

Developing Teacher-Learner Autonomy: Constraints and Opportunities in Pre-service Training

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Abstract

'Teacher-learner autonomy' (the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others) can be seen as an important goal or value in its own right, as well as being an important basis for pedagogy for autonomy with students. There are, however, practical and ideological constraints on its development in teacher education programmes. In this paper, I report on an attempt to identify and constructively address such constraints in one pre-service teacher education context. The results of this evaluation shed light on the processes of change involved when student-teachers are engaged in a guided action research experience.

Resumen

La "autonomía del profesorado en formación" (la habilidad para desarrollar las destrezas apropiadas, adquirir el conocimiento y las actitudes para consigo mismo y para con los demás) puede considerarse como un objetivo o un valor por sí mismo, aparte de constituir una base importante para la pedagogía que favorezca la autonomía del alumnado. Sin embargo, existen limitaciones prácticas e ideológicas para dicho desarrollo en los programas de formación de profesorado. Aquí se presenta un intento de identificar y abordar de forma constructiva dichas limitaciones en el contexto de las prácticas formativas de los futuros enseñantes. Los resultados obtenidos arrojan cierta luz sobre los procesos de cambio implicados cuando el profesorado en formación se involucra en una experiencia guiada de investigación - acción.

Introduction

Over the last two years, in collaboration with my colleagues Peter Brown, Annamaria Pinter and Ema Ushioda, I have been developing ways to enhance student-teachers' autonomy as learners of language teaching in the context of a year-long MA programme for students with little or no substantial prior teaching experience. The intervention we have devised – a small-scale action research experience spread over the ten weeks of the students' Term 2 'Professional Practice' course – has previously been reported on and justified in detail in Smith, Alagöz, Brown and İçmez 2002. In that paper we describe how the introduction of action research based on short lessons taught to peers was intended to develop student-teacher participants' capacities for

ongoing and self-critical reflection on their teaching. A summary of the need and rationale for this type of approach in our context was provided, and problems and advantages of the approach were discussed with reference to participants' end-of-course evaluations in 2001 and the reflections of two tutors and two participating students. In recognition of the fact that this ten-week 'Professional Practice' course is simultaneously an academic and a practically oriented one, we separated out advantages and problems of the approach into three different areas, reflecting different functions of the course (ibid.):

- As one component in an academic [MA] programme: Advantages included this being *a valid educational experience*, fulfilling institutional requirements for high academic standards at the same time as meeting student demands for 'practical' experience. The course seems to have been effective in *linking theory and practice*, and, in the context of the overall curriculum, to have provided a good *preparation for academic research* which students were required to engage in during the following (final) term. Problems included the possibility that for some students at least the course demanded a *difficult transition to autonomy* (for more on this, see below), but also that – in the tutors' eyes – there were *constraints on self-direction* (again, see below). *Overload* on students and *logistical problems* (equipment and room requirements) were also identified as giving cause for concern.
- As a 'real' experience (of teaching / action research): Constraints in this area were the obvious ones that in peer-teaching there are many *differences from a real teaching situation* and *differences from a real teacher-research situation*. Counterbalancing this, however, advantages which emerged strongly were that, in fact, students tended to take this seriously as a *real teaching* and *real teacher-learning* experience. The fact that students were engaged in '*simplified teaching*' within the supportive atmosphere of the peer-teaching group may also have given the least experienced students confidence they would not otherwise have been able to gain.
- As a stimulus and preparation for future teacher research: Problems in this area might include *possible discouragement* if the action research experience is perceived negatively, for example as too burdensome (cf. the problem of 'overload' mentioned above); also, action research in this setting bypasses certain constraints on 'real' action research and is therefore *easier than in real life* – there is a concern, then, that students could become discouraged in the future if they find themselves motivated but unable to engage in such research in a real teaching context. Advantages include the *validation of action research* resulting from its inclusion in an academic programme, and the fact of its *overcoming problems of 'real' action research*, including lacks of psychological and technical preparation which have been mentioned previously in the literature. All in all, we felt, the course provides *an important first step towards teacher autonomy* (see below).

We concluded that the advantages of involving students in a positive, well-supported experience of action research outweigh disadvantages relating to its

'simulated' nature, although problems in some students' adjustment to this kind of work were also revealed.

Aside from beginning to reveal insights into the benefits and problems associated with the course, this reflective exercise revealed to tutors that the development of autonomy had been an implicit goal, from the beginning, in their course design. Partly, this realization was grounded in reflective comments such as the following, from students to whom the concept of *teacher* autonomy had never before been mentioned:

I felt really strong because . . . I could find my way on my own with the help of the students . . . [F]inding on my own what went wrong and doing a research on it was highly motivating. I think this course promotes autonomy as a teacher, making research on a particular subject, while promoting learner autonomy since the teacher has to find out what the learners need to learn for their own specific situation.

(Simla İçmez, in Smith, Alagöz, Brown and İçmez 2002: 35)

Action research seems to be endless, but it . . . gives teachers who are involved in it the sense of achievement, which motivates them to initiate another action circle since this research develops teachers' autonomy.

(Yuka Miyachi, in Smith, Alagöz, Brown and İçmez 2002: 20)

Thus tutors began to realize, on the basis of comments such as these, that the course could be seen as constituting *an important first step towards teacher autonomy* (cf. summary above), in the sense of developing students' ability to teach reflectively and learn for themselves in the future. We realized that we were placing a particular emphasis on developing students' autonomy as *learners of teaching*, and accordingly advertised the following as the major goal of the course in the following year, 2002: enhancement of the 'ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others'. This definition of and focus on 'teacher-learner autonomy' is further discussed and justified in Smith 2003a.

On the other hand, we had also gained an awareness that, for some participants at least, the course involved a *difficult transition to autonomy* (again, see summary above), and that – if we were to consider autonomy as an important goal – there existed *constraints on self-direction* which were difficult to change. We speculated on the problems involved in the first area as follows:

[T]here was some initial confusion associated with what might be described as a shift from dependence to autonomy, from academic to reflective work, and/or from consumption to production of knowledge. For some students this shift may have been perceived as too abrupt and stressful, hence perhaps the (few) negative assessments in end-of-course evaluations. The course may involve a kind of culture shock as students are shifted from a relatively 'applied science' to a more reflective teacher education paradigm (Wallace 1991). This may be compounded

by expectations of students that given the title of the course, 'Professional Practice', they will be inducted into a 'craft paradigm', involving, for example, tutor judgements on the quality of teaching. The reality is that, instead, they are required to rely on their own resources, and this can cause friction, particularly in initial stages, during the course.

(Smith, Alagöz, Brown and İçmez 2002: 13)

At the same time, as tutors, we were aware of constraints on our own ability to engage in a pedagogy for autonomy in the context of the overall curriculum, constraints which we theorized as follows:

While the course aims to develop students' autonomy in pursuing topics of interest to them individually, a structure for this needs to be provided; . . . this is necessary in supporting participants' transition to greater autonomy. However, there are also other aspects of 'structure', or 'context' in this academic setting which can be defined as constraints on autonomy. Among these we would mention the need to fit the course into a short (10-week) term, and the apparent impossibility in this context of self-assessment (given needs for accountability and comparability with other courses).

(ibid.: 14)

With our more explicit focus in 2002 on the development of teacher-learner autonomy, and given our concerns that, for some students at least, the transition to greater autonomy was a difficult one in the context of the overall MA programme, a more extensive evaluation than that of 2001 was planned. This time the focus was to be on the process of change in participant perceptions during the course, with a specific focus on (1) whether or not, and in what respects the intervention could be said to contribute to the development of participants' autonomy as learners of teaching, and (2) what constraints and opportunities were most salient in relation to this development.

The evaluation

The Professional Practice class of 2002 was a large one in comparison with the previous year, consisting of 31 students. Almost all students were in their early to mid-twenties, and all had little or no substantial experience of teaching. Students came from a variety of countries, namely (in descending order of numbers) Taiwan (8), Japan (5), S. Cyprus (4), P.R. China (3), Greece (2), Thailand (2) and one student each from Albania, N. Cyprus, Georgia, Hong Kong, Korea, Macao and Malaysia.

Constraints on and opportunities for the development of teacher-learner autonomy in the context of this course were evaluated in 2002 using a variety of research methods: repeated reflective writing by participants, repeated questionnaires, and in-depth interviews with selected participants. In this paper I shall report only on the

method and results for reflective writing and questionnaires, highlighting the general tendencies which emerged.

First, though, I should point out some important features of this evaluation: (1) there was a deliberate attempt overall to access students' own perspectives rather than impose preconceived categories; (2) information was gathered about students' *developing* perspectives as the course went on, not just their perceptions at the end of the course; and (3) the primary purpose of evaluation was ongoing improvement of the course as well as improvement for the following year.

Reflecting these priorities, the evaluation process began in weeks 2 and 4 (of the ten-week course) with students being engaged in open-ended, anonymous reflective writing at the end of classes in these weeks in answer to the question 'What do I think of the course at this stage?'.

Constraints or 'problems' revealed in week 2, prior to the students' first experience of peer-teaching were as follows:

- lack of confidence in fellow students taking the course seriously enough / lack of cooperative spirit / lack of confidence in peer feedback on teaching
- confusion as to course aims and activities
- need for reassurance regarding lesson plan; stress / lack of confidence in relation to lesson planning; lack of confidence in selecting material
- lack of confidence in ability to do well in the assignment / concern about the complexity of the assignment
- concerns regarding the artificiality of the peer-teaching experience (context and students being different from a real teaching situation)
- concern about the short (30-minute) duration of the lesson to be taught
- concern regarding own time management skills / general anxiety about teaching
- concern about artificiality of the research dimension of the course (compared with lack of time and resources in 'real life')
- desire for models of good teaching prior to teaching
- belief that transcription of the lesson from recordings would be a waste of time
- lack of confidence in ability to evaluate one's own teaching performance immediately after the lesson

Opportunities (positive perceptions of the course) revealed at this stage were as follows:

- willingness to practise teaching (sometimes for the first time ever)
- willingness to gain feedback on teaching
- willingness to have a chance to improve
- willingness to reflect / self-evaluate; awareness of its importance; belief in uniqueness of this opportunity to self-evaluate
- belief that much learning would result
- awareness of need to participate actively (this being a 'challenge')

- belief in importance of observing others' lessons
- approval of idea of draft-writing
- willingness to read intensively to improve one's teaching
- awareness of value of multiple perspectives (feedback) on one's own teaching
- willingness to learn research methods.

In week 4, after all students had taught their 30-minute lessons to peers, reflective writing revealed the following perceptions.

Constraints:

- lack of literature relevant to own concerns regarding how to improve
- too much time spent for peer-teaching as opposed to other kinds of activity (e.g. input) / time-consuming nature of peer-teaching
- continuing anxiety about teaching / dislike of peer-teaching
- confusion about assignment-writing
- time-consuming nature of writing for the assignment
- lack of time to discuss teaching issues with tutors / other students
- desire for tutor feedback on the lesson
- perceived lack of depth and length of peers' reflections / lack of trust in truth value of peers' feedback
- desire for guidance on how to give peer feedback
- awareness of there being too many points to improve in one's teaching
- lack of confidence in what one has written for lesson report
- disappointment about quality of own teaching

Opportunities:

- increased awareness of difference between experienced and novice teachers
- willingness to build confidence further
- appreciation of observing others' lessons
- awareness of careful organization of the course
- awareness of having identified points for improvement in own teaching
- awareness of usefulness of peer feedback
- appreciation of scaffolding of peer-teaching by tutors (demonstration lesson)
- appreciation of web-based discussion forum
- appreciation of value of teaching the same lesson twice (to evaluate improvement)
- questioning of whether 'theory' is the most important thing for teaching
- awareness that others share the same weaknesses
- awareness that peer-teaching helps link theory and practice
- awareness that unexpected things happen in teaching
- awareness of value of action research
- satisfaction that there was no tutor feedback on the lesson
- awareness of usefulness of the course for future teaching
- good opportunity to teach for the first time

- good opportunity to put into practice what had been learned in other modules

The themes elicited above (from week 2 and week 4 reflective writing) were the source for the majority of items on a questionnaire given out in week 5, when students had handed in their draft lesson reports and had begun to embark on reading and other research in relation to particular areas of individual concern.

In this mid-term (week 5) questionnaire, students were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale in relation to a total of 74 statements about the course. Positive perceptions of the course and disagreements with the salience of particular problems according to the 25 (anonymous) respondents to the questionnaire were as follows (only those items agreed or disagreed with by more than 80% of respondents are listed):

- [24 agree, 8 strongly] In this course we are given a structure for our own development and the most important thing is our own participation
- [24 agree, 8 strongly] It was useful to observe others' peer-taught lessons, as a student
- [24 agree, 8 strongly] We can improve even if we disagree with our classmates' comments because we come up with reasons for our own ideas
- [23 agree, 13 strongly] Reflection on teaching is important to explore our strengths and weaknesses
- [23 agree, 8 strongly] This course allows me to develop
- [22 agree, 11 strongly] Peer-teaching was a good way to link theory and practice
- [22 disagree, 9 strongly] I was unwilling to be evaluated by my peers
- [22 agree, 7 strongly] The experience of reflecting on my own teaching is a valuable one
- [21 agree, 11 strongly] After peer-teaching I am more aware of points I need to improve in my teaching
- [21 agree, 6 strongly] I discovered things that I did not expect about my teaching
- [21 agree, 6 strongly] I believe that I am becoming more critical and self-critical as a result of this course

The most commonly perceived problems or constraints were revealed to be the following (only the first was perceived as such by more than 80% of respondents; the remainder are all the items interpretable as problems which received the acknowledgement of more than 50% of respondents):

- [22 agree, 10 strongly] I wish the tutors could give us feedback on our lessons
- [19 agree, 9 strongly] I would like help from tutors to help me select points for further investigation
- [19 agree, 6 strongly] This course requires hard work and commitment
- [17 agree, 7 strongly] I am less stressed now that I have completed my peer-teaching
- [17 agree, 6 strongly] I found that I disagreed with some of my classmates' suggestions on peer-teaching

- [16 agree, 8 strongly] Before doing peer-teaching I would have liked to see more experienced teachers' lessons more
- [15 agree, 8 strongly] I would like tutors to watch the video of my lesson and identify points I should improve
- [15 agree, 2 strongly] I wish that more guidance was provided regarding what we are expected to do in this course

Combining these findings with results for other items on the questionnaire the following were revealed as the primary areas of shared student concern at the mid-term point (in order of priority):

- lack of tutor feedback on teaching or support in identifying points for further investigation
- confusion regarding expectations for the course
- need for more training on how to teach (before peer-teaching) and/or more prior observation of relatively experienced teachers' lessons

Other concerns, as indicated by a minority of students in each case, were the difficulty of reflecting on teaching immediately afterwards, lack of input in the form of lectures, confusion regarding the trustworthiness of peers' comments on teaching, and the 30-minute duration of the peer-taught class being insufficient.

In week 9, after students had completed their investigations and, in the majority of cases, had taught their improved second lesson, there was another anonymous and open-ended reflective writing session. This time, students were asked to reflect freely on 'Any ways you feel you've developed / Any problems you're having'.

Constraints ('problems') mentioned by students at this stage were different from those elicited in weeks 2 and 4, reflecting different, 'end-of-course' concerns:

- problems in organizing and structuring the assignment / it not being easy to organize everything that has been learned into a meaningful text
- it not having been easy to follow the whole of the course, since there's a need to be 'balanced' and independent in what is studied
- a feeling that a lot was learned about teaching but that it is still a superficial understanding

These were the only problems noted by individual students. On the other hand, perceptions of what had been learned were many and varied, and can be categorized into what had been learned about *teaching*, and about *how to develop oneself as a teacher*. Given the focus of this paper on the development of teacher-learner autonomy, I will list only those comments relating to 'how to develop oneself as a teacher' below:

- I learnt how a class can be observed, how self-evaluation can be done and many useful information about questionnaires, checklists, etc. / I think I've learnt about research methods

- I know more how to evaluate myself from feedback and self-reflection / This course offered me the basis to evaluate and criticise myself
- I learned the importance for teachers of getting feedback from students
- I learned how to improve my teaching by referring to various sources / The course offers us strategies for us to learn how to be a teacher, step by step / I know more how to plan to improve and evaluate the improvement
- I learned that improvement comes gradually
- The course developed my self-awareness and sense of reflection on my way of teaching
- I've become more critical by the end of the course
- I've learnt to be more demanding to myself
- I learnt that answers to questions are based on experience as well as theory
- I enjoyed and learnt from observation and finding out something that I want
- I will apply this kind of research when I teach in the future

Many of the items in the week 5 questionnaire were repeated for the final questionnaire, which was given out at end of the final session, in week 10 of the course. (In some cases week 5 items were changed into the past tense to reflect the fact that the course was now over.) Other week 5 items with less relevance for overall evaluation were discarded (for the most part, these being items with relevance only to the early part of the course), being replaced by items derived from students' reflective writing in week 9 which have been recorded above.

The final (week 10) questionnaire mirrored the format of the week 5 questionnaire, this time with 75 statements relating to the course and related beliefs being responded to anonymously. The most positively supported aspects and beliefs according to the 25 students present (3 of whom were different from those present for the week 5 questionnaire) were as follows (here, only items which gained 100% or 96% agreement or disagreement are listed):

- [25 agree, 12 strongly] This course developed my self-awareness and ability to reflect on my way of teaching
- [25 agree, 12 strongly] Reflection on teaching is important to explore our strengths and weaknesses
- [25 agree, 10 strongly] I believe that I became more critical and self-critical as a result of this course
- [25 agree, 6 strongly] I know better now how to plan lessons
- [24 agree, 12 strongly] Even though I did not teach 'real' students, what I learned will be useful for my future teaching
- [24 agree, 12 strongly] I've learned that answers to questions about teaching are based on experience as well as theory
- [24 agree, 12 strongly] This course has taught me how to reflect both on my own and others' teaching
- [24 agree, 11 strongly] Peer-teaching was a good way to link theory to practice
- [24 agree, 10 strongly] I know better how to evaluate myself as a teacher now

- [24 agree, 8 strongly] I discovered things that I did not expect about my teaching
- [24 agree, 7 strongly] This course enhanced my ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for myself as a teacher, in cooperation with others
- [24 agree, 7 strongly] This course helped me improve my teaching abilities
- [24 agree, 7 strongly] This course developed my ability to reflect critically on practice
- [24 agree, 6 strongly] I gained a deeper understanding of many areas of classroom teaching

The most commonly perceived problems revealed at this stage were the following (only the first – which is not unambiguously a constraint – was confirmed by more than 80% of respondents; the remainder are all the items receiving a response interpretable as revealing a problem from more than 50% of respondents):

- [23 agree, 10 strongly] This course requires hard work and commitment
- [19 agree, 5 strongly] I am worried about getting a good mark for the assignment
- [16 agree, 7 strongly] I wish the tutors could have given us feedback on our lessons
- [16 agree, 6 strongly] Before doing peer-teaching I would have liked to see more experienced teachers' lessons more
- [15 agree, 4 strongly] This course required a lot of attention compared with other courses
- [15 agree, 3 strongly] Sometimes I felt I lost my direction
- [13 agree, 7 strongly] I would have liked tutors to watch the video of my lesson and identify points I should improve
- [13 agree, 3 strongly] The work for this course has been too time-consuming
- [13 agree, 2 strongly] I conducted my research with the anxiety of being assessed on my mind

According to these results and responses to other items on the questionnaire, commonly perceived problems or *constraints* associated with the course, by this stage, had resolved themselves into the following areas (in no particular order of priority):

- Overall workload
- Stress associated with assessment / writing the assignment
- Desire for tutor feedback on peer-teaching
- Confusion regarding what was expected
- Desire for more training on how to teach (prior to peer-teaching)

Finally, a comparison was carried out between results of week 5 and week 10 questionnaires for those items which were repeated in both (sometimes with a change of tense in the wording of the item). Although three students were different in the two cases, there were still some clear trends from agreement to disagreement or vice versa during the second half of the course. Results for week 10 as compared with week 5 were as follows for those items with the largest 'swings' (grouped according to area of constraint/opportunity, roughly in descending order of size of difference between week 5 and week 10 results):

Increased worry about getting a good grade for the course (difference of 12)

- I am worried about getting a good mark on the assignment (19 now agree overall, up from 7)

Increased perception of 'reality' of the peer-teaching experience (difference of 7-12)

- The peer-teaching experience was so different from a real teaching experience that I feel I learnt little from it (20 now disagree overall, up from 8)
- Because the students were not real students, I do not think the peer-teaching experience was valuable (2 now agree overall, down from 9)

Decreased sense of need for tutor guidance (difference of 7)

- I wish that more guidance had been (vs. was) provided regarding what we are expected to do in this course (8 now agree overall, down from 15)

Decreased sense of usefulness of observing others' peer-taught lessons (difference of 7)

It was useful to observe others' peer-taught lessons as a student (17 now agree overall, down from 24)

Increased perceptions of having developed 'teacher-learner autonomy' (difference of 5-7)

- This course enhanced (vs. has already enhanced) my ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for myself as a teacher, in cooperation with others (24 now agree overall, up from 17)
- This course taught (vs. is teaching) me to rely on my own resources in developing myself as a teacher (23 now agree overall, up from 18)

Increased perception of having developed abilities to reflect critically (difference of 6)

- I believe that I became (vs. am becoming) more critical and self-critical as a result of this course (25 now agree overall, up from 21)
- This course developed (vs. has already developed) my ability to reflect critically on practice (24 now agree overall, up from 18)

Decreased sense of need for tutor feedback (difference of 6)

- I wish the tutors could have given (vs. could give) us feedback on our lessons (16 now agree overall, down from 22)

Increased appreciation of value of the action research project (difference of 6)

- Basically, I'm happy with this 'action research project' (23 now agree overall, up from 17)
- I understand the importance and effectiveness of this 'action research project' (23 now agree overall, up from 17)

Increased perception of work-load (difference of 4)

- The work for this course has been (vs. is) too time-consuming (13 now agree overall, up from 9)
- This course required (vs. requires) hard work and commitment (23 now agree overall, up from 19)

Increased sense of usefulness of transcribing one's own lesson (difference of 4)

- It was a waste of time to write a transcript of our lesson (17 now disagree overall, up from 13)

Increased overall satisfaction with the course (difference of 3-4)

- Even though I did not teach 'real' students, what I learned will be useful for my future teaching (24 now agree overall, up from 20)
- I feel I benefited and learnt (vs. I feel I am benefiting and learning) a lot from this course (22 now agree overall, up from 19))
- I found (vs. find) the course enjoyable (17 now agree overall, up from 14)

Overall, the evaluation of the course in 2002 showed that, as in the previous year, the course ended up being viewed very positively by participants, despite problems encountered on the way. Data gathered longitudinally for this evaluation indicated that students seemed to pass through states of confusion, anxiety and even resentment in relation to different aspects of the course, but also that they increasingly appreciated its benefits as time went on, including its usefulness in developing their autonomy as learners of teaching. Problems were, generally, reconceptualized by them in two ways: (a) Initially perceived problems came to be seen as less important over time, as students' overall perception of the value of the course increased through involvement. Indeed, some constraints were reconceived as opportunities (for example, initial dissatisfaction regarding the simulated nature of peer-teaching tended to disappear – on the basis of experience it came to be seen instead as a valuable opportunity); (b) Other constraints remained constant in their salience, while some new problems emerged, but in both cases constraints came to be seen as less important overall, being balanced by the increasing overall perception of the value of the course.

Students' end-of-course responses reveal perceptions that they had developed autonomy as learners of teaching during the course. This can be seen both in respondents' answers to direct 'autonomy-related' questionnaire items and in students' decreasing overall dissatisfaction with a perceived lack of tutor guidance and feedback, although this continued to be an important issue for some.

Tutors' own assumptions about constraints on the development of participants' autonomy, as described in the Introduction, were by and large confirmed, but we also realized that students showed an increasing ability to think beyond the constraints of the course and to appreciate the opportunities it gave them to engage in self-directed development. Increasing anxiety about assignment-writing and a decreasing interest in

participation in peers' lessons as 'students' – perhaps related to mounting anxiety about writing the assignment as the course neared its close – emerged as factors which tutors had previously underrated but which, we realized, should be taken into account in redesigning the course.

This evaluation shows overall that the goal of teacher-learner autonomy can be productively pursued even in the difficult circumstances of a relatively decontextualized, pre-service teacher education programme. The problems and benefits identified above are, of course, specific to our own context, and to the particular group of students involved in this evaluation. However, the evaluation has perhaps also shown more generally how opportunities need to be weighed in the balance with constraints in the pursuit of autonomy, and how – while constraints do not 'disappear' – the relationship between constraints and opportunities is a dynamic one which can be changed over time.

Conclusion

There have, as yet, been few published accounts, let alone evaluations of teacher education initiatives explicitly intended to develop teacher autonomy (although see Moreira, Vieira and Marques 1999; Vieira 1999; Thavenius 1999; McGrath 2000; Vieira, this volume). One problem in this area may have been the imprecision of the term 'teacher autonomy' itself, a problem I have considered theoretically elsewhere (Smith 2003a) as well as in practice with student-teachers, as reported on here. Another problem, however, concerns the overall difficulty of evaluating the development of autonomy in learners. As Benson (2001: 186) suggests, 'there is surprisingly little empirical evidence available for the effectiveness of any particular approach [to developing autonomy]', although – he claims – there is a 'pressing need . . . for empirical research that will support or undermine the theoretical assumptions on which forms of practice are based' (ibid.).

Ongoing localized evaluation by the teacher (to improve arrangements in cooperation with students) is nevertheless a crucial aspect of pedagogy for autonomy (cf. Smith 2003b), and the evaluation reported in this paper provided tutors with useful insights into students' difficulties, enabling us to better target our support during the course as well as in subsequent years (a significant change instituted as a result of the evaluation was, for example, to offer some feedback on students' lessons, a change made possible by reduced student numbers in the following year). As Little, Ridley and Ushioda (2002: 97) suggest, 'once-off questionnaires are fairly crude instruments when the aim is to capture a long-term perspective'. Indeed, interviews with selected participants during the evaluation process reported on here provided valuable supplementary, triangulating insights which will be reported on elsewhere. However, we have found that in order to obtain a general picture of developments within a class, for practical as well as theoretical purposes, there are benefits to be gained from the use of open-ended writing by participants followed by incorporation of their perspectives into a mid-term questionnaire which is later repeated. This method proved to be useful in giving us a deeper insight into changes in participants' perceptions, including in relation

to the salience of constraints, and regarding the potential benefits of the course. Constraints, we realized, are a constant companion to opportunities in the 'difficult transitions' of a pedagogy for (teacher-learner) autonomy – however, over time, their salience can diminish as students gain in confidence and control.

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