

# Pedagogy of autonomy as a rescue strategy

Richard Smith

University of Warwick, UK

# Part I - Preliminaries

The current 'state of autonomy':

- buzzword
- popular academic research topic
- a 'slippery concept'
- an abstract ideal (unrealizable in practice?)
- pioneers' despair

# Some necessary definitions

Autonomy is . . . the ability to take charge of one's own learning. . . . To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.:

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition . . .  
(rhythm, time, place etc.)
- evaluating what has been acquired

(Holec 1979)



Learner autonomy is characterised by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person.

(Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander and Trebbi 1990)



- Two misconceptions about learner autonomy
  - that it is equivalent to self-instruction
  - that promoting it makes the teacher redundant

(cf. Little 1991)

Autonomy doesn't make the teacher  
redundant – in fact the teacher's role is  
crucial

Collaboration is an important aspect –  
autonomy isn't equivalent to 'individualism'

Increasingly, autonomy has been associated with classrooms.

In a pedagogy for autonomy, teachers:

- manage the classroom so that students' autonomy is *engaged* and/or
- scaffold the *development* of autonomy

(cf. Smith 2008a)

# Learner autonomy in your experience

- What signs of autonomy have you seen in (any of) your students (recently)?
- What positive teaching experiences have you had where you felt that students' autonomy was engaged?
- How could you generate further successful experiences of the same or a similar kind?

# Part II – Two cases

Is it really true that students ‘do not have’ autonomy?

- A ‘weak version’ of pedagogy for autonomy:  
E.g. top-down strategy training, assuming that students ‘lack autonomy’
- A strong version’ of pedagogy for autonomy:  
Recognizing, engaging with, exercising and developing students’ existing autonomy

(Smith 2003)

# My case

## English teaching in Japan (1994-1999)

- Rapport with + learning about/from students as a basis for the first steps ('trust')
- Starting with discussion of out-of-class learning
- Increasing focus on classroom decision-making by students ('engaging with' autonomy)
- Later, more emphasis also on encouraging reflection on learning ('developing' autonomy)

(Smith 2003)

<i>In the originally designated classroom:</i>	
<b>Topic discussion</b> (4) (they'll discuss 'living alone')	<b>Free conversation</b> (5) (they'll talk about whatever comes into their heads)
<b>Reading/discussion</b> (7) (they copied articles from <i>Newsweek</i> last week, and will discuss them today)	<b>Business English</b> (5) (they'll improvise a sales negotiation)
<i>In the empty classroom next door:</i>	
<b>Debate/discussion</b> (3) (they'll debate the proposition 'Smoking should be banned')	<b>Watch TV drama</b> (7) (they'll help each other to understand an audio-recording one of them made of the video they watched together last week)
<i>In an 'AV' room, some distance away:</i> <b>Movies</b> (9) (they'll continue to watch the movie <i>Seven</i> and then will discuss it)	<i>In my office (where there is a VTR):</i> <b>TV drama (with skit)</b> (9) (they'll share new words and phrases they noted down individually while watching last week, and will write an original skit using these words and phrases).
<i>In the library, or wherever else they want to work (they've arranged to see me at the end of the lesson):</i> <b>Individual writing activities</b> (4)	

Figure 7.2 A 'snapshot' of student-directed classroom activities

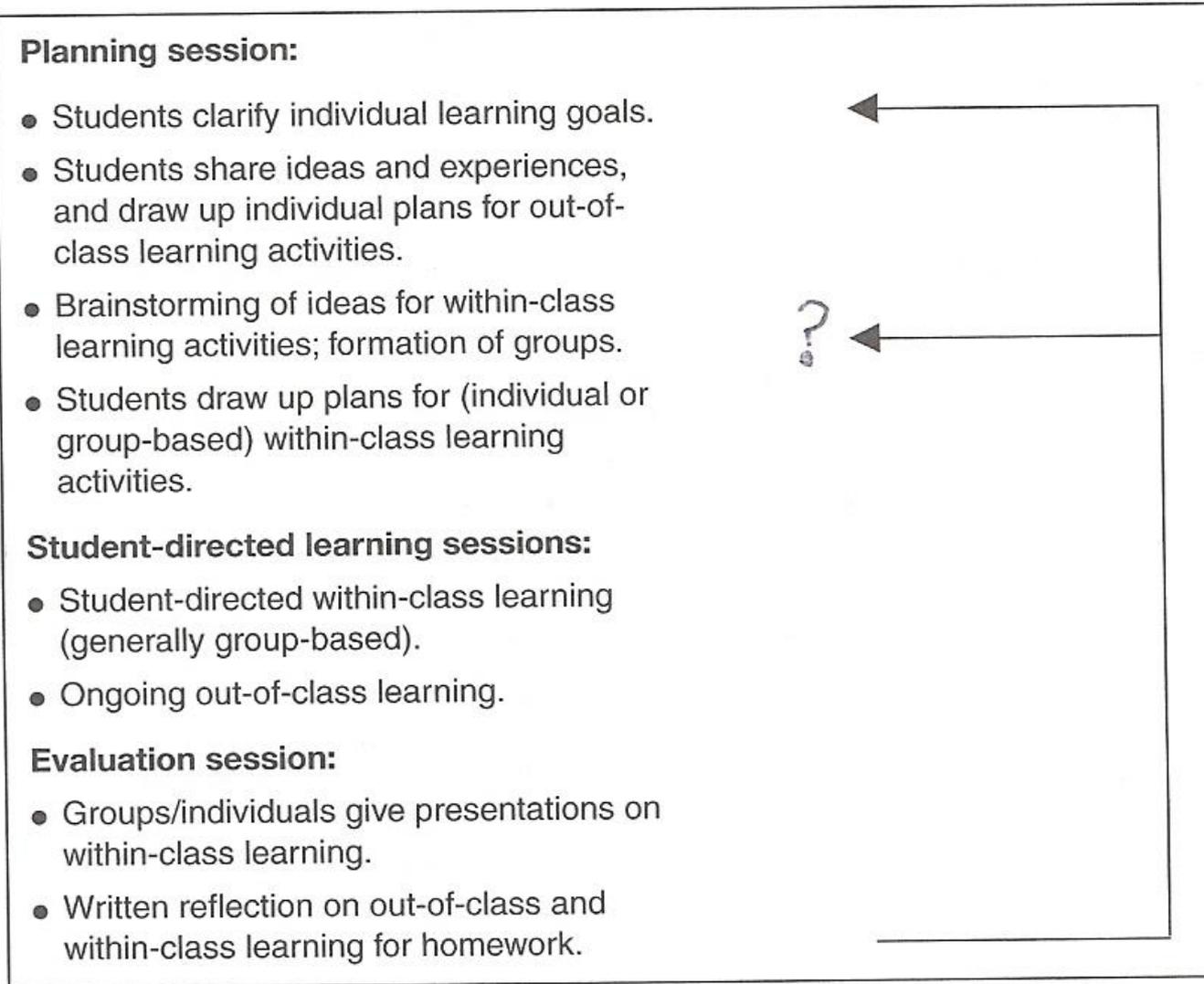


Figure 7.3 A 'student-directed learning cycle'

student feedback and my own developing sense of possibilities and

# Leni Dam's case

- (Dam 1995)

# Engaging with and developing learner autonomy

Teacher  
directed

Learner  
directed

- Planning what to do / which activities to do
- Carrying out the plans / the activities
- Evaluating the outcome of the activities
- Deciding on homework

← Dialogue / Negotiation →

# A possible plan of teaching and learning

1. Teacher-initiated and teacher-directed activities
2. Learner-directed activities
3. 'Together' - shared, whole-group activities

# Learner-directed and -initiated activities (in pairs or groups):

- Share homework
- Work with activities / projects according to plan
- Decide on homework
- Individual and shared evaluation of work

# Reflecting on the two cases

Some benefits for the teacher:

Teaching 'with', not 'at' students

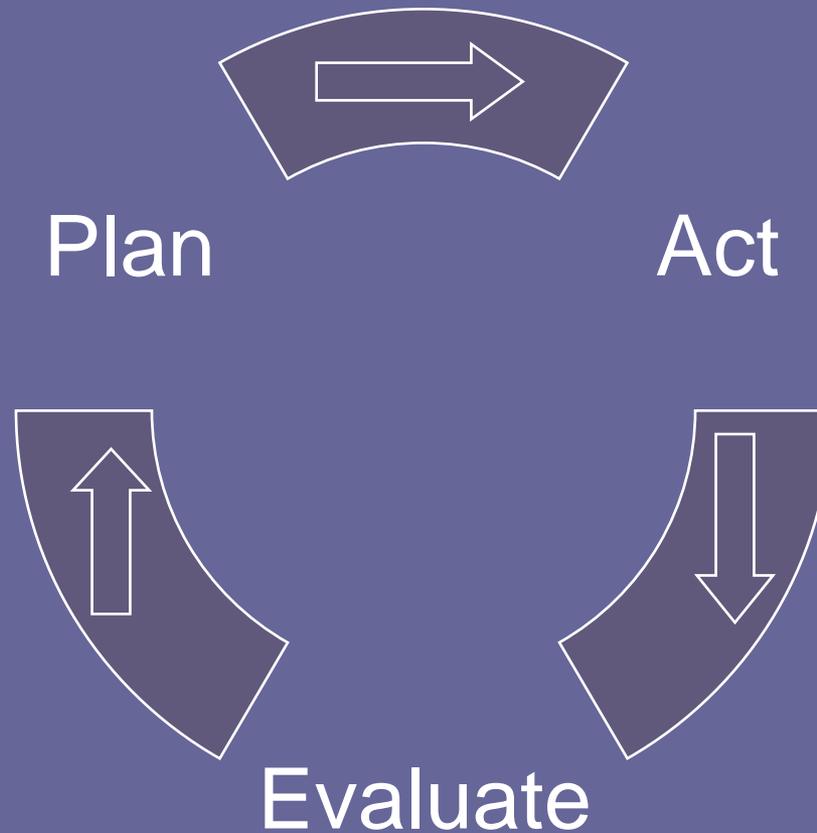
[T]eachers become more reflective as learners become more autonomous and vice versa

(Vieira 1997)

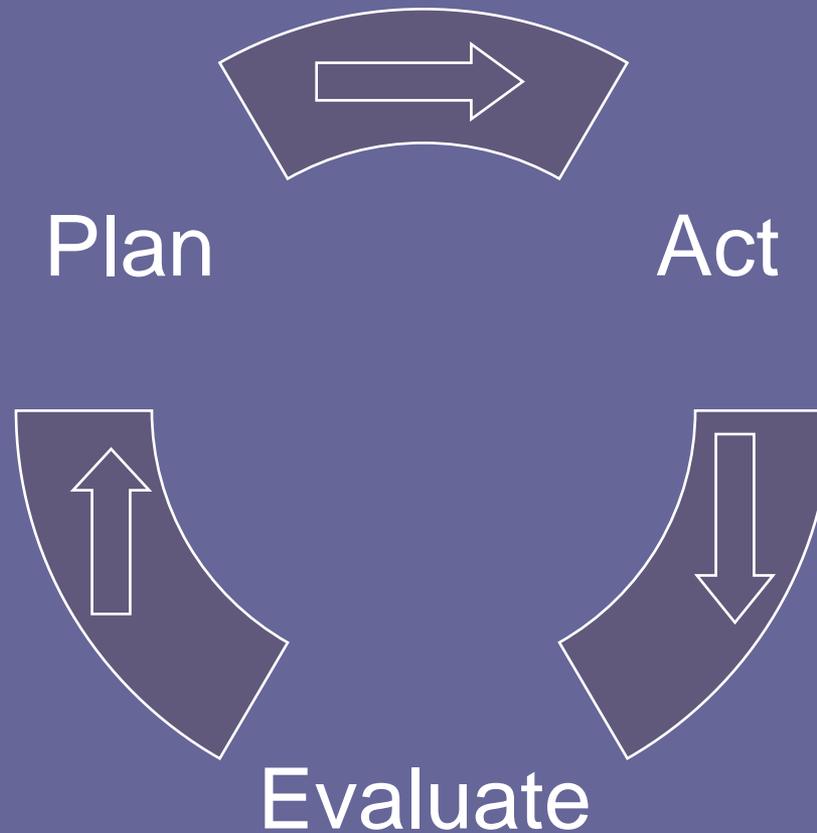
- ‘Through dialogue the ‘teacher-of-the-students’ and the ‘students-of-the-teacher’ cease to exist and a new term emerges: ‘teacher-student with students-teachers’. The teacher is no longer merely ‘the-one-who-teaches’, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

(Freire 1970)

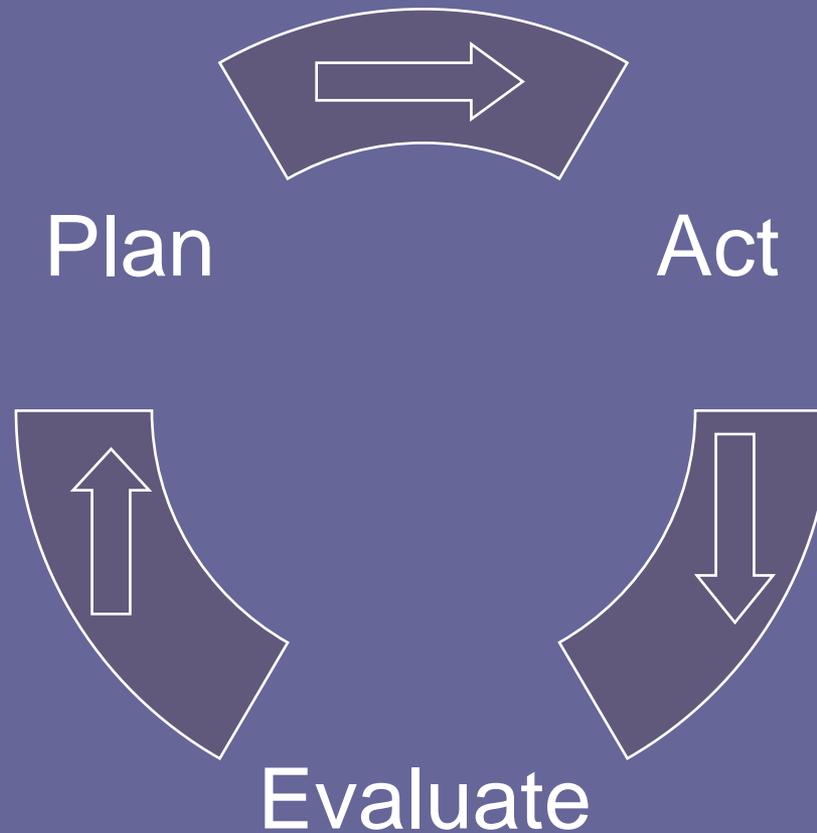
# Experiential / reflective learning by students (engaging/developing learner autonomy)



Experiential / reflective *teacher*-learning  
(engaging/developing 'teacher-learner  
autonomy' (cf. Smith and Erdogan 2008))



# Experiential / reflective learning by students & the teacher, together



Tools to encourage reflection/evaluation by learners, which are also teacher-research tools

- Questions posed orally by the teacher ('What are you planning/doing?', 'Why?', 'How could you do it better?', etc.)
- Regular reflective writing by students ('What have you done?', 'What have you achieved?', 'What could you do differently?', 'What are you planning?')
- Specific questions relating to classroom arrangements or out-of-class learning

## Some 'small steps'

- Ask students what they do outside class to improve their English, and/or what they could do, and/or what they have done before but have now stopped doing.

- Make sure the students get to hear about one another's ideas, and suggest further ideas for out-of-class learning that you may have heard of.

- Ask students to choose what they'd like to do to improve their English outside class, perhaps in replacement for (some of) their homework. Give them some kind of credit for out-of-class learning. Ask them to commit to some kind of contract for this learning.

- Find time for sharing, evaluation and replanning of out-of-class learning contracts

- Ask students at the end of a normal lesson what suggestions they have for classroom work
- Summarize students' suggestions for classroom work and [a big step] act on (some of) them, then evaluate together.

- [a bigger step] Suggest the formation of learning groups which will take forward some of the suggestions more 'independently'. Evaluate (with possibility of reverting to previous arrangements) and replan, together with students

## Your responses

- How does the input so far resonate with your experience?
- What (further) steps towards learning from and 'with' your students and/or engaging and developing their/your learner autonomy would you like to take (if any)?

# Part III – Pedagogy of autonomy as a ‘rescue strategy’

On constraints and the need for ‘teacher  
autonomy’

There are always constraints, and teacher autonomy is not 'freedom from constraints'

More realistically – exploring and exploiting 'spaces of freedom' / 'spaces for manoeuvre' in your particular context

Rather than involving an 'ideal constrained by reality' (an 'impossible dream'), a pedagogy of autonomy can emerge (and can be viewed) as a *response* to difficult circumstances – in other words a 'rescue solution' (Fonseka 2003)

(cf. Kuchah and Smith forthcoming)

Harry's story:

[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/12mayevent/harry\\_kuchah/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/12mayevent/harry_kuchah/)

# Conclusion

From autonomy as an abstract ideal / an  
'impossible dream' to:

pedagogy of autonomy as a 're(ide)alistic'  
practical approach and in some cases a  
'rescue strategy'

- for learners
- for teachers
- in 'difficult circumstances'