

LEARNER INDEPENDENCE: A WEEKEND SEMINAR FOR TEACHERS IN BAVARIA

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This article gives a brief account of a teacher-training weekend on the subject of learner independence (LI). I hope there is something in it for those with an interest in LI and also for those interested in the methodology of teacher-training seminars in general.

After some necessary information about the participants and their teaching situation, and about the aims of the seminar, the account covers the materials used and the way the seminar developed, from the initial warm-up to the results produced by the group.

The Participants

The seminar, which was run by myself and a colleague, Jenny Richardson-Schlottter, was held under the auspices of the Bayerischer Volkshochschulverband (Bavarian Association of Adult Education Institutes) and had been advertised as offering 'ideas and materials to encourage learner independence'. It ran from Friday evening to Sunday lunchtime, some 16 contact hours, was residential and had eleven participants.

These were teachers from various Bavarian 'Volkshochschulen' (VHS), teaching extensive courses in general English to adults, mostly in the evening, mostly for 90 minutes once a week, mostly using a course book they may not have had much say in choosing.



LEARNER INDEPENDENCE WEEKEND

Our Aims

In preparing the seminar we wanted our methodology to embody at least some of the principles of LI which we were aiming to introduce our teachers to. This meant giving our participants as much autonomy as feasible within the restraints imposed by short time, fairly low-tech resources, and above all the participants' own expectations as we were able to anticipate them from our previous experience.

In general, participants on such seminars are a lot more interested in practical classroom ideas than in 'theory' (which may have been a reason for the relatively low number of participants in our seminar). We therefore felt that some sort of tangible results should emerge from the mists of consciousness-raising. To produce concrete results of any kind, the participants would have at some point to set themselves specific aims. We saw it as our job to help them reach this point with enough time left for their aims to be realized.

Warming Up

The seminar began with small group discussion tasks on various topics related to the general theme of the seminar. Thus a group could choose between tasks such as:

- ◆ Make notes about something you have learned recently at home or at work, and how you went about learning it,
- ◆ Complete the sentence 'A good learner is.....'
- ◆ Discuss how teachers can promote learner autonomy.
- ◆ Compile a list of the advantages and disadvantages of self-instruction.
- ◆ Discuss your own expectations of this seminar.

We aimed to provide a range of discussion impulses varying from the personal and anecdotal to the more academic and abstract. The most popular topic proved to be the participants' own experience as language learners.

Input: 'The Library'

The core of the seminar comprised a 'library' of some 21 photocopied articles and short extracts from books. Participants were free to read as much or as little as they wanted, and in any order they chose. They were also free to read entirely on their own or to work with a partner or partners.

It was our intention that the reading should lead via discussion and negotiation to the participants defining aims and setting themselves tasks for the rest of the seminar. The articles and extracts provided information and food for thought on such topics as: learning strategies and learner types, techniques and ideas for self-assessment and self-monitoring, identifying learner needs and motivation, negotiating course content, learning to learn, project work. We also included one or two short texts on recent views of second language acquisition. Overall we were aiming for a selection of materials providing educational, linguistic and methodological perspectives on LI.

Catalogue, Checklist, Report Form

We deliberately avoided categorizing texts as offering 'educational perspectives on LI', 'learner training materials', or whatever. Apart from the difficulty of the task, we wanted to influence the participants in their choice of reading as little as possible. We did, however, provide a guide to the bank of texts, giving the briefest possible information about the content and the number of pages (between 2 and 8). In the case of extracts from books, the books were also available for further consultation.

In addition to the 'library catalogue', participants were also provided with a kind of pre-reading checklist, actually a form of learner contract. Our intention was to try and get the participants to make themselves firm promises about what they were going to read.

To encourage them to monitor their thoughts while reading we had also prepared a sort of report form for notes. This emphasized the participants' emotional as well as their intellectual responses to their reading, encouraging them for example to make a note of ideas which they found surprising, or hard to accept, or which they would like to know more about or discuss with their colleagues later.

As it transpired, the relatively formalized 'contract' and commentary form were quickly abandoned by most participants in favour of informal individual procedures. Participants made ad hoc decisions about what to read next, and used their own paper for their individually preferred styles of note-taking.

Plenary Discussion

The bulk of Saturday morning was taken up by individual reading. Saturday afternoon began with a plenary and provisional reports and feedback about what had been read. The discussion was unusually interesting and fruitful for a plenary session, precisely because no two people had read exactly the same things, and whilst one or two participants had skim-read their way through a large part of the material, others had got immersed in one subject and had read little but in depth. The exchange of 'tips' and recommendations led to a general desire for further reading time and another hour was allotted for this.

Jenny and I had had some misgivings about basing so much of the seminar on an extended phase of individual reading. Our Bavarian seminars are usually pretty lively, sometimes even hectic affairs with everyone interacting as if there were no tomorrow. There is a danger of equating the noise level directly with the success of the undertaking. It was therefore a relief as well as a source of gratification when our participants expressed their appreciation of the peace and quiet and freedom to work on their own.

Group work, Group results

From the reading there emerged three main areas of interest, which were now pursued in group work. These were: 1) progress checks, learner diaries and learner contracts; 2) differentiation and pacing within a course; 3) self-access learning.

Further concentration of focus and effort led to one group working with a group member to produce a learner contract. The contract was for an Englishman working in a management capacity in a German firm. He had learned German with little formal instruction and was particularly keen to improve his written skills in the language. The group helped him to analyse problems and clarify aims, suggested activities and offered him information about the availability of materials.

The second group produced a number of recommendations relating to differentiation within a class. This is a classic VHS issue as courses tend to be either very heterogeneous or so small that they have to be cancelled.

The third group produced a list of activities which learners can pursue by way of accompaniment to their VHS course. This ranged from general, and familiar, ideas like watching satellite TV to more specific suggestions such as corresponding with fellow course participants in English and tips to do with homework.

Classroom Implications

Following the presentation and discussion of results, the tutors and participants agreed to switch the focus, in the short amount of time remaining, to classroom activities. Following a presentation by the trainers of some learning-to-learn activities and learner-created materials, the group split into two halves to discuss in one case the role of the teacher within a framework of self-directed learning, and in the other to try and find ways of making a course book unit more negotiable for the students.

Not surprisingly, these discussions proved somewhat inconclusive. We would have needed another weekend, and by now we were all tired out. This was indeed a pity because, by returning to some central issues of the classroom situation, we were in a very real sense just beginning. However, I suspect that a great deal of life is like that, and not only teacher-training.

Acknowledgements

It is only fair to mention the contribution made to our seminar planning by various articles and suggestions for further reading in, (at the time of publishing), INDEPENDENCE, the newsletter of the IATEFL Learner Independence special interest group. The group is now called "Learner Autonomy". A version of this article appeared in Issue No. 5, Spring 1989. A special acknowledgement is also due to the account by Marion Geddes. 'A teacher training workshop on individualisation' in **Individualisation**, edited by Marion Geddes and Gill Sturtridge, Modern English Publications, 1982.