

## **The History of Learner Autonomy**

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### **Introduction**

In spite of the imposing title, my aim in this paper is not at all to present some kind of ‘definitive history’ of learner autonomy in language education – even if this were possible, it is highly premature. Rather, I want to argue here for the practical relevance of adopting *historical perspectives* on the autonomy movement at this stage in its development. I wish to suggest, in particular, that it might be useful for us to jointly construct records of learner autonomy related *practice* in which we have ourselves been involved. Please interpret the title, then, as meaning something like: ‘Reflections on the usefulness, at this point, of our constructing historical records of learner autonomy practice in different contexts’!

I begin with some reflections on why history-construction might be a good idea at this point in time, moving on to describe further the scope and type of history I am arguing for. I then report on some preliminary steps I have taken towards the construction of this kind of history with the collaboration of participants in the Copenhagen Workshop and others. Some preliminary findings are presented in the form of commented timelines, and I invite readers to use these as a basis for further commentary and filling in of gaps, from their own perspectives.

### **Why history?**

#### **The general relevance of history**

Over the last ten years or so I have been researching the general history of language teaching methodology, guided by a belief derived from professional experience (see Smith 2001) that insights from the past can help teachers navigate their own way, critically but constructively, among the top-down, centre to ‘periphery’ fashions which tend to characterize language teaching discourse.

Raising language teachers’ awareness of past developments can, I would suggest, be one means for enhancing teacher-learner autonomy (‘the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in collaboration with others’ (Smith 2006)). From this point of view, not only can learning about the past empower pre-service and in-service teachers to adopt a critical perspective on new ideas they are exposed to, but also – in particular if narratives are offered which highlight the past contributions of *practitioners* and the way current theory and practice build on their contributions – teachers may gain an enhanced sense of confidence in their own ability to generate appropriate pedagogies and theory, ‘from the bottom up’. My interests in history, appropriate pedagogy and teacher-learner autonomy therefore coincide in this general area.

#### **Why history of autonomy now?**

##### *Commemoration and celebration*

More specifically, though, why should we be considering the history of *learner autonomy* – assuredly not yet a superseded notion! – at this particular point in time? One motive is clearly to commemorate and celebrate some significant achievements, not least the twentieth anniversary of

the Nordic Workshops on Developing Autonomous Learning (see the timeline at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/history/international/nordic](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/history/international/nordic)). Beyond this, Leni Dam recently wrote of the ‘thirty year history of learner autonomy’ (Dam 2006), referring specifically to her own practice in Denmark; indeed, work with the concept of learner autonomy by Henri Holec and his colleagues at CRAPEL (the Centre de Recherches et d’Applications Pédagogiques en Langues, University of Nancy, France) first started as far back as 1972 (Holec interview, 2006; see also Holec 2000), fully 35 years ago.

### *Information and diffusion*

There are also, arguably, some pressing *practical* needs for history of learner autonomy – primary among them being the need to record and diffuse reliable and useful information for those new to the autonomy movement. Over the last decade in particular, as the term ‘learner autonomy’ has become mainstreamed and globalized (see Benson 2007), much existing work – especially that which has not been published in ‘international’ journals or by ‘major’ publishers (in practice, US or UK based journals and publishers) has tended to be ignored – Schmenk’s recent (2005) article in *TESOL Quarterly*, for example, almost entirely passes such work by. There seem to be compelling reasons, then, at the present juncture, why achievements gained and lessons shared over previous years need to be better publicised and diffused. In short, we may need to take history-writing into our own hands if work we have been involved with is not to be completely misrepresented or ignored within the expanding discourse on learner autonomy.

### *Evaluation and action*

Finally, for those engaged in autonomy-related practice there is a generally recognized, ongoing need to evaluate in order to determine future directions (cf. Dam 1995). As new opportunities have arisen for involvement in relatively large scale experiments (e.g. national curriculum development in the Nordic countries, the European Language Portfolio, and so on), and as the term ‘learner autonomy’ has moved into the mainstream, it seems to have become necessary to evaluate our practices and ascertain needs for action in a wider context than we may have been used to, that is, beyond our own classrooms or institutions (cf. Bobb-Wolff and Vera Batista 2006: 57). Particularly at this juncture, a major reason for looking back among those who have been used to considering autonomy a minority interest is to help make sense of the current process of mainstreaming, enabling us to see why the spread of the idea of autonomy has occurred, what has been gained, what may be in the process of being lost, and how we might influence events. Writing ourselves into the story, in particular, may show to us how we have had agency and can continue to change things in the future.

## **What kind of history?**

### **Scope**

Initially, at least, I suggest that we focus our attention on the roughly thirty-five year period up to the present day, without delving back into possible antecedents, and that we focus on developments within rather than beyond language education. In these respects, Benson (2001, 2007) has cast the net more widely in his own recent retrospective accounts, while Gremmo and Riley (1995) also provide useful insights into a wider historical and social context. On the other hand, for reasons I shall be explaining, I hope that we can introduce a more consistent emphasis than is evident in these authors’ accounts onto the various *practices* associated or associable with learner autonomy in language education, in a wider variety of settings. From this perspective, there seems no need to

restrict ourselves to the actual label of ‘autonomy’, since practices, associations and institutions now united within the learner autonomy movement may have started out life under other labels (until very recently Leni Dam, for example, has been making use of the term ‘differentiated teaching and learning’ rather than ‘learner autonomy’ to describe her practice to Danish teachers (Dam interview, 2006). There is likely to be considerable value, also, in not being exclusive where diverse languages and geographical settings are concerned – one might expect, indeed, that there will be interesting variations in understanding and practice according to participants’ background language, culture and place (cf. Riley forthcoming).

## **Type of history**

To bring together and extend slightly some of the thoughts expressed so far, the type of history of learner autonomy that I am envisaging as particularly ‘useful’ (for the purposes of information/diffusion and evaluation/action outlined above) will consist primarily of an account – or, rather, accounts – of learner autonomy oriented social practice in diverse contexts. This will both complement and serve as an alternative to the narratives previously offered by Gremmo and Riley (1995) and Benson (2001, 2007), which construe learner autonomy primarily as an *idea*, thus privileging theory over practice, and abstraction over local context. As Little (2007) has recently remarked, a symbiosis between practice and theory has tended to be a particularly important characteristic of the autonomy movement to date. However, this then needs to be reflected more clearly in narratives of the movement’s development.

## **Research aims and methods**

### **Initial aims**

On the basis of the above considerations, I propose a project whereby we work together to establish good records of practical work in the field of autonomy over the last thirty-five or so years. The body of accounts which emerges will serve as a useful counterbalance to the relatively ‘universalizing’, theory-centred overall narratives which are tending to dominate.

Aside from being potentially informative for those new to but interested in practices connected with learner autonomy, this will, I hope, be a good opportunity for those already involved to step back and see where, professionally, we’ve come from, and where, in relation to our individual contexts and professional involvements, as well as collaboratively, we may wish to go from here. Thus, it might ultimately constitute an experiment in the use of an evaluative historical perspective to influence present-day decision-making.

The first stage, though, is the development of descriptions. Accordingly, here are the initial aims of the project as originally conceived: 1) to gather sources for and begin to compile records of learner autonomy oriented practice in different contexts (with a particular initial focus on the Nordic Workshops and on practice as experienced by Nordic Workshop participants), 2) to begin to involve others in contributing to the project, and 3) to diffuse some findings at the Nordic Workshop in Copenhagen, 2006, with a view to 4) extending the project in a collaborative manner.

### **Initial steps and sources**

Here I list the initial steps I took and sources I consulted prior to the Copenhagen Workshop:

*Working with timelines*

1. I began in autumn 2005 by drawing up an overall time-line divided into years;
2. I filled in this initial time-line with details gathered from existing accounts (in particular, Gremmo and Riley 1995 and Benson, 2001), taking care to cross-check against primary sources;
3. I also filled in bibliographical details of all relevant book or report publications (confirmed with reference to originals in my own collection and to a thematic bibliography compiled by Huang and Benson (forthcoming));
4. I then added details of international conferences, and datable activities of associations I have myself been actively involved with such as the JALT Learner Development SIG, IATEFL Learner Independence SIG, and AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy;
5. When I started to add in details from existing autobiographical accounts (e.g. Dam n.d.) and began, in particular, to compile a comprehensive record of the Nordic Workshops from published reports, I realized that the wealth of detail to be gained from such sources would require breaking up the one, comprehensive time-line into separate files – later to be reassembled when appropriate. For the sake of convenience, then, I made a number of separate files for:
  - various international initiatives (the Nordic Workshops; the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy, etc.);
  - various local initiatives or centres of autonomy practice – i.e. countries like Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and ‘centres’ like CRAPEL. In these files for different countries or centres, I incorporated activities of national associations (e.g. HASALD in Hong Kong and the JALT Learner Development SIG in Japan), as well as most details from autobiographies and – subsequently – interviews and email questionnaire responses;
  - books, reports and journal special issues – in one file.

#### *Interviews*

6. Around this time (January 2006) I began to engage in face-to-face interviews with some leading participants in the autonomy movement (Henri Holec, Leni Dam, Turid Trebbi), filling in details in the time-lines as appropriate.

#### *Email questionnaire*

7. Shortly before the Nordic Workshop in Copenhagen (September 2006) I sent an email message to participants requesting their help (with a warning that the answers they sent back might be seen by others, so anything private should be highlighted). The questions to which I requested answers were as follows:
 

Qu. 1: When, how and why did you personally first get interested in developing 'learner autonomy'? What were your first practical steps?

Qu. 2: What phases (if any) did you go through as you developed your autonomy-related practice? What or who influenced you?
8. I added in details from replies to the relevant 'local' timelines;
9. By this stage the time-lines for Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Poland were particularly well-developed, and one week before the Workshop I sent these timelines to participants from those countries, asking them to add or change whatever they liked and as much as they liked before returning the file to me. I did something similar with the timeline for the Nordic Workshops themselves, gaining valuable feedback in advance of the Copenhagen Workshop from Gerd Gabrielsen, in particular.

## *Documents*

10. In the course of the above email correspondence I also asked participants to bring along to the Workshop any difficult-to-obtain documents / videos / texts to show and share. By this stage I had already begun to build up a good collection of such documents (e.g. early Nordic Workshop reports), and had used such documents to fill in time-line details, thanks to donations by Turid Trebbi, Leni Dam and June Miliander, among others.

## **Sharing findings and developing further aims**

At the Workshop itself I shared some example time-lines in the form of handouts and I invited comments on these and myself commented on them, as reported below ('Some preliminary findings'). Participants' response to the idea of further collaboration seemed generally positive, and I received many offers of documents and personal insight. I therefore decided to formalize the project on the last day of the Workshop as 'DArHoLALe' ('Developing an Archive and Histories of Learner Autonomy in Language Education'), subsequently shortened to 'DAHLA' (Developing an Archive and Histories of Learner Autonomy'). After the Workshop was over I received some further responses to the email questionnaire and I have continued to develop the timelines when time permits.

I have also been developing an overall project website, where revised project aims are listed ([www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla)). As can be seen there, in the section called 'Autonomy histories', I have uploaded some of the timelines created so far (in particular, those distributed at the Copenhagen Workshop and referred to under 'Some preliminary findings' below). In the other half of the web-site, called 'Autonomy archive', I have begun to upload some difficult-to-obtain documents, including (with the permission of Leni Dam and Turid Trebbi) the Nordic Workshop report (Trebbi 1990) which contains the much-cited 'Bergen definition' of learner autonomy. With permission, I have also published some of the primary source material for the project (interviews / email questionnaire responses) in issues 39–40 of *Independence* (the newsletter of the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG: see [www.learnerautonomy.org](http://www.learnerautonomy.org)), namely part of my interview with Leni Dam, and autobiographical pieces by Nordic Workshop participants Pili Uceira Diez and Jörgen Tholin.

## **Some preliminary findings**

### **Different layers of history**

In my talk in Copenhagen I reported on progress made up to that point – while stressing that any findings were provisional and in rough form, and that a lot of work remained to be done – by distributing various timelines in the form of handouts. Some of these provided a composite ('international') picture, while others were more localized in focus.

Comparison between the different 'layers' of history can be instructive, as I highlighted in my talk. Indeed, I structured the presentation of findings (and follow this structure below) by moving from an 'upper layer' of published writings – the bread and butter of a 'history of ideas' approach to narrating our history – to substructures of practice, in order to illustrate differences between what we can learn from different types of history and to exemplify the kind of practice-oriented history I think we could favour. For, reasons of space I cannot reproduce the timelines here, but have uploaded them to the web (URLs are below), and intend to update them there as new information comes in. On the basis of each timeline I made some comments and raised some

questions which I also reproduce below – not really as an attempt to ‘write’ history at this point, just in illustration of the types of observation that can be made on the basis of these kinds of data.

### **Books, reports and journal special issues**

[www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/books](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/books)

This list is currently biased towards texts in English and needs amendment to incorporate publications in other languages. This is clearly a significant limitation, but some relevant comments and questions may nevertheless include the following (note: bibliographical details are provided in the timeline itself at the above URL, not in the list of references at the end of the present paper):

- It might be worth stressing once more that publication in relation to learner autonomy has at least a 30-year history, i.e. the concept has been in at least some kind of ‘mainstream’ for a long period of time;
- Although the earliest publications were mainly French in origin (Holec 1979, Riley 1985), and/or associated with the Council of Europe (Holec 1979, Oskarsson 1980), there was an early strand of work in the field of ‘individualisation’ in the UK (Altman and James 1980, Geddes and Sturtridge 1988) which was later to join up with autonomy (Brookes and Grundy 1988). Indeed, the very first publication on the list was an Anglo-French collaboration (Harding-Esch 1977);
- However, an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ preference was, until quite recently, for titles including ‘Individualisation’, ‘Independence’, and/or words with ‘self-’, but not ‘autonomy’;
- The focus in books and reports up to the 1990s seems to have been mainly on adult learners and self-access learning. The 1987 Nordic Workshop report was the first publication to adopt a focus specifically on classroom practice – although this report was not widely disseminated;
- Holec 1988 appears to have been an important first step in bringing together reports of practice in diverse settings (in ‘internationalising’ autonomy?);
- From 1989 onwards, we see the entry of new ‘centres’ where publication is concerned – Trinity College Dublin, CILT, Hong Kong;
- From 1995 onwards there was a steep rise in number of books / reports published per year and the beginning of a coalescence around the term ‘autonomy’ in book and report titles (although still with a tentativeness about this in the world of ELT);
- Any centre to periphery movement in globalization of learner autonomy (Schmenk 2005) seems, from this timeline, to have had an unconventional aspect. It appears that the Council of Europe / non-native speaker language teachers in Continental Europe may have had far more of a role to play than, for example, the British Council or IATEFL. Hong Kong – more than the UK or USA – was an important centre for the dissemination of ideas from 1994 onwards (cf. Benson and Voller 1997, Benson 2001);
- 1997 witnessed ‘autonomy triumphant’, in the sense that all titles of books published in that year had ‘autonomy’ as a component.

### **International initiatives 1: A composite view**

[www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/international](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/international)

This list, providing composite details of international conferences, associations, projects etc. (each of which also has its own separate timeline), seems useful in revealing some of the context of production underlying autonomy-related publications, and is of interest in its own right as a record of one level of ‘autonomy practice’. This constitutes, then, a step away from conventional history of

ideas. Still, we are looking at phenomena at a relatively ‘high’ academic level, but now the role of inter-governmental organizations (UNESCO, Council of Europe) and international associations, including teacher associations, becomes more salient. This timeline is still far from complete, but here are some random musings:

- 1971: It will be interesting to investigate further to what extent CRAPEL was influenced by the Rüşchlikon meeting and the Modern Languages Project, and Council of Europe level thinking on lifelong learning generally;
- 1984: Here (at the Køge workshop) we can see the beginnings of a school classroom focus internationally;
- During the fifteen-year timespan 1971–1986 there is an impression of relatively little coordinated international activity (but this impression may change as further information is added);
- Until 1991 only the Council of Europe and the Nordic Workshops had emerged as important international networks concerned specifically with learner autonomy (the IATEFL Learner Independence SIG will also need to be considered);
- In 1993 or thereabouts a new centre of international activity emerges: the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy;
- The 1994 conference in Hong Kong may have been a defining moment in the ‘internationalization’ or ‘globalization’ of learner autonomy: it seems to have been the first relatively large scale conference specifically on learner autonomy anywhere. It brought together interested parties from Europe, Asia and Australia/New Zealand, and linked the ‘worlds’ of modern language education and ELT;
- 1997 onwards – The Autonomy 2000 conference in Bangkok and subsequent AILA conferences in Tokyo (1999) and Singapore (2002) helped to confirm the ‘rise of Asia’ in the world of autonomy; a spread to Spain is reflected in the 1997 Nordic workshop being held there; in 2003 a new Australia/New Zealand based association (ILA) was formed – but without ‘autonomy’ in the title. Still there was little apparent interest in learner autonomy in the USA, despite the 2005 AILA conference being held there.

### **International initiatives 2: An example (The Nordic Workshops)**

[www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/international/nordic](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/international/nordic)

The two timelines presented up to this point have represented a ‘global’ kind of history, with all contexts being viewed together in one mass. It seems important, however, to consider the dynamics and origins of different international initiatives on their own terms. The example of the Nordic Workshops on Developing Learner Autonomy might serve to illustrate this. This timeline is relatively well-developed, since I wanted to have it ready in time for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary Workshop in Copenhagen. It has benefited a lot from input by Gerd Gabrielsen and Leni Dam, and I have already incorporated my notes from Gerd’s opening remarks at the Copenhagen workshop. I just have two comments to make at this point:

- This timeline contains more detail than could be included in the composite ‘international initiatives’ timeline considered above. This detail shows that even though Leni Dam’s classroom work with ‘differentiated teaching and learning’ was not presented under the rubric of ‘autonomous learning’ before the 1984 workshop in Køge (which itself led to the organization of the first (1986) Nordic Workshop), the work itself had been going on for a decade and did *not* (as might otherwise appear) develop out of Council of Europe initiatives.

The direction of influence, then, is from practice to the theorizing of practice, rather than involving theory of autonomy ‘applied’ to practice;

- 1986: The stated aims of the first Nordic Workshop raise the issue of ‘Do we evaluate according to the original aims of some activity / association / initiative or according to unpredicted outcomes? Also, when does it become necessary to change the aims?’. In the Nordic Workshop case, the Bergen definition of learner autonomy (Trebbi 1990) and the production of videos of classroom practice for teacher education have been important within the overall autonomy movement but were initially unpredicted as outcomes.

### **‘Local’ initiatives 1: An example (Sweden)**

[www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/local/sweden](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/local/sweden)

The files with probably the ‘richest’ and most original data are likely to be those on local initiatives, including not only details of national conferences, associations, institutions and projects but also details from autobiographies and interviews. The example I provided at the Workshop was that of Sweden, since I had received very full comments in particular from three Swedish participants, Rigmor Eriksson, June Miliander and Jörgen Tholin. As can be seen from this example, there is much greater space in such files for individual voices, details of classroom and other practices, and indications of how ideas develop in, through and out of social practice in particular contexts:

- 1970s: It is interesting to note in Rigmor Eriksson’s account how her practice developed as a response to a practical teaching problem, not from any particular formal theory;
- 1982: ‘Differentiated teaching and learning’ and ‘individualisation’ appear to have been rubrics under which Scandinavian teachers were working at this time, not ‘autonomous learning’;
- 1984: Regarding the ‘turning point’ for Rigmor of attending Leni’s and Hanne Thomsen’s classes: Might such ‘turning points’ be common in teachers’ development towards pedagogy for autonomy?;
- 1986: Birgitta Risholm’s and Jörgen Tholin’s experience, as reported by Rigmor, indicates that as ideas spread new variations in practice occur;
- 2003: Lessons learned from the personal experience of someone like Rigmor Eriksson (as recorded here) could be very useful when shared with other practitioners;
- Mentions of various publications in Swedish in this timeline indicate how work in languages other than English may need generally to be taken much more into account.

### **‘Local’ initiatives 2: A composite view**

[www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/local](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/histories/local)

This was the most interesting timeline for me to construct, peruse and comment on, because it came closest to providing insights into what a composite history of local practices might look like in the field of autonomy. This file is a kind of index to what I have so far included in the separate ‘local initiatives’ files. Of course it is not very complete at all – there are many gaps to fill in, but with the inclusion of excerpts from autobiographical accounts, in particular, the timeline still enables us to gain quite a rich picture of relationships between theory and practice – and it makes clear how often theory can develop *out of* practice in a way which is masked in conventional histories of ideas:

- 1972: learner autonomy theory developed at CRAPEL as a response to a particular practical problem. Thus, when self-access systems began to be developed out of existing language



labs, the need arose for enhanced understanding of what it means to be able to self-direct one's own learning;

- 1973: Autonomy-oriented classroom practice can develop as a response to difficult circumstances. Leni Dam's practice developed originally as a way to cope with apparently unmotivated teenagers. This theme is repeated in other autobiographical accounts. Much discussion in the field, though, presents things the other way round, as a question of constraints hindering the promotion of autonomy rather than autonomy-oriented practice being a means for teachers and learners to *address* constraints;
- 1975: The influential role of particular mentors emerges from several accounts. Gerd Gabrielsen had a very central role in supporting Leni Dam's practice in the early years, just as Leni Dam was to be influential as a mentor for many others later on; the active roles played by women, generally, emerge more strongly than in the academic, 'history of ideas' types of account.
- 1993: New, autonomy-oriented ways of organizing teacher education and facilitating teacher development emerge in Portugal (University of Minho) and Japan (JALT Learner Development SIG), respectively.

## Conclusion

I started by proposing three main areas in which history-construction can make a contribution, and shall conclude this report with a summary of some achievements in these areas, and a final historical reflection.

### *Commemoration / Celebration*

This has been a timely project to embark on, as one way to commemorate and celebrate the twenty-year history of the Nordic Workshops. One outcome of the project so far is quite a detailed timeline representing the history of the Nordic Workshops

([www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/history/international/nordic](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/history/international/nordic)), and this is almost ready to be written up as a 'proper' account, which I hope to share at the 2008 Workshop in Bergen; a complete collection of Workshop reports has also been assembled, and one of these (Trebbi 1990) has been uploaded to the web ([www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/archive](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/archive)), with more to follow.

### *Information / Diffusion*

The timelines, as commented on above, show how practice has informed theory to a larger extent than has been acknowledged in previous narratives. I also believe they are likely to facilitate the identification and further diffusion of some radical innovations in practice which have not been adequately described in previous histories of autonomy 'as idea'. Some key innovations might reveal themselves to be, for example:

- New forms of learning situation (innovations in self-access provision, e.g. CRAPEL, Hong Kong);
- New forms of classroom practice (in particular, as developed in Scandinavia);
- New forms of teacher association and conference (e.g. JALT Learner Development SIG);
- New forms of teacher education (e.g. University of Minho, Portugal).

I wonder to what extent these choices match others' perceptions. I look forward also to receiving feedback on the extent to which the timelines themselves might already be useful tools for

informing others – e.g. student teachers – about autonomy-oriented practice, even though they are in rough form and many gaps remain to be filled in. Indeed, I request your continuing collaboration in filling in the gaps, so that we can work towards the production and diffusion of more informative accounts.

### *Evaluation / Action*

The timelines produced so far, as commented on above, already help us make some sense of the geographical spread in popularity of the term ‘learner autonomy’, indicating that this spread has been motivated and mediated in more complex ways than critics like Schmenk (2005) have tended to imply. The important role of the 1994 Hong Kong conference and subsequent Hong Kong based publications has been pointed out. We have seen how a tradition of work with ‘individualisation’, ‘learner independence’ and ‘learner training’ within ELT has increasingly adopted the label ‘learner autonomy’, and this co-option will also need to be taken into consideration as a factor in apparent ‘spread’ and possible ‘dilution’ of the concept. The Nordic Workshops and educators associated with them seem to have been particularly important for their role in promoting practices of *classroom*-based self-directed learning. Finally, I have raised the question, without presuming to answer it, as to whether the intentions with which the Nordic Workshops were originally set up are still adequate or need to be revised in the light of subsequent developments.

In presenting the findings above, I have concentrated on providing some preliminary *description* as a potential basis for evaluation by others, but a few speculative comments on implications of the recent rise to prominence of autonomy might be in order, as a way to bring this piece to a close.

On the one hand, it would be perverse to view the recent general rise in interest in learner autonomy as a ‘bad thing’, especially considering the involvement of some leading autonomy advocates in large-scale innovations and the way – if we have been ‘promoting’ learner autonomy at all – we are all implicated. Gerd Gabrielsen, in her opening remarks at the 2006 Copenhagen Workshop, took a positive view of the matter, emphasizing the achievements of those associated with the Nordic Workshops in showing how, in practice, school pupils as much as the adult learners referred to by Holec can learn in a self-directed way, with no detriment to achievement and with increased benefit for ‘weak’ learners.

Nevertheless, the rise to prominence of autonomy as an ‘idea’ should not blind us to the fact that there has not been as widespread a shift towards autonomy-oriented practice as might seem desirable. Leni Dam, in my interview with her (Dam interview, 2006) expressed the view that ‘Differentiated learning is still a town in Siberia’ for most teachers in Denmark, while Turid Trebbi spoke at the Copenhagen workshop of it being ‘an enormous challenge to shift the weight of centuries’, characterizing engagement in pedagogy for autonomy in a school context as a ‘fundamental rupture’ with tradition.

Perhaps this is partly a matter of perspective – of not knowing whether to focus on achievements (seeing the bottle as ‘half full’) or on remaining challenges (the bottle as ‘half empty’), and of our being too close to the ground still to make an overall, global assessment. It may be instructive, then, to offer the following historical parallel in conclusion. The last time that such a ‘fundamental rupture’ was attempted in modern language education in Europe seems to have been during what came to be known as the ‘Reform Movement’ of the late 19th century (Howatt and Smith 2002; Howatt with Widdowson 2004). Similarly to what I have been calling here (in conscious imitation) the ‘autonomy movement’, the Reform Movement was international – pan-European – in scope, and brought together, initially, quite a small number of committed reformers from different countries: established academics like Johan Storm in Norway and Henry Sweet in England, school teachers who were subsequently to become well-known for their academic and

teacher education work like Wilhelm Viëtor (Germany), Paul Passy (France), Otto Jespersen (Denmark) and Johan Lundell (Sweden), and innovative practitioners like Hermann Klinghardt (Germany), August Western (Norway) and William Widgery (England) (the autonomy movement has rather similarly involved good cooperation among academics, teacher educators and schoolteachers!). Together with Lundell and Western, Jespersen founded a small association in 1886 (coincidentally, exactly 100 years before the first Nordic Workshop!) – the Quousque Tandem Society – which brought together the Scandinavian reformers, uniting them around a small set of shared principles in opposition to the dead hand of grammar-translation in schools: (1) the use of ordinary everyday spoken language presented through the medium of phonetically transcribed texts; (2) the use of connected foreign language texts in the classroom, not disconnected sentences; (3) the inductive teaching of grammar (after the intensive study of the texts, not before); and (4) the replacement of translation exercises by re-tells, free composition and extended reading. These practices came together with others to form what was being called by the turn of the century ‘The Direct Method’. Some – particularly in the UK and the USA, it seems – misinterpreted this, due to lack of information or *misinformation*, as an idea meaning 100% use of the target language in the classroom, and this enabled them to reject reform outright. Indeed, by the end of the 1900s there was much talk all over Europe of ‘compromise’, ‘dilution’ and ‘failure’ or ‘inappropriateness’ of the Reform project (for example, in the sense that phonetically transcribed texts were not judged practicable by teachers, or that some translation was still retained). From a less purist point of view, however, what had happened by then had been a process of wide spread of the movement, and widespread sifting, selective appropriation and adaptation of Direct Method practices by teachers in many areas of Europe. Indeed, the Reformers can be seen to have ultimately succeeded to the extent that most progressive language *teaching* methodology to the present day has been constructed within the spoken language focused, anti-translation paradigm originally established by them under the banner ‘Language teaching must start afresh!’. Although it is too early to tell, maybe something of the same kind of appropriation and adaptation process is happening and will continue to occur as a new paradigm takes hold: that of self-directed *learning* as promoted by the pioneers of autonomy, involving also – probably – various forms of such learning not approved of or predicted by them at all.

The Autonomy Movement is by no means over, but it seems to have entered a new phase, one of wider diffusion. If we can stay aware of its history ‘as it happens’, we may be able to see better where it is going, where we want it to go, and what we can or cannot do to guide it there.

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