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Teaching autonomy: Resolving the Paradox

Kevin Bodwell

Meiji Gakuin University

Miki Kohyama

Gakushuin Women's University

Rachelle Jorgenson

Meikai University

Stacey Vye

Kokusai Iriyou Fukushi University

Jodie Stephenson

Kohran Jogakko

The writer Jim Cummins (1994) argues that educators should move from a “transmission orientation,” in which knowledge is “inert,” toward a “critical orientation,” in which knowledge is “catalytic,” empowering students to take command of their own learning and ultimately their own lives. This workshop built on the premise that learning is best accomplished by learners rather than teachers. But can teachers encourage their students toward autonomy when students themselves choose to be dependent on teacher control? Participants viewed cinematic portrayals of teachers encouraging their charges to move toward autonomy, and then discussed models methods for resolution of the conflicts that arise when a teacher tries to persuade dependent students toward more autonomous modes of learning. In general, participants found a need for regulated amounts of structure as students gradually learn to take more control through incremental increases in responsibility for curricular goals and learning processes.

ジム・カミングズ(1994)は、先生が言うことをそのまま鵜呑みにするように強制する「受身的教育」から、学生たちが意味を論理的に解釈し知識を構築していき、学習の自己責任をとる「論理的指導」に移行すべきであると論じている。このワークショップは、学生自身によって自主的に行なわれる学習が最も効果的であるという考え方に基づいている。しかし、学生が先生に依存するという選択をした場合、どのように自律学習を指導したらよいのだろうか。ワークショップでは先生が自律学習を進めようとしているビデオをいくつか見てもらい、依存心の強い学生を自律学習へ移行させようとする時に起こる衝突を解決するにはどうしたらよいか討論した。最初は先生が必要に応じたサポート体制を与え、学生が徐々にカリキュラムの目標を達成し、学習上の責任をとっていく段階的変化が必要であるという結論に達した。

Introduction

The origin of our autonomy workshop was the observation among the presenters that student expectations can often conflict with the practice of autonomy, creating a paradox in which students may autonomously prefer to be dependent. In the traditional, transmission-based classroom, autonomy is often suppressed. Students are compelled to absorb what the teacher tells them, and are not encouraged to build up knowledge by constructing meaning for themselves (Cummins, 1994, pp. 33- 58). As a result of their educational experience, many students may not have the learning skills necessary to manage learning goals or processes. They are often not even aware that any management takes place. Thus, in many cases, asking students to “be autonomous” is likely to be a chaotic rather than a productive process.

Such chaos is what one of the presenters faced last July when she had to resolve the contradiction between student expectations and her own belief in the pedagogy of autonomy. She had taken over two university classes from a teacher who left in the middle of the year. The previous teacher had been doing grammar-translation in one class, and dictation in the other. The presenter had to decide whether to continue to run the classes as they had been going, which would have been against her understanding of the nature of learning, or propose new ways of learning, based on her belief that students learn better when they take control of their own learning. She decided on the latter.

The students’ reactions were not enthusiastic: “Since you came after the other teacher, I think you should follow her style.” “The old teacher’s way was fine with us.” Some students panicked: “What about my grades?” “I already did the work required by the first teacher.” “How are you going to combine your grade and

hers?” Another student seemed to consider the change irrelevant: “As long as I pass the class, do whatever you want.”

This experience exemplifies the paradox, and raises the questions we explored in our workshop: What should the teacher do if students make choices that limit their own autonomy? What if students don’t recognize the benefits of autonomy? What if students resist change toward autonomy because they are unused to it?

Exploring the paradox

To help participants conceptualize our understanding of the autonomy paradox, we showed two short video clips, one from the film *Sister Act II* (1993) and the other from the film *Keeping the Faith* (2000). The clips dramatized the conflicts that can arise when a teacher seeks to foster autonomous learning. We then posed discussion questions designed to encourage discussion of possible resolutions to the conflicts on the screen and in their classrooms. The two clips are described below.

Sister Act II

The teacher, Sister Mary Clarence, walks into a classroom and begins “laying down the law” to a group of students that until now have been undisciplined and have not shown any interest in studying. She says that students will no longer be able to pass the course just by turning up to class, but will actually have to study. They will also need to be much more disciplined, and show respect to the teacher. The students at first reject this new way and begin to walk out, until they realize that walking out means that they will fail the course. In the end all but one student choose to stay.

Keeping the Faith

This scene shows how a congregation react when their unorthodox rabbi, Jake, invites the Harlem Gospel Choir to take part in the service at his synagogue. While they are initially surprised at the new, more expressive style of worship, most people quickly join in. However, afterwards, Jake is summoned to a board meeting, where he is reprimanded for his unconventional ways. In his defense, Jake says that he is not interested in keeping people comfortable in their traditional ways, but rather wants to push them to grow. One of the board members sympathizes with Jake, saying that his ideas are good, but there is a problem with the execution. The board member's final comment is "I think you'll find people will go a lot further if they feel they are being led and not pushed."

Focusing the workshop discussions

In order to focus discussion, we presenters designed a continuum intended to model autonomy in practice. We believe that autonomy can be considered not only as an absolute, but also as something that can be practiced in larger or smaller amounts, supported with appropriate levels of structure (Nunan, 1999, pp. 192 - 203). The left end of the continuum represented the *chaotic autonomous* classroom, a situation in which students have free reign of the classroom, the teacher's role is minimal or non-existent, and little if any learning takes place. The opposite end of the continuum represented the *teacher-centered* classroom, where the teacher plays the major role in deciding what is to be learned and how, often under the direction of the educational institution's expectations. The center of the continuum represented the *productive autonomous* classroom, in which the teacher acts as a facilitator, and curricular decisions

and pedagogical procedures are determined through negotiation between the teacher and students. Participants' discussions suggested that the linear continuum model did not adequately capture the dynamics of autonomy.

Sister Act II

After viewing the video clip from *Sister Act II* (1993), several groups focused on the first set of questions: *If we envision the classroom along the continuum described above, where does the classroom in the video clip fall? What specific student and teacher behaviors led you to your answer?* One group found it difficult to determine where the clip would fall on the continuum, as it seemed to be Sister Mary Clarence's first class with the students. Groups that focused on the teacher's behavior reported that the classroom was most definitely teacher-centered as she was laying down the law, defining classroom roles by informing students of her expectations and rules of classroom conduct. One participant suggested that the Sister's attitude was "fascist," but her expectations seemed reasonable. Another participant proposed a motive for the teacher's behavior suggesting that the Sister was laying down the law in an effort to move students from the previous chaotic situation to a more productive one. In contrast, groups that focused on the students' behavior found that there were some elements of autonomy in the sense that students felt they had a choice to obey the teacher's requests and stay in the class or leave as one girl did. Providing a choice, even one as simple as the choice to stay or to leave, can influence students' attitudes toward their learning situation.

Participants were also asked to consider: *Where does your classroom fall along this continuum?* Several groups indicated that their classroom falls somewhere between productive autonomous and teacher-centered. However, one participant said

he thought his classes fit the productive autonomous model as his students determine and organize their own group projects. Another participant described her classes as moving among all three concepts depending on interpersonal chemistry, interest levels, personal physical condition such as whether students are hungry or tired, and other factors that she may not be aware of. One participant believed the three concepts are all part of natural learning processes, involving chaotic periods in which students struggle with a new task, teacher support, and eventual productivity. The degree of autonomy in any given student, teacher, or classroom is a complex dynamic of physical, mental, and situational factors and as such can't be adequately conceptualized in a linear continuum.

This discussion led into the next question: *Is this the only continuum you can imagine?* Many of the groups agreed that the linear continuum is simplistic and cannot describe the dynamics of a typical classroom. One group envisioned a triangular shape, with the productive autonomous element at the apex, and the chaotic autonomous and teacher-centered elements at the corners on the bottom. Another group remarked that the interaction of the three elements could be represented as three partially overlapping circles.

The next question was: *What can a teacher do to encourage autonomous learning when the class autonomously chooses to be unproductive?* A few groups discussed the notion of unrealistic expectations. Teachers can't expect students to suddenly become autonomous by throwing them "into the deep end and expecting them to swim." It was suggested that autonomy should be introduced slowly, by initially providing limited choice, such as with a list of two or three exercise options for a particular content goal. As students become more comfortable, they can take increasing control. Support can be provided when needed, and removed when students are able.

One participant remarked that in cases where students choose to be unproductive despite the graduated support structure, the teacher might help students become aware that the consequences of their choices are likely to include a failure to learn a useful skill and diminished opportunities that result.

Keeping the Faith

After viewing the outtake from the film *Keeping the Faith* (2000), a number of groups focused on the question: *What may be some possible reasons behind the resistance to change from both the board's and the congregation's perspective?* One group said that the rabbi was trying to introduce innovative concepts, but many followers and the board were comfortable with traditional concepts because they were familiar and safe. Thus, they resisted change. When a comforting structure is removed, some may be frightened. Participants acknowledged that the rabbi's ideas and intentions were inspiring, but he didn't explain his rationale, nor did he involve the congregation or the board in his decision-making. There were no opportunities for negotiation and feedback, so there was resistance.

Another group considered the issue of negotiation using a metaphorical interpretation, with the rabbi representing a teacher and the congregation representing students. They decided that students should be given opportunities to influence the syllabus and make decisions about learning processes. Even small choices, such as between which of two exercises to do, can increase the amount or "degree" (Nunan, 1999, pp. 192 - 203) of autonomy. Teachers can reduce resistance by providing structure with options and then gradually increase choices. The process becomes a consciousness-raising experience in which students learn to appreciate autonomy. Another participant mentioned

the similar idea that students become autonomous in stages as suggested by Michael Rost in his workshop the previous day at JALT 2002 (Rost, 2002).

A third group focused on the ideas of one of its members who strongly identified with the rabbi. She encourages her students to create class activities for themselves. Although her students seem to find the changes in the classroom refreshing and study eagerly, administrators and fellow teachers criticize the teacher's unorthodox teaching practices.

The final set of questions were (1) *Discuss some approaches the rabbi could take to balance his own goal of helping his congregation "grow" while at the same time addressing the expectations of the board and the congregation and (2) Discuss some approaches teachers can take to balance their own goals for student growth while addressing the expectations of students and the larger institution.* One participant mentioned that changes made in the classroom should be gradual and introduced over time. In this conception, students are a part of the negotiation process of how and what is to be learned. Gradual implementation also gives the teacher time to document the effects of the change they introduce in class. Others agreed that gradual change is particularly useful for teachers who work for institutions with policy constraints.

Conclusion

We designed our workshop to explore the paradox that can arise when teacher belief in the pedagogy of autonomy conflicts with student belief and behavior. Participants analyzed the situations depicted in the video clips and examined through discussion how a teacher can persuade students to cease dependency and take charge of their own learning.

In general, participants agreed that non-autonomous students can move toward increased autonomy through appropriate levels of supporting structure, combined with increasing choice. Initially, choice can be relatively small, such as between two options in a classroom activity, but eventually, students can be encouraged to negotiate the whole of curricular goals and classroom practices.

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