

Escaping from the treadmill: practitioner research and professional autonomy

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At the launch of the DfES CPD Strategy in 2002, I attended a seminar on practitioner research. At the time, Michael Simpson was working as a head of languages in Bedfordshire. He spoke enthusiastically about the way in which his own small-scale inquiry into a specific model of teaching and learning had re-invigorated him as a teacher. His subsequent rediscovery of the learning process through a part-time postgraduate MA course resonated with Lamb's own work on professional autonomy and school improvement. This article is the result of their reflections and discussions, and it attempts to explore the extent to which teachers' involvement in research can provide them with a much-needed opportunity for creativity and growth.

INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, I had stopped learning – I felt like a hamster on a hamster-wheel – always moving forwards, always busy, but treading the same old treadmill. The treadmill was successful – a successful head of department with good OFSTED endorsements... but I felt trapped and enclosed.

With these words, Michael began his presentation about practitioner research. Afterwards, I quizzed him about what he meant by 'I had stopped learning' – he explained that he had not made a deliberate effort NOT to learn, but rather that, when reflecting on his work as part of a Masters degree, he realised that it was a long time since he had actually been in the position of a learner. He had been on one-off training courses and picked up ideas to use in the classroom, but this was the first time in a long while that he had done any sustained study. As a result, he found he was able to relate more to his students and empathise with their struggle to meet deadlines, memorise facts and interpret information. This article will explore the extent to which teachers' access to theoretical knowledge and involvement in research can provide them with a much-needed opportunity for creativity and growth, re-invigorating them as learners. It will examine whether curricular requirements, new national

policies and strategies, examinations and inspections help or hinder professional growth and autonomy. In particular, it will suggest that emancipatory, critical forms of practitioner research supported by philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, may provide a way for teachers to prevent their professional lives becoming 'routinised' by offering a model of development which will ensure the development of communities of learners, rather than unthinking automata on a series of treadmills.

TEACHERS AS LEARNERS

Michael made the statement quoted above before embarking on a number of practitioner research projects, and he went on to contrast it with his subsequent rediscovery of learning as a means of escaping from the treadmill. He found resonances in the work of the American educationalist Roland Barth (1997) who stated:

I believe that schools can become much more than places where there are big people who are learnED and little people who are learnERS. Schools can become cultures where youngsters are discovering the joy, the difficulty, and the excitement of learning as we adults are rediscovering the joy, the difficulty, and the excitement of learning. We are all in it together – a community of learners.

It is interesting, in this context, to consider the common instructions given by flight attendants to airline passengers: 'In the event of an oxygen failure, those of you travelling with small children should first place the oxygen mask on your own face and only then, place the mask on your child's face.' The fact of the matter is, of course, that the adult must be alive in order to be of any help in keeping the youngster alive. In school, we spend a great deal of time placing oxygen masks on other peoples' faces while we are suffocating. (Barth, 1997: 2)

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The results of such suffocation are teachers who 'do what they did today because that is what they did yesterday or because that is what they think others expect them to do' (Barth, 1990: 49).

The notion of the teacher as learner can encompass a range of meanings: the development of pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills is one; others are the enhancement of sociological, psychological, policy and management awareness; the teacher may also be developing linguistic skills and possibly reflecting on the learning experience (Smith, 2000). The format can also vary: whole school CPD seminars; structured courses in higher education; individual or collaborative learning through systematic reflection on teaching and learning; or peer observation. What is important to note is that when teachers stop learning themselves, they run the risk of becoming what Barth (2001) calls 'at-risk educators':

The learning curve of the beginning teacher remains high for two or three years. Then something curious seems to happen. The teacher finds some things that don't work very well and scraps them. And they find some things that do work well, and they *enshrine* them. It's Halloween – out comes my Halloween folder... Once our practice is committed to a folder, once routinization and repetition replace invention, learning curves plummet. (Barth, 2001: 21-2)

In order to reinvigorate himself professionally and to combat the 'routinisation' of his daily life, Michael embarked on an MA course in school improvement and continuing professional development, as well as successfully applying for a Best Practice Research Scholarship. Through these efforts he met the specific concept of action research which he was later to adapt for use in his own classroom.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is a process which encourages individuals to conduct a small-scale inquiry in their own classrooms with their own students. In the UK, action research was first popularised by Stenhouse (1975), who directed the groundbreaking Humanities Curriculum Project (1967-72) and who argued that: "It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves." (Stenhouse, 1975: 143). He used and developed Hoyle's concept of the 'restricted professional' and the 'extended professional' (Hoyle, 1972 cited in Stenhouse, 1975):

...the outstanding characteristic of the extended professional is a capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures. (Stenhouse, 1975: 144)

Stenhouse thus made explicit the link between autonomy and professional development, with the professional teacher having responsibility for developing professional practice through ongoing learning.

Although there can be no doubt that the concept of the extended professional offers the potential for strong and sustainable growth, the handing over of control and responsibility implied by the development of autonomy can in practice be problematic. Even Stenhouse's project has been criticised by Elliott, himself a member of the project:

I would argue that in the Humanities Project we never satisfactorily resolved the issue of how one facilitates autonomous reflective practice. And this was because we were reluctant to relinquish control over pedagogical theory. (Elliott, 1991: 26).

This concern over the potentially paradoxical and tense relationship between action research and teacher autonomy in fact echoed concerns over an earlier manifestation of action research. In the 1930s the social psychologist Lewin 'conducted quasi-experimental tests in factory and neighbourhood settings to demonstrate, respectively, the greater gains in productivity and in law and order through democratic participation rather than autocratic coercion' (Adelman, 1993: 7). This had resulted in the development of a process of systematic inquiry into greater effectiveness by involving those affected by the inquiry in the inquiry itself, but this approach had, however, been discredited in the 1960s as it had become merely a part of the management repertoire for ensuring corporate excellence.

Hopkins (2002) has similarly critiqued action research, making useful distinctions between action research and other models of classroom research conducted by teacher-learners:

My first concern is that there may be a misunderstanding of the nature of Lewinian action research... Lewin's concept of action research was (1) as an externally initiated intervention designed to assist a client system, (2) functionalist in orientation and (3) prescriptive in practice. None of these features apply to what I assume to be the nature of classroom research by teachers which is characterized by its practitioner, problem solving, and eclectic orientation...

My second concern relates to the specification of process in the action research models... the tight specification of process steps and cycles may trap teachers within a framework which they may come to depend on... (Hopkins, 2002: 50-1)

As Hopkins comments, a key aspect of 'real' action research is the ownership of the research agenda and an understanding of the concept of research. Elliott (1991) also argues for teacher control of the research agenda. Describing the Ford Teaching Project (1973-1975), which was designed to

“when teachers stop learning themselves, they run the risk of becoming... ‘at-risk educators’”

investigate the notion that, in order to implement innovative projects using inquiry and discovery methods, all teachers required was appropriate resource material, he writes:

* The project was designed as teacher-based action research and not simply as teachers' research. The term 'action research' indicated a clarification of the research paradigm involved, and the relationship between research and teaching. They were not conceived as two separate activities. Teaching was viewed as a form of educational research and the latter as a form of teaching. In other words the two activities were integrated conceptually into a reflective and reflexive practice.

* Teachers were to generate as well as test diagnostic and practical hypotheses.

* Teachers were expected to develop a pedagogical theory and to explore how to realize it in practice. The approach was to help them to reflect about the aims and values implicit in their definitions of problematic situations within the classroom.

* The classroom action research was designed as a co-operative rather than individualistic endeavour aimed at generating shared insights and practices as teachers tested each other's hypotheses in a range of contexts. (Elliott, 1991: 30)

THE PRACTITIONER RESEARCH PROCESS

Having engaged with the literature behind action research, Michael designed his formulation of what it might look like in his classroom and decided upon a series of steps:

1. Find a focus
2. Collect data
3. Reflect on data
4. Devise experiment/intervention
5. Record event
6. Collect data
7. Compare
8. Implement
9. Review

For him, a key aspect of the process was the fourth stage 'intervention'. In his reflections, he writes:

I have found it essential to change practice and observe the impact of those changes. It has not been enough to reflect on what is going on in the classroom, but it has become imperative to interact with classroom practice, change that practice and document the reaction.

This use of practitioner research as a change mechanism in fact illustrates a fundamental difference between action research and reflective practice, and is reflected by McTaggart (1997):

The ways in which experience is objectified and subjectivity is disciplined may vary, but there is a commitment to use examined experience of concrete practice to inform future action. (McTaggart, 1997: 6)

FINDING A FOCUS: INDUCTIVE PROCESSES

Michael set about developing a small-scale, classroom-based inquiry, choosing a Year 10 German group as his 'test-case'. The students had learned and encountered phrases in the perfect tense, but the teaching programme now required them to make that passive understanding active so that they could construct perfect-tense sentences for themselves. Usually, Michael would have done this through teacher exemplification and explanation followed up with some practice drills. He decided, however, that the focus of his inquiry would be to investigate whether a more exploratory approach would enable his students to 'master' this particular grammar point better than would a traditional approach.

His background reading had included an exploration of the constructivist approach to learning pioneered by Bruner (1986) and Vygotsky (1962, 1978) whereby learners construct their own meaning and theories through problem-solving activities. These activities must be within the reach of the students' capabilities, but should challenge them to some degree. Vygotsky also believed that learning was a social process and that progress could be made if more capable learners helped less able peers to solve problems. One particular model of teaching and learning – the inductive approach – lends itself well to the constructivist model. It was originally developed by the curriculum reformer Hilda Taba who, in 1962, made a case for a learning programme which would harness natural learning processes:

Attention needs to be focussed on the essential principles and ideas which give structure to thinking. Learning needs to include more opportunities for inquiry, discovery and experimentation. (Taba, 1962: 71).

Taba's model involves students engaging with a set of data and trying to make meaning from it: they process the information and, in groups, they develop categories and classifications; they then have to determine what the identifying features of their classifications are so that they, and others, could use their definitions and descriptions to add to their data sets. Seeing the possibility of creating sets of sentences in different tenses for students to analyse in order to identify the distinguishing features of each tense, Michael set about researching the inductive model further to see whether this model would enable his students to develop a definition of the perfect tense for themselves.

Taba's model has been further developed by Joyce and Calhoun (1998) in their six phase model. In each phase, the learners actively engage with the learning content (in this case a point of grammar), in a way which has interesting parallels with the way in which Michael himself was engaging with his learning. Joyce and Calhoun's phases consist of the following:

“whether a more exploratory approach would enable his students to ‘master’ this particular grammar point better than would a traditional approach”

- Phase One: Identify the domain
 Phase Two: Collect, present, and enumerate the data
 Phase Three: Examine data
 Phase Four: Form concepts by classifying
 Phase Five: Generate and test hypotheses
 Phase Six: Consolidate and transfer

They then go on to define 'induction':

In this flow of cognitive operations, we find the definition of *induction*, for in these types of inquiry, the student constructs knowledge and then tests that knowledge through experience and against the knowledge of experts. *Induction*, rooted in the analysis of information, is often contrasted with *deduction*, where one builds knowledge by starting with ideas and proceeding to infer further ideas by logical reasoning. (Joyce and Calhoun, 1998: 9-11)

This is exactly what Michael hoped to achieve with his students – he wanted them to look at a number of different sentences in German, be able to recognise the different distinguishing features of each tense and develop their own definitions of how the tenses were formed. Although an advocate of target language teaching, Michael decided that this lesson would be conducted mainly in English, because he believed that the cognitive demands of the analysis would be beyond the students' linguistic capacity. He would, however, aim to translate the final student-generated definitions into German so that the students could have target-language definitions. What follows is Michael's outline of that lesson, with an analytical commentary based on video evidence of the lesson. He also reflects on a further inductive lesson with the class which used a different data set focused on German adjectival endings. The group was a Year 10 German mixed-ability group in their second year of learning German. In the group there were thirteen males and twelve females and their National Curriculum Key Stage 3 Attainment Levels ranged from 3-5. They were a lively group with a wide-range of motivations.

In order to provide a basis for comparison, Michael taught the perfect tense to a parallel group in a more traditional way through teacher demonstration and student practice. The section concludes with a brief reflection on this.

THE INTERVENTION LESSON (AS DESCRIBED BY MICHAEL)

Underlying conceptual framework: Formation of present, past and future tenses in German.

Phase One: Identify the domain

Learning objectives for the lesson and the topic area of journeys and descriptions were specified in German and framed in a competitive group structure established during the previous five lessons. The lesson objectives were given as:

revising journey vocabulary; working out how to use past, present and future tenses. (In retrospect, these learning objectives were not particularly well-defined. More appropriate learning objectives would have been: to analyse a selection of German sentences; to agree a collaborative description of the ways in which the present, past and future tense is formed in German.)

Phase Two: Present data (collection and enumeration done by teacher)

Each student was given a phrase and meanings were checked within their group. There was a team game in which phrases were called out in English and German and the student with the appropriate phrase had to stand up and either read out the phrase or translate it as appropriate. This was all conducted in the target language.

The data set consisted of 30 German sentences –

- six were written in the present tense
- six were descriptive sentences written in the present tense
- six were written in the perfect tense
- six were written in the imperfect tense
- six were written in the future tense.

Students had been exposed to both the present and the perfect tense before the lesson and had done some active work on both topics. The imperfect tense sentences were known to them, but had not been classified as 'imperfect' – they had not seen any future tense sentences before.

Phase Three: Examine data

Students were put into random groups of five and given a set of all sentences from Phase Two. The lesson then switched to English. Students were given a rationale for this and they were told that this would be a different way of working. They were then given ten minutes to try to group the phrases and construct categories for the sentences. They could have as many groups as they wanted, but they had to have a reason for grouping the phrases together. Most groups started quickly on the task and most started by spreading the phrases out on the table. One group was very quick to complete the task and, as predicted:

As learners and data interact, expected and unexpected results transpire... students will make many improbable connections; they will often see things in the data that you did not see or make connections that have little utility. (Joyce & Calhoun, 1998: 13)

The first group had classified the sentences according to whether the sentences were easy or hard... and one group started by grouping the odd and even numbers together! Once re-directed to the meaning of the sentences, students started to hypothesise: 'these are all places you can go'; 'that's what you might say about people: *freundlich, ehrlich*', etc.

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Phase Four: Form concepts by classifying

Students were asked to generate labels for the groups presented and to share the groups' labels. When the classifications were shared, one group had classified the sentences according to the pronouns at the start of the sentences, two groups had gone for past – present – future and one group had thematic groups: people, places, objects and miscellaneous. (Unfortunately, they were not asked to justify their groupings.) They were then asked to re-classify the sentences into five groups – two present, two past and one future.

Phase Five: Generate hypothesis

Students were then asked to work out the qualities of each data group. Students shared their re-groupings and they were happy to go with one group's definitions: past tense – a group with 'war' in the sentence and a group that all had words that began with 'ge-' at the end of the sentence; present tense – 'one group is what someone is doing and the other is adjectives ...so-and-so is...'; the other group is future. The students thought about what made a future tense sentence and came up with having 'werde' and an '-en' word in the sentence – usually at the end. The correct labels in German for the '-en' word ('*Infinitiv*') and for the 'ge-' word ('*Vergangenheitspartizip*') were introduced.

Phase Six: Consolidate and transfer

Students were asked to write up the data sets and add two extra sentences of their own to each set. Students did not find this task as easy as had been expected, but they did all manage to write at least one new sentence per group.

Homework: Students were supposed to write a description of a journey including all three tenses. In fact this task was set in the following lesson and instead, students were asked to write up definitions for themselves to describe the five groups.

Monitoring the work of the class over the following weeks, it appeared that the learning was retained by many students – particularly those who were more actively engaged in the task. The more articulate learners were particularly good at the task, so ways to develop this through involvement of more students in the de-briefing session have since been sought. This led into an exploration of the use of co-operative group work strategies to develop shared conclusions. From this inquiry, it became clear that it is essential to bridge and re-bridge within modern foreign languages. By building students' conclusions and definitions into everyday classroom language, the learning may become second nature and instinctive. It can then be deepened and developed to a higher level. Some students internalised a German definition of how the past tense is formed and could then use this to identify past tense sentences.

In terms of cooperation within the group, it was

interesting to note how the well-motivated students kept the less-motivated on task and how they organised their learning. However, low self-esteem, poor motivation and poor cooperative group work limited the quality of the inductive discussion, and therefore demanded further action.

The next inductive lesson (on adjectival endings) was much more productive and students' initial sentence groupings mirrored the final tense specific ones from the first lesson even though the sentences were different. Students remembered the synthesised definitions and some even remembered the German labels. They were then directed to re-examine the data and re-classify. The students were more confident and their classifications more erudite and rooted in evidence. This seems to illustrate the point made by Joyce and Calhoun (1998: 28):

As students repeatedly use the model, they become more skilful information users and more powerful thinkers.

Indeed, as they continued to use the model more frequently, they became more aware of their learning, more able to describe their thinking processes and more able to describe and justify their classifications.

Interestingly, the parallel group which had been taught in a more traditional way seemed to have grasped the concept of the perfect tense better than the inductive group. They were, however, unable to retain the knowledge as well. Weeks after, the inductive group still remembered the lesson and the definitions of the tenses. When interviewed, they said that because they had had to find out the information for themselves, and because they were their own definitions, they remembered them better.

REFLECTION: ESCAPING FROM THE CAGE

This extract does not illustrate all of the nine stages listed above. Nor does it describe in detail the forms of data collection used by Michael, apart from brief references to video recording, monitoring of work and follow up interviews. It has been selected, however, as an example of reflection on practice, intervention and analysis which made it possible to implement and evaluate change. Following this, Michael was successful in securing funding for a Best Practice Research Scholarship, which enabled him to investigate the application of another teaching and learning model – CASE (cognitive acceleration through science education) – to the modern languages context. Both experiences forced him back into the role of the learner which he feels was a vital factor in re-invigorating him as a teacher:

Over the last three years I have had the opportunity to stop myself from suffocating and to become a learnER again. Both opportunities have re-invigorated me as a teacher and I have been pleased to pass on my

“as they continued to use the model... they became more aware of their learning... and more able to... justify their classifications”



newly acquired knowledge to colleagues and to students both within my own school context and nationally.

In terms of personal knowledge acquisition, I have acquired new knowledge about models of teaching and learning, about how the brain works, about thinking skills, about mind-mapping, about the whole management and implications of CPD and school improvement. It has been an empowering and liberating experience and in terms of my own professional self-renewal and growth, it has been transformational. I have become more reflective as a practitioner and have completely rethought my moral stance. I have been able to get off the hamster-wheel and start learning for myself again.

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT CONTEXT

The starting point for this project was an involvement with BSIP – the Bedfordshire School Improvement Partnership. BSIP was formed when a group of head teachers decided to work together to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Using the IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All) model (Hopkins, 2002a), which has practitioner-research at the heart of its process, classroom-based research groups were established. In other words, the individual inquiry was stimulated by the development of a learning community.

Many current models of school improvement put the teacher-as-learner at the centre of the model, and common to many of these models is the idea that the teacher-as-learner is part of a team. The IQEA model sets up research groups outside the normal planning cycle which deals with the maintenance and development aspect of school improvement. These ‘cadre’ groups carry out an investigation in which they develop a pedagogic understanding of a particular teaching and learning model, practise it and refine it in their classrooms – coaching each other (usually in trios) – until they have a ‘perfect’ model. The model is then evaluated by students, either by questionnaire or in focus groups. If it is validated, then it is presented to the whole staff for implementation. Schools that are involved in such initiatives are seen to be well-placed to deal with the change process as they are used to internalising the three main stages of the process as outlined by Hopkins: initiation; implementation; institutionalisation (2001: 39).

Critics of the school improvement movement, however, consider that the agenda is often controlled by externally set targets, and that the structured and systematised format puts additional constraints on teachers – constraints which stifle their autonomy, their creativity and their ability to avoid routinisation, preventing them from asking difficult questions and reinforcing their frustration. Lamb (2000a: 104) has reconceptualised learner disaffection as ‘a search for a voice in a context of disenfranchisement’, and it is easy to see parallels

with teacher ‘disaffection’. An alternative, more critical version of school improvement would see it involving, according to Giroux (in Freire and Macedo, 1987: 15), “teachers and students recovering their own voices so that they can tell their own histories and in so doing check and criticise the history they are told against the one they have lived”. This does not imply individualism, recognising as it does that social interaction is a crucial means of opening horizons and reducing preconceptions of what it is possible to achieve (Gadamer, 1975). What it does imply, however, is control over the agenda of the inquiry, and the development of a capacity for criticality in order to find fundamentally different alternatives.

THE NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Practitioner research has the potential to empower or to constrain and control teachers, depending on the extent to which they, as individuals or as learning communities, have the autonomy (and capacity) to question givens and to set critical research agendas. Certainly Michael has experienced it as a route to ‘autonomous professional self-development’ (Stenhouse, 1975: 144), enabling him to feel empowered and positive about his professional role. Of course, autonomy in a social context rarely means freedom from constraints. It is, however, the nature of the constraints which can be so influential over teacher empowerment and motivation. Constraints can indeed be healthy if they result from collaborative learning and its potential for stimulating new ways of thinking, or from given theoretical insights based on empirical research which can lead to ‘independent critical thought’ (see Lawes, this issue). On the other hand, with an externally driven agenda, constraints may be less healthy, even destructive.

McGrath (2000) differentiates between two forms of teacher autonomy. One can be described as self-directed professional development, with strands such as teacher as researcher (Stenhouse, 1975), action research (see e.g. Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982, 1988; Hopkins, 2002; and, in language teaching specifically, Nunan, 1989; and Wallace, 1991, 1998), and reflective practice (Wallace, 1991). The other form of teacher autonomy is defined as ‘freedom from control by others’, a form which can be compromised by macro constraints (originating outside the institution over which the teacher has no control) and micro constraints (institutional decisions which the teacher may be able to influence). McGrath quotes Breen and Mann (1997: 140):

A common experience among many teachers in western democratic societies in recent times is the growing sense that the locus of control over their work is shifting away from themselves and their immediate institutions to centralized bureaucracies. This trend is manifest in explicit intrusions upon a teacher’s previous work

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experience in terms of formalized systems of accountability, the introduction of top-down predesigned assessment and curricular frameworks, and employment conditions overlaid with enterprise bargaining which many teachers perceive as entailing greater insecurity and more work for less reward.

McGrath (2000: 101) suggests that what is crucial is the way in which the teacher responds to such constraints:

In some contexts, the obvious option – obvious because less demanding in every respect – is to accept the decisions that have been made by others and carry out those in the classroom... The alternative, however, is not to carve an independent swathe through constraints, rejecting out of hand what may have been put in place with good reason, but to exercise independent judgement in order to establish a principled strategy which may involve compromise and negotiation as well as determined autonomous action.

What if, however, the constraints are perceived as not having ‘good reason’ but rather as a form of accountability with no roots in research evidence of what is effective practice (see Pachler, 2003) I fear there is a third possible, though regrettable, response, which parallels the pupil disaffection which can result from a lack of relatedness, competence and autonomy (as Deci *et al.*, 1991 define intrinsic motivation). Teachers can become increasingly disillusioned, as external impositions relate less to their own beliefs and professional contexts, as they experience feelings of incompetence, as access to theoretical and philosophical debate is withheld, and as they lose their sense of autonomy. Such disillusionment can result in resignation: resignation to an unsatisfying, unreflective professional existence, cynically resisting any change or development at all; or, indeed, resignation from the profession (Lamb, 2000).

In an exploration of the relationship between learner autonomy and motivation, Lamb (2000) relates Benson’s (1997) three versions of autonomy (technical, psychological, and political) to their potential for motivating learners, suggesting that it is only the latter, defined ‘in terms of control over the processes and content and learning’ (Benson, 1997: 19) which has the potential to empower learners and to create an environment in which their voices may be heard. Since these different forms of learner autonomy are based on different constructions of knowledge, theories of learning and interpretations of society and power, it is arguable that they will all require different versions of professional knowledge from the teacher, and that the development of such professional knowledge will be related to the teachers’ own experiences of autonomy.

Thus, technical learner autonomy, which

suggests that only an increased technical competence to learn is required to improve the quality of learning, will simply demand technical teacher competence in areas such as materials development and the training of language learning strategies. There are parallels with the Aristotelian notion of technical discourse, i.e. that which enables us to act effectively in order to bring about some determinate end. The notion of teaching as a technical, competence-based skill which requires little theoretical understanding would correspond to this.

Psychological autonomy (which recognises that learners need to be willing as well as able to take responsibility for their own learning) requires a more complex version of professional knowledge, since the teacher will take account of issues such as learner attitudes, motivation and confidence. The teacher will need to be able to respond to differing psychological needs and the ends will be less determinate than in technical autonomy. Here the parallel is with Aristotle’s practical discourse, i.e. that which enables us to act in order to realise ethical values and goals. This may be moving closer to a situation in which teachers have more control over their work, but it still does not address the issue of external constraints (such as an imposed curriculum) which might be the major factor contributing to disaffection in both learners and teachers. The belief that reflective practice alone is sufficient to lead to improvements in achievement and motivation is related directly to the belief that the causes of underachievement and demotivation lie solely in the classroom and school rather than in broader external issues such as the imposed curriculum. Thus, teachers who have little control over the curriculum or exposure to broader theoretical knowledge may find themselves blamed for the failure of our schools.

Political autonomy as defined by Benson (1997), and extended into Lamb’s (2000) concept of ‘critical autonomy’, requires, however, a more critical approach to the curriculum, and a genuine ability and readiness to make radical change on the basis of exposure to theoretical understandings and empirical research, allowing the creation of a more democratic curriculum which is flexible and responsive to alternative possibilities. Whereas technical and psychological autonomy have their roots in the worlds of positivism and constructivism respectively, political autonomy resides within the paradigm of critical theory. In order to facilitate such an approach to learning, however, teachers themselves need to experience such autonomy. In other words, as has been claimed by both general educational researchers (e.g. De Charms, 1984) and those working specifically in the field of language teaching and learning (e.g. Daoud, 2002; Martinez, 2002; Smith, 2000; Trebbi, 2002) teachers themselves must feel in control of, or be able to take control of, what they are doing if their learners are to feel in control. Of course the skills relating to both technical and psychological autonomy are

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“to become a learner again was the crucial factor, not the content of the inquiry, and although there was an imposed framework, there was enough choice to enable him to engage in learning which he deemed to be of importance”

still needed, but, in addition, they need to develop skills of ‘critical reflection’ in order to empower themselves. There is some resonance here with Giroux’s (1983) concept of emancipatory rationality:

Emancipatory rationality... is based on the principles of critique and action. It is aimed at criticizing that which is restrictive and oppressive while at the same time supporting action in the service of individual freedom and well-being... Similarly, emancipatory rationality augments its interest in self-reflection with social action designed to create the ideological and material conditions in which nonalienating and nonexploitative relationships exist. (Giroux, 1983: 190-1)

Van Lier (1996) describes his idea of an ‘authentic’ person as one who is autonomous, responsible for him/herself, intrinsically motivated. He recognises that this is rare, but suggests that teachers should nevertheless strive to educate students towards it, despite the constraints of ‘bureaucratic demands and practices, external controls in the form of tests and grades, perceived gaps between what is valued at school versus what is valued at home or in the peer group, and many other factors.’ He is thus recognising the need for ‘authentic’ teachers if education is to achieve authenticity for its learners since education is ‘closely tied to political, ideological and critical issues’ (1996: 144).

This suggests that, as with students, teachers need to understand these constraints but, rather than feeling disempowered, they need to empower themselves by finding the spaces and opportunities for manoeuvre. As Benson (2000: 117) argues, ‘teacher autonomy is a question of the way in which we view our role in relation to constraints on autonomy’. Teachers certainly need to respond to external demands and constraints, but on their own terms and on the basis of their own professional judgement, arrived at through systematic and critical inquiry backed up by consideration of philosophical debate and broad social and educational as well as subject-specific theory (Lawes, this issue), rather than through handed-down methods and techniques. As Davis (1995: 178) suggests, it is important to recognise that good practice is ‘a function of different *thinking* not merely different actions’. As such, reflection becomes creative, even disruptive, a ‘political’ act (Smyth, 1987, 1991, 1995; Hursh, 1995), and teachers become once again ‘transformative intellectuals’ (Giroux and McLaren, 1989) or ‘problem-posing educators’ (Freire, 1970/1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely

the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself (*sic*) taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire, 1970/1996: 61)

In order to escape from the treadmill of routine and become autonomous learners, teachers have to be allowed to rediscover the joy of learning so that they can enthuse the learners of tomorrow. Practitioner research is a tool which can enable teacher creativity and, indeed, teacher autonomy. It does depend, however, on who controls the agenda. Michael found it empowering, and gained support. What if, though, he had wished to investigate an issue which was outside the Government agenda? Would he have been granted support or would he have been blocked in the same way that CPD courses fail to gain support unless they are judged to help raise classroom standards in line with Government policies? And if the only possibilities for support had been in areas with which he felt uncomfortable, would his research have had such a positive impact on his motivation or would he have simply replaced his own hamster wheel with that of the latest educational imperative?

If we are to empower teachers to be autonomous learners and creators of their own development, we must create the conditions in which this can take place. It is important to recognise that such conditions for learning must allow teachers (and students) to ask difficult questions where they wish to, if they are really to be engaged in the process of learning. This is happening in other parts of the world, where there are examples of teachers being encouraged to contribute to educational developments through more critical and creative thinking. Keating, Diaz-Greenberg and Baldwin (1998), for example, describe a teacher education course at California State University based on critical pedagogy which includes themes such as: voice (teachers as students and students as teachers, promoting the desirability of interviewing pupils and listening to *their* voices); the reflective educator (explored, for example, through reflective journals); and dialogue and collaboration (including work on critical ethnography of schools, dialogue with supervisors and qualitative action research).

Michael would argue that being given the time, space and challenge to become a learner again was the crucial factor, not the content of the inquiry, and although there was an imposed framework, there was enough choice to enable him to engage in learning which he deemed to be of importance. What this article has suggested is that it is vital to give teachers opportunities for learning and, in addition, for them to have the capacity and space to build critically on theoretical knowledge in order to think the unthinkable. It is only in this way that we will begin to get to the roots of disaffection, entrapment, experiences of disempowerment and the flight to routinisation and safety because of overload and over-work. We need to create opportunities to step off the hamster-wheel and to enable us all to think outside the cage.

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