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"On preparing adults for autonomy : problems and techniques".

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This paper discusses some of the problems involved in encouraging autonomous learning strategies and describes the ways in which we have tried to deal with them. Its aim, therefore, is to be practical, even pragmatic, and no attempt is made to survey the literature or to delve into the theoretical aspects of the matter. For this reason, detailed references will be made to case histories, including a number of failures. The risk of such an approach is trivialisation, of being over-specific, so that the points made lack any pedagogical context, the background and structure, within which the experience described below has been acquired. In particular, it is important to indicate the types of learner we are dealing with; in any pedagogical situation the characteristics of the learner are of great importance, but in an autonomous strategy those characteristics actually define the situation.

I - Background

Under the "Loi de Formation Permanente" (1971), French employers are obliged by law to spend the equivalent of 1% of their payroll on the further education of their employees. Motivation to do so is provided in the form of an extra tax which is imposed if this money is not in fact used for education of some kind. The money can be spent with any of the large number of institutions recognised for the purpose: some are specially established commercial bodies, others are the "extra-mural departments" of already existing institutions. The C.R.A.P.E.L. falls into this second category.

When an employer considers sending his staff to the C.R.A.P.E.L., he has three major options available:

(i) Autonomous learning schemes (such as the one described by G. Henner-Stanchina pp. 30 & ff). Learners go directly into the scheme without following any kind of traditional course. (See STANCHINA 1976).

(ii) On-site courses. If practical considerations justify it, a course may be set up on the firm's premises. Such courses usually involve some kind of English for Special Purposes (see DUDA et al. 1975) and may or may not include an autonomous learning component. The C.R.A.P.E.L. handles between six and ten such contracts annually for hospitals, offices, factories, research centres, and so on.

(iii) Evening Courses. C.R.A.P.E.L. evening courses take place in the University itself and according to the classic formula - four hours per week in a classroom, with a group and a teacher. The only option is at 'Beginner' level, where the learner chooses between written and oral English. The courses deal with general English and over the past four years, numbers have varied between 100 and 200.

II - Learners

This section will describe briefly the types of learners following the courses available under options (ii) and (iii) above, i.e., On-site courses and Evening courses.

There is a clear tendency for on-site courses to provide for relatively lower-status workers: the boss likes to keep an eye on them (-and on us!). Managers and executives on the other hand, can be trusted to attend evening classes, though many firms still insist on a certificate of attendance. Obviously, neither system is particularly conducive to autonomy: nor is it by any means exaggerated to say that at least part of the opposition to autonomous learning schemes is based on class prejudice. For example, the Personnel Officer of a large building concern made it quite clear to us that whilst he would consider an autonomous learning project for his "cadres", it was out of the question for his lower-paid workers; he had no hesitation in rationalising his objections on political grounds - and who is to say he is wrong?[1] In

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(1) In those cases where the C.R.A.P.E.L.'s recommendation of an autonomous scheme is rejected, our policy is not to provide a traditional course instead. But this is in no sense due to political attitudes; rather we feel it necessary to stand by our pedagogical conviction that in some cases an autonomous learning scheme provides the best answer to a problem and we refuse to make a professional compromise which we believe could only be to the detriment of the learners.

his introductory paper (see pp. 5 and 6) John Trim voices a similar concern when he asks how one stops autonomy becoming anarchy. But why _should_ we stop it? Historically the provision of learning has always been attached to institutions for strictly _non-pedagogical_ reasons, such as the keeping of power, control and influence, and the supporting of social hierarchies. Pedagogically, there is no principled objection to an autonomous or "grass roots" approach. (Space does not permit me to enlarge on this crucial problem, but see PIRSIG 1974).

By and large, our evening class students (and a number of the on-site students) are middle-class professionals: doctors, teachers, secretaries, travel agents, pharmacists, university lecturers and research workers, business executives, engineers, etc. These are busy people, but they are very often highly motivated, since they need English for professional reasons. Of course, some of the most powerful arguments in favour of autonomous schemes do not in fact apply to these learners since they _can_ follow regular classes at set places and times. But many other arguments remain valid: perhaps one of the less obvious is that, since the C.R.A.P.E.L. is not a commercial language school, we do not want our courses to become habit-forming, i.e., we do not want our learners to become course-addicts depending on an institution for their regular "fix" of English. Anyone involved in adult education is familiar with such learners: unfortunately, teachers tend to regard their loyal attendance year after year as ego-boosting evidence of a satisfied customer rather than as a demonstration of expensive inefficiency.

Let us consider briefly two cases of "addiction". First, Mme. G. This lady is a highly successful business woman, a qualified chemical engineer specialising in food-technology. To all appearances, she is dynamic, determined and directive: yet she has just registered for what we know to be her fifteenth consecutive year of English classes (though she joined the C.R.A.P.E.L.'s courses only recently). Mme. G's English is very advanced: the company she works for is American-owned and she uses her English daily, so she hardly needs to do even the kind of maintenance work for which

autonomous study is so often and rightly recommended. It is quite ludicrous for her firm to continue paying good money for instruction which she does not need; whatever it is that keeps her attending classes year in, year out, it is certainly not a linguistic or pedagogical need.

The second, similar, case is that of Mme. W., a lady in her seventies, whose age has actually become a hindrance to learning a language. She spent two years at 'Beginner' level, but even so when she moved on to an 'Elementary' group, she found it impossibly difficult. She found the other learners "rushed things all the time", moreover she objected strongly to being asked questions, or being required to repeat phrases which she did not have written down in front of her, indeed she insisted on writing her own replies, not speaking them. She began to come regularly to the course-organiser with a long list of complaints: everything possible was done to satisfy her, including the provision of individual classes. As this measure still failed to please her she was allowed to cancel her registration, which we reimbursed in full. That was in the middle of last year: two months ago, she re-registered for this year's course.

What is it that pushes Mme. G. and Mme. W - and many others like them - to register time and again for courses from which they get no real benefit? What brings about this psychological dependence on a course? There is a clear and profound parallel between the teacher/learner relationship and the psychoanalyst/patient relationship. As Laing (1971) says:

> "Some psychotics look upon psychoanalysis as a relatively safe place to tell someone what they really think. They are prepared to play at being a patient and even to keep up the charade by paying the analyst, provided that he does not cure them. They are even prepared to pretend to be cured if it will look bad for him if he is having a run of people who do not seem to be getting better - not an unreasonable contract".

If we substitute "learner" and "lesson" for "psychotic" and "psychoanalysis" in this passage, there are a number of unnerving parallels. Mmes. G. and W. may be extreme cases, but they are the extremes of a very common tendency, and one which most courses, institutions and teachers actively encourage. Some

do so for the relatively honest reason of keeping the money coming in: others do so for murkier reasons connected with the support of the teacher's ego - hence the violence of some teachers' reactions to the very idea of autonomy which they take, quite literally, as a personal attack.

It is not adequate to say that Mme. G. or Mme. M. continues to re-register for courses because of "social" or "affective" needs; this is perfectly true, of course, but it is also only a description of the problem - it is not a solution. Nor is it much good pointing out that such needs might be better met by joining a volley-ball team or taking up chess: the problem is to get them see this, and there is no hope of making autonomous people whose major need and motivation is to participate in a course or group activity of the traditional kind.

This brings us to a point made in several other papers, that autonomy is closely lined with needs and motivation - though much work still remains to be done on the nature of those links. However, for the moment, let us limit ourselves to two ancillary observations. First, we need to distinguish carefully between the contribution made to successful autonomy by needs and motivation on the one hand and by aptitude for language learning on the other. This is a vexed question, of course, as we have no accepted way of measuring or even describing aptitudes for language-learning (but see BRUGMAN, DIETRICH, FRIGGIERI & STOCH 1976).

Secondly, strength of motivation is not always directly related to specificity of motivation. This admittedly impressionistic observation is based on the fact that a very few of our most hard-working and successful learners have no objectively defineable motivation. Typical examples of this "parthenogenetic motivation" are Mr. P. and Mr. M., who are both rising young executives. They work very hard at English, as indeed they do at everything else. They feel the need to be successful and to have the teacher's approval. Nonetheless, detailed investigation failed to reveal the slightest trace of an objective need for English: they never used it at work and they had no plans, personal or professional, for any future use. Indeed it seemed to their

teacher that they had little interest in English: yet they both worked hard and improved considerably. Obviously, they had failed to read the right studies of motivation.

People who fall into this category will often explain their motivation in terms of "a challenge". This is usually a hang-over from their schooldays, which has great psychological reality for the individual concerned, but little objective measurability for the researcher. For example, both Mlle X. and Mme. H. independently gave the same reason for learning English: that they had been traumatised by their schoolday attempts to learn German and now want to reassure themselves that they cannot really be <u>that</u> stupid. Significantly, these are the only people we have ever had who requested formal examinations.

III - <u>Preparation for autonomy</u>

With a few exceptions, then, the public under discussion consists of intelligent, motivated learners with specific needs. What can be done to help such people become linguistically and pedagogically independant, to prevent them become "addicts"? Originally (see e.g., RILEY 1974) it was thought that learners arriving as beginners would pass through three years of courses. The content and progression of these courses includes both systematic and non-systematic phases and a methodological component, aimed at introducing materials, ideas and techniques for autonomous work which becomes increasingly important as the course continues, advanced students, for example, only having half the number of classroom hours per week that the beginners have. However, although this system is operating along the lines described, a number of factors combine to make it difficult to evaluate what degree of success it is having. These include:

(i) The fact that relatively few learners join us as linguistic virgins and then proceed modestly upwards year by year: many arrive already knowing a certain amount of English, of course and many only follow the course for one or two years.

Professor J. can be cited as an example of a model learner. A teacher

of solid-state physics he registered as a complete beginner: after three years he had reached an advanced level. He then decided that he no longer felt he needed classes either to keep up his English or to answer his specialised needs. For instance, at one time he needed to comment in English on a series of slides as part of a lecture: so he recorded a native speaker of English doing just that at a conference he attended, later carrying out an analysis of the recording in terms of acts and phrases which he knew would be useful to him. All this was done without any reference to a teacher or institution, although similar ideas and techniques had been suggested to him during the course which he had followed.

(ii) The fact that when a learner stops attending a course, he may do so for any one of a vast number of reasons. He may be prevented from coming by personal or professional obligations. He may find the course a waste of time, or he may decide that he has already got what he needed out of it. Or, of course, he may simply have become fully autonomous, realising that with the methodological training he had received he no longer needed to attend the course. Without large-scale follow-up surveys, it is impossible to give statistics for these various categories.

(iii) The increasing realisation that pedagogical autonomy is not linked to level of attainment. A learner may reach an advanced level in terms of classroom performance and yet not be advanced at all as far as independance is concerned, and of course the opposite holds good. Compare, for example, the case of Mme. G. (above) with that of Mr. D., a young man who is learning to fly as part of his National Service and who wants to become a commercial airline pilot after. Although of only "intermediate" level, he has taken enthusiastically to the idea of making his own in-flight recordings, which he uses as study-material.

(iv) Once the scheme described by C. Hanner-Stanchina (pp. 38 & ff), was established, it became possible for learners to study autonomously without following any kind of course. Moreover, a small number of learners who had previously been following the courses changed over to the autonomy scheme when it became available.

Definition of the learners' needs

In order to help learners to become independant, their needs must be defined, since only then can relevant techniques and materials be chosen. It is essential that this process of definition should be understood and carried out by the learner as well as the teacher; this takes place in several stages, any of which may be repeated several times:

(i) An in-depth interview on arrival

(ii) A discussion with the teacher and the group

(iii) The study of authentic materials, usually provided by the learner himself.

During this time, the learner is encouraged to think about his own attitudes to language and to learning, his priorities in terms of language skills, the situations in which he wishes to use his English etc., the aim being to provide him with criteria for directing and ordering his own study outside class hours. Although needs must be defined for and by the individual, it is by no means a waste of time to do this in the group. Occasionally there may be individuals having the same needs of course: or, through their questions and comments, the group may help an individual member to define his needs more clearly: they may also make suggestions or offer help of different kinds. Again, at a very basic level, this kind of group discussion demonstrates clearly the practical impossibility of dealing with a wide variety of specialised needs within the same course. A typical group last year included the following learners:

Mr. C., a stock-market analyst and finance manager of a large firm

Mme A., a pharmacist

M. M., a metal-wire salesman

M. B., a lecturer in sociology

Mme. D., a secretary in a travel agency

M. J., a lawyer specialising in international law

These people all brought examples of their authentic materials to the class on the same day: it took no prompting from the teacher for them to reach the

conclusion that, somehow, they would have to deal with their specialised needs outside the class.

Psychological preparation for autonomy

In preparing adults for autonomy it is useful to distinguish between psychological and methodological preparation. It should be clearly borne in mind, however, that these are twin concepts, rather like the literary critic's "Telling" and "Showing". If "Telling" seems to indicate a more cognitive approach, that would certainly be fair comment on the way the idea of autonomy is presented on C.R.A.P.E.L. courses. The logical arguments favouring autonomy are discussed - the freedom of time and place, ability to work at the individual learner's pace and rhythm, the impossibility of dealing with specialised interests in a general course, the failure of previous attempts at language, the fact that the very presence of a teacher falsifies the discourse networks, that the teacher can't learn it for you.... Such an approach is obviously not always possible, but is well-adapted to the learners in question.

Persuading learners that autonomy is feasible, that they are capable of learning something without attending classes and without the presence of a teacher is rarely easy, since it goes against the whole of their learning experience, especially as far as languages are concerned. Tact is at a premium here, since learners are always apt to put the very lowest of interpretations on the teacher's motives. "You just want to get rid of us, you don't want to see us any more", said Mme. P. "Don't you like our classes?" is common. Mme. P's husband, Professor of Pediatrics asked mournfully, "Don't you like us"?

Many learners refuse to face up to the fact that they are acting on the ridiculous assumption that merely attending a course, their physical presence in a classroom with a teacher, is enough to guarantee the acquisition of the language, as if this alone completely absolved them from any further pedagogical responsibility whatsoever.

Such reactions are not unusual, nor are they extreme: only friendly

discussion and demonstration can help, and it needs to be done discreetly. The slightest whiff of propaganda or of ideology and most learners of this type will reject the idea of autonomy out of hand. Yet it is difficult for the teacher/helper not to seem parti pris: partly because he too is a human being with his own beliefs and enthusiasms, partly because autonomy invariably involves a challenge to social roles. What John Roberts (1976) has called "Revolutionary Epistemics" are revolutionary, and the attitudes of the learner, or of the Personnel Officer, measured in terms such as paternalism, authoritarianism, directivity and their opposites, are crucial.

The fundamental importance of attitude can be illustrated by contrasting two courses, one for workers in a bottle factory[2], the other in a Government Research Centre. In the first case, with the active co-operation of the Personnel Officer, a course involving a considerable amount of autonomous work was run successfully. In the second case, however, the learners - all of whom possess high academic qualifications - have refused every attempt to introduce the idea of autonomous work. It is not that autonomy has failed in their case: they are aggressively opposed to the whole concept and refuse even to try it. Indeed, even discussing it proves difficult. Why this should be so is not easy to say. It is true that these people are not used to taking responsibility in their work, that they are passive in their attitude to new information, you provide it, they process it. Very often they are intellectually fatigued by the nature of their own work; naturally enough, they would like their learning of English made easier, and this they see as being the teacher's main job. But, above all, they are shocked by the teacher's rejection of the role of "expert": in discussion they have characterised this heatedly as laziness, lack of interest or of professional responsibility and inefficiency: they are all experts themselves and recognise the thin edge of a wedge when they see one. Whatever the reasons, though, these two examples

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(2) for a more detailed description of this experiment see

provide a clear demonstration that a positive attitude towards autonomy does not seem to be linked with cultural or intellectual level of attainment.

Methodological preparation for autonomy

"Showing" as opposed to "Telling". Learners who are not convinced by abstract arguments in favour of autonomy may nonetheless soon see the point and concrete value of a particular activity. M. R., for example, pestered his teacher with requests to translate letters, refusing even to try writing them in English himself. The teacher asked M. R. to bring his English correspondence file to the class, and together they made a functional analysis of the letters, in terms of "references to earlier correspondence", "apologies for delay in replying", "requesting an appointment", etc. This functional analysis could then be used as the basis of a collage. This collage technique is, we find, effective in relatively limited situations, but it is not restricted to the written form. Professor P. prepared much of his address to a highly specialised congress by making authentic recordings, using them to prepare a collage. Where practicable, this technique is immediately rewarding and we find that little further argument is necessary.

Any group-teaching activity in class can be a valuable preparation for autonomy, although the effectiveness of the different activities will vary greatly. This is because group teaching includes two essential features:

(i) it allows the teacher to withdraw from the class, possibly even from the classroom;

(ii) it shows the learners that they can learn from and with one another. Group-teaching activities can include work with a tape-recorder, drills, games and simulations: it is best, though, to start with an extremely simple exercise e.g., with an intermediate group the teacher might project a certain number of slides, asking the learners to make, say, three statements about each picture. The learners split up into groups of two and three, and the teacher leaves them to get on with it. Of course, when finally produced, the three statements represent only a fraction of the work which has been done: the intermediate and corrected versions also contribute to the learning process -

and they have been rejected by the learners themselves. Mlles D. and C., colleagues in a school for the deaf and dumb, have adopted this technique, including other simple activities, such as pairs-practice, outside the classroom and state that they themselves have been surprised by its effectiveness.

This kind of group work is an example of a general rule: any activity which can be done inside a classroom with a teacher, can be done outside without one. Many teachers find this claim shocking and unacceptable, but experience shows that small groups of adults - or individuals - are quite capable of taking over the teaching role: to a very large extent, this means simply taking responsibility for management tasks such as deciding when and where to meet, what materials to study, how long to work for, what techniques to employ etc. Every week in class we try to involve the students in at least one exercise or activity without the teacher, as part of their methodological training for autonomy: as we have seen, it is not possible to force autonomy on people who do not desire it, so many learners will continue to follow courses of various kinds. But at least they will have made a choice to do so, the first and possibly the most important step in any instructional process.

The teacher, then, tries to set in motion activities from which he can subsequently withdraw. But he also tries to hand over the teacher's role, the pedagogical responsibility, to the learners themselves. He may of course choose to do this gradually, beginning with seemingly trivial details: the look of sheer terror on the face of a learner who has just been asked to operate the group's tape-recorder for the first time is not simply the result of a phobia about machines. If it is a trivial task, though, he is doing it and not the teacher; from there, it is a shorter step to doing it without the teacher.

Indeed, the most valuable single technique which can be introduced to learners - and one of the simplest, after all, is the use of the tape-recorder. The tape-recorder not only replaces the teacher as a model, but can also replace him as stimulus: and so in our evening classes all learners, whether beginners or advanced, are shown how to do the various types of exercise - repetition,

transformation, situation, etc., - as well as listening comprehension work. It is true that the first step is taken by the teacher, who distributes cassettes for home-study; but once the learner has accepted the idea of working at home on a cassette chosen by the teacher, it is again a shorter step to working on a cassette he has chosen himself.

If the learner teetering on the edge of autonomy cannot find suitable materials, though, he may well easily become discouraged. This is where the concept of the "Sound Library" fits into autonomous learning schemes. (RILEY & ZOPPIS 1976). The existence of a wide selection of materials, including both didactic and authentic recordings, is both reassuring and useful to the learner.

It is not possible to go into every type of activity in detail: below is a brief list of some of the techniques used:

(i) Games in which the teacher does not participate and which he does not direct. e.g. One learner secretely puts a number of geometric shapes on a table and covers them; his "opponent" tries to reproduce an identical arrangement by asking questions.

(ii) Group discussions without the teacher, which may or may not be recorded (see KEANE K., 1976, for an interesting discussion).

(iii) Blot-outs: using the cloze technique, a student can produce his own drills, tests and exercises and can concentrate on those aspects of the language which he finds most difficult. It is helpful if two copies can be made of a newspaper article; on one, all the prepositions, say, are blotted out. The learner tries to find them, using the second copy to check his performance.

(iv) Simulations: e.g., a learner who knows he will have to take a visitor sight-seeing might simply practice with another learner first.

(v) Home-made drills: a vast number of drills can be constructed mechanically e.g., a learner might turn every sentence in a newspaper article into the negative or interrogative.

(vi) Description exercises: the learner takes a cartoon or a picture from a magazine and tries to describe it. If he is working with another learner, there might be questions, discussion etc.

(vii) Peer-matching and task-matching: learners are introduced to people at the same level, or having the same problems as themselves.

(viii) Introduction to native speakers: groups of non-teacher native speakers are invited into the classroom. Learners are shown that they do not have to wait until they reach some abstract level of perfection before they can communicate in English and that they can benefit from such encounters.

Finally, very brief reference must be made to two important problem areas:

1. Problems with the teachers.

The average teacher rejects the idea of autonomy as an attack on his status and livelihood. Even teachers who are intellectually convinced of the value of autonomous learning find that they are not equipped psychologically or methodologically. Here, as in so many other matters, teacher-training is crucial, and so long as we allow the teacher's role to be considered as model, source of information, enforcer of a difficult and unpleasant task and solely responsible for all pedagogical decisions, the introduction of autonomous learning schemes will remain an uphill task.

2. Problems with institutions.

A teacher's work may be of poor quality or ineffective, but no matter, he is paid for physical presence in a classroom. In an autonomous learning

scheme, the teacher/helper may do vast amounts of work and the learners may achieve good results: nonetheless, the institution may be unwilling or unable to recognise this as "work" or as "teaching". It is by no means rare for the administration of an institution to reject an autonomous learning scheme simply because it cannot be assimilated by the accounts department. The suspicions that the learners are doing the teacher's work, and that learning can only occur in a classroom, are manifestations of ingrained prejudices that will remain with us for a long time.

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