly' interweaves stories about scaffolding for the development of learner autonomy—e.g., strategies, techniques and teacher roles. I wonder what kinds of scaffolding you consciously/unconsciously used and also if they were employed implicitly or explicitly. Whatever the scaffolding you may have used, it seems to me that you carefully tried to identify students' Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) for learner autonomy with an awareness of the perspective of 'culture' and encouraged them to arrive at their appropriate levels/degrees of learner autonomy. However, it seems your students had many choices about handouts, as well as teaching and learning materials, which sounds very 'free' to me. Reflecting on my teaching practice, I often face a gap between my expectations as a teacher and students' choices of materials. Some students choose materials which are too easy/difficult for their levels, while others show their interests in tasks which are completely different from what I expect. Then I often feel I need to set a certain framework and let students work within the framework, especially in the early stages of learner development. I wonder if there are any difficulties/ uncertainties you have in working within students' ZPDs and how you share the responsibility with your students. I sympathized with your explanation about the refusal of your colleagues and academic authorities to acknowledge and support your efforts at innovation. This is the political/sociocultural dimension to your local context. However, I wonder what exactly made your colleagues, academic authorities and students refuse your approach. Did they think your approach was too radical? Were they not ready to accept your approach? Did they try to accept some of the new teaching approaches but did not know how to incorporate them into their teaching practice? Reflecting on my own teaching experiences at the secondary and tertiary levels in Japan, I often feel I am surrounded by three cultural paradigms: Japanese, school and classroom culture. Japanese culture informs us of certain norms and even forces us to behave in ways that are considered to be right in the culture; this influence is also uni-directionally transmitted to school and classroom cultures and even controls teachers and students within the cultures. In general, teachers and students in a classroom simply accept the influences from both culture and school, and behave and act as they are expected to do. However, it is clear to me that you as a change agent broke such cultural norms and became a role model for your students, colleagues and other teachers at different schools. Through this transformative process, did you also find a collaborative dimension to the development of autonomy similar to your experiences at UPA?

Martin's response

Irina's starting point is her sense that she has never stopped being a learner, and her whole story is of course a testament to this claim: it is an extended reflection on a process of change, from being one kind of teacher to another. Although the story is 'rounded off' with its happy ending of satisfied students celebrating a 'miracle', one can be sure that Irina is still learning, and that subsequent to these experiences her teaching has continued to evolve. She doesn't mention it explicitly, but I suspect there is another sense in which Irina is still a learner—of English language and literature, and the other subjects that she teaches. A few years ago I gave a talk at an English teachers' conference in Indonesia called 'Remember our ignorance! Why teachers must be co-learners with their students', which took as its starting point this quotation from Henry Thoreau (1817-1862): 'How can we remember our ignorance, which our growth requires, when we are using our knowledge all the time?' I'm not sure I was very successful in getting my point across—a questioner later asked whether I considered even the university lecturers in the audience to be ignorant—but I do firmly believe that retaining an enthusiasm for learning the subject, and modelling ways of learning it, are among the most essential qualities of a teacher, especially one who hopes to promote learner autonomy. Of course there are times when we should 'use' our existing knowledge for the benefit of our students, but, as Irina says, even more time should be spent in 'mutual exploration of new knowledge'. A salient aspect of Irina's story is the crossing of cultural borders—the changes in her teaching occur after moving to teach in America for a year, and then again on moving back to the Czech Republic. It makes one wonder whether Irina would still be teaching in her old 'transmissive' style if she had not had the opportunity for cultural exchange. I suspect it would have happened eventually, as she implies that she was somehow ready for the change—the move to the new cultural and educational environment could be seen as a 'tipping point' when, with familiar conditions suddenly removed, her own internal teaching 'system' had to suddenly reorganize. Perhaps if she had stayed in the Czech Republic, some other local upheaval, or personal epiphany, would have served as the 'tipping point'. On her return, Irina was herself the change agent, and she admits to a period of resistance and chaos while the system re-ordered itself. It is interesting to speculate how far the students themselves were 'ready' for a more autonomous style of learning, in the way that she was psychologically prepared for changing her teaching style on arrival in America. In Irina's story autonomy is mainly conceptualized in terms of in-class activity, that is, the teacher

sharing decision-making with the students about what and how to learn; there is talk about goal-setting, reflective logs, long-term project work. I'd be interested to know whether there was any more 'system-wide' change—for example, what has happened subsequently? Did introducing change in other classes become easier once one had already been transformed? Did the changes in her classroom trigger other teachers to experiment with different teaching styles? And did her own students' behaviour outside class change, such that they engaged in more autonomous learning of English?

Part Two
Irina's story continued

First, I would like to express my gratitude to the two readers of my 'learner autonomy story'. I appreciate their insightful remarks and questions as well as their sharing their own experiences and thoughts on the learner autonomy development. I hope my responses will meet Chika's and Martin's expectations and will cover the areas of their enquiries. Chika was wondering what caused the difficulties at the initial stage of incorporating autonomous principles into my classroom practice. From my perspective, there were several reasons for the hard times at the beginning. The first one was my limited experience of its implementation from both practical and theoretical perspectives. Moreover, my own educational background was very traditional or even conservative. I grew up in the Ukraine where a 'transmissive' style of teaching was the only one I could experience. Even after moving to the Czech Republic, nothing changed in terms of my further education or teaching career. At the point when I realized how ineffective this style was, I felt the need for change and started seeking something new and meaningful. Nevertheless, even the turning point in my teaching, the Fulbright exchange experience, was not sufficient to make me start experimenting with a new style with confidence and immediate success. Moreover, my American students were native speakers who were all quite used to making decisions and choices on their own; they were well experienced in terms of project-based assignments and research-oriented tasks. I can now see how naive I was upon arrival in the Czech Republic in expecting so much from my students. My Czech students had never learnt anything without course books; they were inexperienced with doing long-term projects, time management, collaborative peer-work, research capacity etc. However, we all wanted to start something new. We overcame all the difficulties and what the students achieved was fantastic in the end. Our first project was devoted to shopping in Prague. Within this project my learners (second-year students of a

medical college) decided to figure out which shopping street in Prague is the best. The end-product of the individual part of the project was an argumentative article to persuade other students that the chosen street was really the best. Although the final product was individual, the students mostly worked in groups according to similar choices, so their work involved a wide range of collaborative activities both in class and out of class e.g., Internet research, note-taking, making interviews with shopping assistants and doing surveys with peers or tourists. During the second part of the project, my students decided to create a collaborative end-product which they were supposed to present as a group of authors. The biggest challenge for me at the beginning was to establish spontaneous communication in English. The project inclined to spontaneous talk; therefore it was tempting for my students to talk in Czech due to their lack of vocabulary and grammar in English. Another big challenge for the students was to write an article; they were struggling with word order, cohesion etc. The students also found drafting and peer editing too difficult and time consuming. However, they enjoyed writing short reflections on their outside class activities. Gradually, the process of learners' engagement became more and more enthusiastic, and, in the end, they all wrote articles arguing for the advantages of their favorite shopping streets. The very final part of the project was the most enjoyable because the students worked in groups on the final products to present them to their classmates in English. I was happy when they came up with various 'genres'— shopping guidebooks for tourists, magazines with advertisements, posters or films. In the following projects my students and I were able to handle everything with better time management and planning. For me, this was the time when I decided to set up gradual systematic work on learner autonomy development in my other classes too. Now I am very well aware that most of my secondary school first- or second-year students are not familiar with autonomous learning. They require a very sensitive approach in terms of setting realistic goals, and deciding on the amount of work in accordance with their ZPDs, as well as their cultural and educational backgrounds. There is one more challenge or even constraint that not only influenced the initial stage of my new teaching style, but also keeps limiting me in my way of teaching. Like other teachers at our school, I am supposed to follow the coursebooks assigned by the English Department and keep up with all required units, which has put me in a position of maneuvering between two different approaches. It took me some time before I decided to start using the textbook as additional rather than mainstream material in order to foster learner autonomy to as great an extent as possible. This change helped my classes become more authentic as far as the target language use is concerned; they have also become more content-based and autonomy-oriented. Along with the gradual and systematic

implementation of learner autonomy principles, I started to discuss autonomous techniques with my older students and explicitly tried to find out what works for them better and what their preferences are. Reflecting on Chika's question about the implicit-explicit dichotomy in my practice, I realized that, in the early stages of the autonomy development, it is more effective to introduce steps toward autonomy implicitly, without exposing students to the concept of autonomy from its theoretical perspective or using specific terms where self-directed learning is featured. However, after a two- or three-year experience of autonomous learning, it could be quite effective to reflect on the autonomous strategies and techniques explicitly, especially if students' experiences in developing learner autonomy are quite rich for them to reflect upon. I am talking here about 18-19 year olds who have gone through nuts and bolts of autonomous strategies and are aware of the techniques they have used. In fact, this is the main subject of my current investigations. I have been exploring 'learning by teaching' with my third-year and final-year students, in which I hope the dynamic 'from implicit to explicit' autonomy development will prove its effectiveness. This is just a hypothesis, so it is too early to speculate about the outcomes. As Chika has noticed, I try to identify students' ZPDs as well as take into consideration their cultural and educational backgrounds. I also set a framework for the projects and try to balance students' responsibilities and my own. We tend to make the most important decisions together; however, there is always space for their individual choices, preferences and decisions. In terms of Chika's questions about scaffolding and the materials we use, I have come to the conclusion that the most successful handouts, worksheets or vocabulary exercises are those we created by ourselves. Students have turned out to be very good at creating posters, quizzes, vocabulary cards and other materials. Moreover, if at the beginning of my transformation towards learner autonomy, my students did not meet my expectations, now they often go beyond them. The more trust and empowerment they have, the more impressive results they achieve. By this I do not want to say that all borders have been crossed and all challenges have been overcome. As Martin mentioned in his reflections, I am still learning and looking for more effective strategies to help students become autonomous learners. In addition to what Martin said about learning and teaching as inevitable parts of the teacher's profession, I would like to emphasize one more quality of a teacher that is worth trying to aim for. This is doing research on what is happening in class. It helps me rely on not only my own perspectives, emotions and opinions, but also the students' feelings, perceptions and reflections about the process of modifying projects, syllabus or specific techniques. Combining my teacher and researcher roles gives me a chance to investigate the students' learning in a more analytical

way. Besides, I share with them my findings and see that my research techniques inspire them to investigate language features through research as well. We all finally learn from each other and discover new learning strategies together. Another point Martin mentioned in his reflections was my Fulbright Exchange experience and its really significant influence on my teaching style. He wondered if I would still be teaching in the old 'transmissive' way if I had not had the opportunity for cultural exchange. Looking back at the previous stage of my teaching career, I cannot say with confidence that it was entirely transmissive. I have always tried to find something new to engage or to reach my students. I therefore believe that sooner or later I would have started my journey to learner autonomy no matter what events had taken their course. Martin's question concerning 'system-wide' change and the subsequent dynamic in my other English classes corresponds with Chika's considerations. However, I would like to emphasize here that with every new class I deal with new questions and challenges. I just do not consider them difficulties any more. With my growing confidence and experience I have learnt that challenges are a natural part of teaching. Besides, each class has its own personal profile. Therefore, whatever framework I come up with, it needs modifications and remodeling in my further work. Both Chika and Martin are interested in how other teachers perceive my attempts to teach English in an enquiry-based environment. Unfortunately, I am still struggling with finding the way to reach out to my colleagues and share my experiences with them. Teaching approaches are more or less a matter of individual teachers as long as they use the pre-determined course books; the school foreign language policy deals with following the governmental curriculum and adjusting it to the specifications of the school. Teachers are not expected to look for or experiment with new approaches. Although Czech schools function in accordance with CEFR and other Council of Europe documents, such significant aspects as autonomous learning, learning awareness or communication awareness remain largely untouched. To finish on a positive note, I will move to Martin's final question regarding learners' out-of-class behavior. Relying on students' reflections, interviews and overall discussions, I have learnt that most of them spread out their communicative capacities in English by using worldwide networks, watching movies without Czech subtitles, reading English webpages or corresponding with native speakers. They definitely feel more confident in learning English independently as well. The major benefits of our projects they have mentioned were their ability to find what they need on the Internet, and process and interpret the data in the ways they want to. Moreover, the students' overall attitude towards English has also changed. Most of them would like to travel to England or other English-speaking countries on their own, and when they mention this, it sounds like a real goal for them, not

just a dream. I believe that autonomous learning has impacted my students favorably and will contribute to their lifelong learning experiences.

Chika's second response

First of all, I really enjoyed the interactive dialogue with you, which provided me with an opportunity to consider the concept of autonomy with a fresh eye and also reflect on my teaching practice with critical perspectives. In spite of the fact that we work at different institutions and even in different countries, the realisation that you strive to work for the development of student autonomy not only reassured me that I am not the only one who tries to promote student autonomy, but also encouraged me to move forward with confidence. Before reading your second story, I flashbacked to the first part of your story and tried to remember the synopsis. The most impressive memory I have was that your story started with the emphasis of your role as a learner. When I read this for the first time, I simply thought that you as a learner always pursue something new and explore more effective teaching strategies and approaches for the development of student autonomy. However, after reading the second part of your story, I realised that your role as a learner has a more complex meaning in that it cannot be considered without the presence of your students. Indeed, as you establish a symbiotic relationship with your students, you collaborate with your students for the development of their autonomy with an awareness of individual differences as well as cultural and administrative contexts. In addition, your intensive focus on particularity made me include a new addition to your list of teacher's roles in the first part: ethnographer. In fact, your answer to my questions about the difficulties you had in introducing autonomy supports my interpretation. You point out three possible reasons: your limited experience, your educational background and students' inexperience of student-centred learning. This suggests that you are more likely to find out from classroom participants about the different realities influencing a particular classroom culture. As you acknowledge, you as a teacher also have an influence on the formation of classroom culture, as do your students. Moreover, your explanation about a 'discussion forum' with your previous students regarding autonomous techniques clearly indicates that you value students' voices and try to understand realities narrated in their authentic voices. More importantly, you even integrate them into the process of your self-reflection, which informs me of the parallel relationship between student and teacher autonomy. As a starting point, you as ethnographer choose to fully understand the realities in your classroom and then invite students to implicitly (as you point out) re-examine

cultural notions and values through various teaching approaches and hands-on experiences. The project you explained in the second part of your story is a successful example of enabling students to approach the development of autonomy. Seen from the perspectives of experiential learning, your first project may be categorized as a student-centered and real-world oriented activity. As you acknowledge, the topic you chose for the project—shopping in Prague—sounds 'light'. However, this real-world oriented learning experience must have been a significant first step for students to pay attention to, and even be aware of, the presence of their own society and culture which surrounds them. Through the real-world oriented learning experience with a gradual shift to some controversial issues, students gradually created their own knowledge as they examined cultural notions which they considered to be right and as they became engaged in reevaluating and transforming their cultural values from their own emerging critical perspectives. As you explain at the end, I am also convinced that the authentic nature of your project helped students to turn their attention to the real world and expand their perspectives from internal/micro (classroom) to external/macro (real world). This underpins your explanation that some of your students have started to think about what they want to do in the future and express their ideas in relation to the real world. In other words, your students are at the stage of getting ready to establish their own short-/long-term goals with a clear understanding of their own needs and wants, and they are moving forward to achieve them. This perfectly demonstrates a path to the development of the whole person, which I believe is the ultimate goal of education!

Martin's second response

It was a delight to read Irina's response, so fastidious in its attention to our queries and comments, and honest in its appraisal of her ongoing struggle to teach in a way that fosters learner autonomy. Actually this sense of constant challenge came across strongly in her texts; as soon as you think you have solved a pedagogic problem, another one comes along. I think that is what my very first education tutor was trying to say when he observed my hopeless attempts to control a class of primary school children at the start of my practicum and questioned whether I really wanted to become a teacher—'It must get easier', I said; 'No, it doesn't', he replied dolefully. As Irina says, every new group of learners present their own fresh challenge, and trying to do exactly what you did with a previous group is a sure way of messing up. Later, hopefully, comes the satisfaction of having solved the particular problems thrown up by that class. In his fascinating book The Social Animal, David Brooks (2012: 250)

points out that this constant cycle of difficulty and harmony is what defines the happy life—if all we wanted was harmony 'we'd be happy living on the beach all our lives'! I appreciated hearing the detail about the kind of projects learners engage in, the way Irina carefully grades tasks and only gradually hands over control according to what she feels they are ready for. She says that in her more advanced classes she is experimenting with 'learning by teaching'. By this I presume she means that she is setting up tasks in which students teach each other. This nicely mirrors the topic of our previous exchange, of teachers needing to continue learning; in the truly autonomous classroom, perhaps it is true that the roles rightfully overlap—learners are teachers, the teacher is a learner—even if at the end of the day, within broader sociopolitical structures, the teacher is still accountable for the learning that goes on. She notes another structural limit on autonomy in the shape of the set textbook, which has to be 'got through' by the end of term. I remember another former tutor of mine, Mike Breen, teaching me that— or rather, leading me to see that—this situation is not at all inimical to learner autonomy, in fact it provides another opportunity to develop it. Viewed (like public exams) as a common external imposition, teacher and learners can together work out how to deal with the textbook, how to best exploit it as a resource for their learning; the very act of analyzing the content and design of a textbook can greatly enhance their awareness of language, and language learning. The final part of Irina's story was encouraging. It is not at all surprising that practices promoting autonomy inside the classroom have developed learners' initiative to seek out and use English beyond the classroom. To cite my ex-tutor again, this is precisely the kind of 'porous classroom' that Breen envisaged back in 1985, 'where the classroom walls become its windows' (Breen, 1985) and where learners engage in language-based tasks designed around their own interests in the world outside. Irina's comments also link with recent developments in motivation theory, and give a clue to the psychological processes at work. She says that her students' overall attitudes towards English have changed, that they want to travel to English-speaking countries and that these 'sound like a real goal for them, not just dreams'. It appears that their learning experiences in class have helped them to develop 'Ideal L2 selves'—visions of themselves as users of English, communicating in imagined communities of English speakers. Put another way, they're no longer learning English because they have to, but because they feel it is an intrinsic part of their present and future lives. A perfect illustration of the symbiosis of autonomy and motivation!

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