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Responding to Resistance

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> *Dear Richard, Ema and Peter*
> *I am one of ELSM student and am writing this letter to say some-thing about our class. … This is not just my opinion, as you might notice (or not), we sometimes talk about our class and most of stu-dents (at least more than half) seem to be dissatisfied with our lesson. The reason is firstly, there are too much discussion rather than input from you. I understand in a way that we should study and read many things by ourselves, however, if that is what we have to do, there is no point for us to pay a lot of money and being here. …*

Letter from 'a student'

This chapter is a story of resistance to autonomy and our responses to that resistance. It begins in early February 2004, when we received an anonymous letter from 'A student' on the core 'Professional Practice' module that we co-teach for pre-experience English teachers taking our MA in English Language Studies and Methods (ELSM). The contents of the letter were distinctly worrying. Had we been blind in thinking that our students were eager participants in our version of 'pedagogy for autonomy', when all the time it seemed that 'at least more than half' were dissatisfied with the module? Had we misread the signals? Surely the student feedback to date had generally been positive? But no, the anonymous letter told us we could have little faith in this feedback:

> *I am not sure about what feedback you had from all different student, but I strongly believe that not everybody is honest on that issue, as we don't want to offend against any of you. However, what is sad is even though*

> *students have complaints, they just accept the fact and do not try to talk to tutors about their real feeling.*

It was sadly paradoxical, indeed, if our attempts to foster autonomy were in fact creating an unhappy climate of stifled complaints and forced compliance, with the exception of this lone and daring voice of resistance.

Clearly, we had to respond – but how? What follows is the story of (a) our response to the immediate situation in 2004 (what we might call action research as crisis management), and (b) the adjustments we made to the course the following year (relatively delayed action research). Before continuing, however, we need to set the story in its context by giving some more background information about the course itself.

The setting

Our story takes place in the heart of England at the University of Warwick. Here, at the Centre for English Language Teacher Education (CELTE), we offer various MA programmes for English language teaching professionals from around the world. Most of these programmes are for students with prior teaching experience, but one programme, the MA in ELSM, is specifically designed for students who have less than two years' experience or, in most cases, have just finished their first (undergraduate) degree. The spring term (January to March) Professional Practice module has a central but, in some ways, problematic role within the programme, in the sense that we rely upon it to help students relate theory to their own practice in the context of an academic course of study. However, there is not much opportunity for teaching practice since the module lasts for only one 10-week term, with five teaching hours allotted per week. The overall strategy we have adopted in this setting since spring 2001 has been to run the course on an 'action research' model, and to focus less on imparting teaching skills *per se* than on developing students' autonomy as learners of teaching, purposefully engaged in self-directed knowledge construction. Our goal, then, is 'teacher-learner autonomy' (see Barfield and Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000; Smith and Erdoğan, 2007), that is, the development of our students' ability to evaluate and continuously develop their teaching into the future.

In a nutshell, here is what we ask students to do. They plan, teach to peers and evaluate for themselves (on the basis of peer feedback and

reflection on a video-recording) two 30-minute English lessons, one at the beginning of term and one at the end. Between these two points, we help them to investigate an area of their teaching which they are particularly concerned about. The research methods they use include interviewing experienced teachers, observing English classes within CELTE, analysing a transcript of their lesson, and reading in their chosen topic area. The insights they gain in relation to their research questions feed into improvements which they attempt to implement and evaluate the second time they teach. This makes the overall experience akin to one of action research. Students also write a conventionally assessed 6000-word assignment, but in stages corresponding to the three phases of the module: Part I reports on the initial teaching and self-evaluation experience with clarification of a topic for research, Part II reports on research into the topic, and Part III reports on self-evaluation of improvement. Students submit drafts of Parts I and II at the end of the respective phases of the module and receive formative feedback from their tutor, either orally or in writing.

In parallel, we have consistently adopted an action research orientation to our own work. In teaching the module, we engage in continual self-critical reflection on its design and delivery (see Smith et al., 2003; Smith, 2005). On the basis of ongoing evaluation, we have retained the overall course design but have made adjustments every year, both in line with analysis of the previous year's feedback and 'at the point of need', as new concerns and issues arise during the course. Thus we return to our story of spring term 2004, when the concerns and issues raised in the anonymous letter certainly did seem to demand further research and relevant action.

Our immediate response

One point – indeed, an accusation – made by the letter-writer was that while we had asked students to voice problems and concerns through private written feedback the previous week (four weeks into the term), we had not done much to respond to the issues raised. This prompted us to look again at what individuals had written (we had simply invited everyone at the end of class to write a few lines about any 'problems and worries' they were experiencing). Of course, we had already read this feedback and had found nothing to worry us unduly, or else surely we would have discussed it with one another and responded. However, recognizing that students might be reluctant to reveal their true feelings, we looked more critically at their comments

to see if the letter writer's concerns indeed reflected a general feeling of dissatisfaction. We could still find little evidence to support the view that feelings of disquiet and resistance were rife, though we admitted we had no way of gauging the reliability of the feedback. While most students did express anxieties (which was hardly surprising since we had solicited feedback on problems and worries), these were mostly concerns about coming to terms with the research itself rather than scepticism about the value of what they were doing. Students repeatedly revealed that they were having difficulties in narrowing down their research topic, but seemed to regard this as a legitimate challenge rather than a focus for complaint. Nevertheless, we took our letter writer's point about the need to respond, and consequently posted detailed comments on the feedback received so far (appropriately anonymized) via the electronic discussion forum we had set up for the module. Our comments sought to clarify procedural points of uncertainty students had identified, and to offer reassurance by acknowledging that feelings of confusion were a common experience during this early phase of the course.

Mindful, however, that students' written feedback might not be revealing the true picture and that our posted responses might thus merely be touching up minor surface problems, we felt we needed to deal systematically with the letter writer's specific complaints and find out how far they represented the majority view. Thus we devised a short anonymous questionnaire to assess students' agreement or disagreement with statements encapsulating these specific complaints. The first area we asked about was peer teaching, and we were reassured to find that only one student (presumably the letter writer her/himself) agreed that 'there is not much point doing peer-teaching'. Thirteen students disagreed and five remained neutral. There was less agreement about the organization of peer teaching sessions, and we responded to student opinion by making some minor changes to timings. However, a clearly worrisome finding emerged from responses to the statement 'there is too much discussion in class as opposed to input from tutors'. Thirteen agreed, nobody disagreed and six remained neutral. This was the main reason for dissatisfaction cited by our letter writer, and was evidently a vexed area which hasty crisis management could not easily resolve, short of letting the tail wag the dog and duly providing more input (cf. Moreira, Chapter 5, on her students' resistance to 'too much negotiation').

We administered the questionnaire mid-way through the course when – as we knew from previous experience – most students are par-

ticularly anxious, needing both to draft the first part of their assignment and to identify a topic for further research. It was, then, reasonably reassuring that about half the group disagreed that they were 'confused about how to investigate [their] research questions', though nine out of 19 did agree they were 'worried about how to describe [their] research.' We realized from this that we should remind students that we were accessible for consultation more or less on demand. Enhancing proactive tutorial support would be something else to think about for the following year.

A final question bit the bullet and asked students to respond to the blunt statement 'I am personally dissatisfied with the course'. Ten students disagreed, five agreed and four remained neutral. Interestingly, when asked to comment on a differently worded statement, 'Most students are dissatisfied with this course', eight students agreed, five disagreed and six had no opinion. What did this tell us? Perhaps that our letter writer had been proselytizing, or perhaps that when students (as well as teachers!) get together for a chat they tend to focus on negatives rather than positives. It certainly told us that we needed to keep explaining ourselves, provide enhanced support, and keep communication flowing – all lessons that we would attempt to put into practice during the rest of the term and in our action research with the following year's students. Finally, it was salutary to discover that although ten students disagreed with 'I don't think I am learning much from this class', eight students did agree. What more could we do, then, to ensure that students would not only feel they were learning, but also develop an enhanced appreciation of learning as self-directed knowledge construction? This became a key concern for our action research the following year.

A year later

Actions taken

Responding to the anonymous letter in 2004 crystallized for us the following chief issues to take forward to 2005:

- take into account mid-term student desires for more input and less discussion
- enhance tutorial support
- keep explaining ourselves and keep communication flowing
- more deliberately validate a 'constructivist' understanding of learning.

In discussing the first of these, we agreed that we were not willing simply to provide more input and reduce discussion, since this would undermine our own principled commitment to the development of students' autonomy as learners of teaching. Instead, we agreed to try to alleviate dissatisfaction in other ways, in effect through dealing with the three other issues. Our action research thus revolved around two main adjustments we made to the course in spring term 2005 to deal with these issues:

1) Enhancing tutorial support

We had 20 students in the 2005 ELSM professional practice module – from mainland China (5), Taiwan (4), Thailand (4), Japan (3), Cyprus (2), Syria (1) and Hong Kong (1). In order to ensure that individual concerns were better addressed, we decided to enhance the existing tutorial group system so that each of the three course tutors had specific responsibility for tracking and supporting a particular group of students throughout the module. We achieved this partly by time-tabling individual and group tutorial time during the first half of the course. In other words, instead of waiting for problems to fester or for students to come to us when their difficulties were intense, we actively sought them out to monitor and smooth their progress. In short, we sought to keep communication flowing between tutor and student and to provide added support and advice when required, rather than revert to more teacher-directed arrangements.

2) Promoting reflection on personal development

Our second modification was to promote more explicitly than before a conception of learning as self-directed knowledge construction rather than consumption of pre-packaged input. In this area, our response to the problems which arose the previous year coincided with a general shift towards the promotion of reflection on learning within British higher education, under the banner of 'Personal Development Planning' or PDP.[1] Our main innovation consisted in making reflective writing on what students had learned during the course a substantial part (1500 words) of the 6000-word assignment itself. Throughout the course, we explicitly related to this requirement the various kinds of in-class reflective writing and discussion we asked students to engage in at different stages. In effect, we wanted to give more legitimacy, indeed institutional respectability, to reflection on learning, and to enhance the perception that discussion and reflective writing were for students' own benefit rather than an interruption to the 'real business' of learning.

How things turned out

Our subjective impressions overall during the 2005 course were that we succeeded in being much more 'in tune' with students' needs than in the previous year, tailoring what input we gave more effectively 'at the point of need'. To us, the overall classroom dynamic felt better (though, of course, this may have had a lot to do with the make-up of the group). From a more objective point of view, we turn now to discuss data from end-of-term student evaluations and the reflective writing component of student assignments.

During the final session, all 20 students responded anonymously to the invitation to write freely, in bullet-point form, about 'good points' and 'points to improve' about the course. Our content analysis of the comments (see Table 6.1) shows the following main points (with

Table 6.1   Students' end-of-term evaluations

	'Good points'	**'Points to improve'**
Suitability to needs/suitability of particular activities	(13) Peer teaching/teaching improvement (6) Experience of research (6) Overall positives (5) Interviewing/classroom observation (4) The course being practical (4) Recording own lesson (2) Freedom of choice (1) Presentation of research (1) 'Reflection grid' [personal construct questionnaire]	(3) Reporting research at end of course (3) Teach real students (2) Classroom observation (2) Personal construct questionnaire (1) Teaching room (1) Too much reflection (1) Transcription analysis
Tutors' input/ feedback/ guidance; overall organization of the course	(18) Organization/ instructions (10) Tutor support/feedback (5) Staging of assignment (4) Demonstration of teaching (4) Feedback from peers and tutors (4) Discussion/collaboration with peers (2) Cooperative/team teaching by tutors	(5) Structuring of course (3) Too much group discussion (2) Earlier start/better preparation (2) Assignment-related (1) More feedback from tutors (1) More input (1) More help with research methods (1) More help with references for reading

frequency of comments indicated in parentheses), classified into two broad areas.

Firstly, we were pleased to note that positive comments (89) far out-numbered comments on points to improve (29). We were particularly interested in responses relevant to our specific concerns – the balance between input and bottom-up support from tutors; and the extent to which students appreciated the opportunities for self-directed knowl-edge construction. In relation to the first concern, there were isolated requests for 'more feedback from tutors' (1), 'more input' (1), 'more help with research methods' (1), 'more help with references for reading' (1), and a few complaints (3) that there was 'too much group discussion'. From an opposing perspective, however, there were several endorsements (10) of the amount and quality of tutor feedback and support, and the value of peer and tutor feedback (4) as well as discus-sion and collaboration with peers (4). In addition, our felt need to 'keep explaining ourselves' undoubtedly contributed to achieving this greater balance between input and bottom-up support. Quality of 'organization/instructions' was the feature most frequently commented on as a good point (by 18 respondents). The provision of better expla-nations of the rationale and purposes of different activities along the way is something we had identified several years earlier as needing enhancement, and clearly we had improved.

In relation to our second concern (whether students appreciated opportunities for self-directed knowledge construction), we examined the data on 'suitability to needs/suitability of particular activities' for any signs of resistance. There were a handful of comments relating to some course elements, including three useful suggestions about modi-fying the way research is reported to the class at the end of the course. This seemed to indicate that students were interested in hearing more about colleagues' projects. We noted just one sign of possible overall resistance from a student who commented that there had been 'too much reflection on my teaching learning process', though the same student also made several favourable comments about other elements of her experience, which reassured us. On the positive side, 13 noted peer teaching as a good point of the course, while six noted that the course also provided an effective introduction to research.

While the end-of-term evaluations were anonymous and thus offered us a global picture only, students' reflective writing in their assign-ments gave us insights into their individual development as learners and teachers. To capture these personal perspectives, we decided to use I-statement analysis of each student's 1500-word piece of reflective

writing. I-statement analysis examines how people speak/write in the first person to describe their actions, feelings, abilities, goals and so on, and how they thus construct particular socially-situated identities for themselves (Gee, 2005: 141). I-statements can be categorized according to the type of predicate that follows 'I' (for example, cognitive I-statements such as *I think*, *I believe* or affective I-statements such as *I feel*, *I like*). Following initial re-working, we developed seven categories of I-statements, as shown in Table 6.2. The data set comprised reflective writing from 18 students, totalling 602 I-statements and averaging 33 I-statements per student (though the actual number per student ranged considerably, from 8 to 86). Table 6.2 summarizes the total distribution of I-statements across the seven categories.

Table 6.2   Distribution of I-statements in reflective writing

I-statement category	Sub-total	% of total
Actions & events: what I did or did not do, what happened during the module (for example, *I started, I designed, I had the opportunity*)	168	28
Insights & gains: what I've learned, discovered, gained during the module (for example, *I realized, I became aware, I have learned, I found, I benefit*)	160	27
Future goals & challenges: what I want, should or need to do in the future, what the future holds for me (for example, *I would like to, I plan to, I might, I will, I want to*)	78	13
Feelings & states: how I feel or felt, how I see myself now and during the module (for example, *I was glad, I'm surprised, I felt nervous, I have many concerns*)	73	12
Thoughts & beliefs: what I think, believe, speculate (for example, *I think, I mean, I believe, I guess, I wonder*)	72	12
Constraints & pressures: what I cannot or could not do, what I should have done or have to do during the module (for example, *I could not, I did not how, I had no idea, I have to*)	33	5
Personal history: experiences and events from the past (for example, *when I look back at my own experience of learning English, when I was in China*)	18	3
Total	602	100

We were struck by the relatively high percentage of I-statements reflecting personal insights and gains (27%), and the relatively low percentage reflecting constraints and pressures experienced during the module (5%). We felt this suggested that the perceived benefits outweighed the perceived negatives, and that students did not feel cast adrift through lack of teacher input or other causes.

Of course, the reflective writing was part of assessed work, and students may have been reluctant to voice their true concerns or criticisms of the course (as our letter writer had originally pointed out to us!). However, closer analysis of the I-statements categorized as insights and gains suggested to us that lack of teacher input and direction was not an issue. Our analysis seemed to indicate instead that students gained a rather different understanding of how knowledge comes to be constructed – a development which had been a primary intention of our action research. In essence, these I-statements express insights gained through action, experience, interaction with others and reflection, and express recognition of the diverse ways in which knowledge develops or input can be sourced, for example:

- *During the course, I have discovered a lot of aspects of myself as a teacher that I had not thought of before*
- *From my peer teaching, I recognized that what happened in the classroom cannot be absolutely controlled*
- *I have realized the value of having discussion in order to organize and develop my topic area*
- *I realized that writing the aims and tasks helps teacher organize the lesson clearly*
- *I have also found the classroom a much more interesting place to notice and observe*
- *I have learned that teaching is an experienced action which we have to learn by ourselves and it takes time to become a skilful teacher*
- *I did not realize that another interesting way to learn is to do research*

While many students did reflect on problems they faced, their I-statements cast these problems as opportunities for positive change and growth rather than reasons for sustained resistance. For example, let us consider the case of R, a student who explicitly mentioned initial feelings of resistance and low motivation. R was enrolled in the MA in British Cultural Studies and ELT programme. Since this programme straddles courses offered by the Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies and CELTE, R had (wrongly) assumed

that the ELSM module was not a required component for her. She was thus a reluctant participant to begin with, and had missed the first week of classes. Her I-statements convey her initial resistance, anxieties and low sense of autonomy:

- *I did what was necessary, nothing more*
- *I did not have much interest in it (the module)*
- *I felt anxious and nervous when I was told I had to interview some experienced teachers in CELTE*

Gradually, however, R constructs a narrative of change and personal development as she begins to see things in a different light. The key factors that trigger change seem to be (a) the experience of teaching (in Week 3), which, despite herself, she finds motivating:

- *I found that I actually enjoyed preparing a lesson and enjoy teaching it*
- *Thus I felt motivated to learn things because I wanted to improve my lesson*
- *I knew I got my motivation and would do a better job*

and (b) the experience of discussing ideas with peers and tutors, which she finds an illuminating way of arriving at new knowledge and insights:

- *During the discussion in this module, I got some interesting and useful information*
- *From then on, I became much more active and participate much more in later discussions.*

By the end of the module (Week 10), not only does R see things in a different light, she also sees herself differently:

- *After finishing all the research work, I realized I was not that shy as I used to think*
- *The close-linked learning process in which I learned more about myself was discussion and sharing ideas with peers and tutors*
- *Through the two peer-teachings, I came to know more about the teaching process and about myself as a teacher*

R's case clearly provides an interesting counter-story to our letter writer from 2004. Of course, we have no way of 'proving' that the changes in

R's attitude from initial resistance to motivated engagement can be explained by the specific adjustments we made to the course in 2005. Yet the fact that she identifies discussion with peers and tutors as a key element in her own metamorphosis suggests that these adjustments may have had a pivotal role to play.

Final reflections

The teaching and research experiences we have described above show that promoting autonomy is not simply a question either of 'giving learners what they want' or of 'letting them get on with things', although both of these may be important at certain times and in certain areas. Ours is quite a tightly structured module within a tightly structured programme, and we do not (indeed, do not consider ourselves free to) allow students control over important areas of overall module design (decisions as to overall objectives, approach and evaluation criteria, for example). Within the overall structure we have developed over the years, however, students do plan, monitor and evaluate their own teaching and research projects. In general, their self-directed activity in these areas, combined with reflection on the experience, does seem to contribute quite powerfully to the development of their autonomy as learners of language teaching (Smith, 2006; Smith and Erdoğan, 2007). Thus, embedding a supported experience of action research within initial teacher education has proved itself, in our context, to be a valuable and viable strategy for promoting teacher-learner autonomy (see also Moreira, Chapter 5).

The corresponding action research orientation we have built into our own practice enables us to respond flexibly to students' problems on a 'just in time' basis: we investigate and make modifications when necessary within the overall structure we have established. However, as the case reported on above shows, responding to resistance does not necessarily have to involve giving students what they say they want at a particular point. More effective responses, we have found, can include careful elicitation of all students' opinions (to complement those of the most vocal), better explanation of the course aims, heightened legitimation of relatively unfamiliar practices (in our case, explicit reflection on learning) via their inclusion in assessment procedures, and improvement in the targeting of support for students as they undergo the sometimes difficult transition to greater autonomy.

For us, the 2005 module we have concentrated on evaluating in this chapter was a positive experience, in comparison with the more worri-

some experience of 2004. The 2005 course left us with a desire to build on what we thought of as our 'success', with no major new problems to address. Without the resistance expressed in the anonymous letter of 2004, however, we would not have made the modifications which contributed to this success. Were such resistance to be entirely absent, indeed, there might be dangers of complacency and, perhaps, of the imposition of a new 'orthodoxy of autonomy' as innovations brought about originally in a spirit of adventure and genuine experiment become systematized and fossilized. This has led us to think that 'resistance' to pedagogy for autonomy should be viewed as a positive phenomenon, one which can be welcomed and turned to good advantage as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on core values in collaboration with students, and as a basis for continual improvements.

Note

1. PDP is defined as 'a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development' (Higher Education Academy, no date).