LEARNER AUTONOMY AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT:
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO GT-PA AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY (1)

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Resumo
A autonomia do aluno e o desenvolvimento profissional do professor, principais tópicos deste encontro, são também as principais áreas de reflexão e acção do GT-PA (Grupo de Trabalho - Pedagogia para a Autonomia). Constitui objectivo deste texto apresentar o GT-PA como uma comunidade de aprendizagem e clarificar o modo de entendimento desses tópicos no seu seio, com ênfase nos seguintes aspectos: o papel do aluno numa pedagogia para a autonomia e o papel dos professores numa formação que facilite o desenvolvimento dessa pedagogia. Começarei por fazer uma caracterização do grupo, seguida da apresentação de condições para a autonomia do aluno e o desenvolvimento profissional do professor, essenciais à compreensão da direcção assumida pelo nosso trabalho.

Abstract
Learner autonomy and teacher development, the main topics of this meeting, are also the main areas for reflection and action within GT-PA (Grupo de Trabalho - Pedagogia para a Autonomia). The purpose of this paper is to introduce GT-PA as a learning community and to clarify the way these topics are understood within the group with a focus on two specific aspects: the role of the learner in a pedagogy for autonomy and the role of teachers in professional development towards learner autonomy. I will start by characterising the group and then present some basic conditions for learner autonomy and teacher development, which help clarify the direction we are trying to follow in our work.

1. GT-PA: a learning community
In order to understand fully what GT-PA is, one probably has to become one of its members. Describing it as a learning community is perhaps the best way to portray its nature and goals.

For universities to have a significant role in fostering pedagogical change, academic researchers/ trainers have to redefine their relationship with teachers in the (re)construction of pedagogical thought and action. Collaboration is one way to break through the barriers between schools and the academic world, but collaboration is not just about working together. It is essentially about the feeling of togetherness, in trying to set up common plans
based upon shared preoccupations and goals, in reconciling different voices around a common direction, in seeking to build a common ground of knowledge and experience. Learning communities share ways of thinking, communicating and acting, thus highlighting the social nature of knowledge construction.

In trying to characterise GT-PA as a learning community, I will focus on four questions:

Why and what for does GT-PA exist?
Who belongs to GT-PA?
What kind of work does GT-PA do?
How does GT-PA work?

1.1 Why and what for does GT-PA exist?

Basically, because there are teachers and teacher educators who believe in a pedagogy for autonomy and want to understand what it means in theory and in practice.

The story of GT-PA goes back to October 1997, when it was set up as a small network aiming at the collaborative development of its members by exploring the idea(l) of a pedagogy for autonomy within the school context. The main reason why it was set up goes back some years before to a teacher development project (1993-96) entitled "Pedagogy for autonomy - a project on teacher development and pedagogical experimentation", which involved 13 EFL school teachers in small scale action research projects (see Vieira, 1997, 1999a). The value of the project was summarised in the final report as follows (Vieira & Moreira, 1996: 31, translated):

➢ It promoted the collaboration between the university and schools and showed how action research can facilitate the innovation of pedagogical practices and the reconstruction of educational knowledge;
➢ It allowed for the investigation of the relation between theory and practice, between research and teaching, thus counteracting the divorce between essential aspects of educational thought and action;
➢ It tested the applicability of two main trends of educational discourse: autonomous learning and reflective teaching;
➢ It developed the teachers' teaching and research attitudes, knowledge and abilities, necessary to their (self)-development and professional autonomy;
➢ It developed, in their learners, the ability to manage their own learning and to take a pro-active role in the learning process;
➢ It promoted the professional growth of the academic researchers/trainers involved as regards language pedagogy and teacher development.
As the project came to an end in June 1996, all the participants felt the need to keep in touch, working towards the same direction, and this was the main incentive for setting up a working group, this time more flexible in organizational and methodological terms, and also open to other teachers. The aims of GT-PA were then set as follows:

- Understanding the theory and practice of a pedagogy for autonomy in the school context
- Understanding the contexts of EFL teaching/learning with reference to assumptions and principles of a pedagogy for autonomy
- Analysing instruments that regulate EFL teaching/learning processes (syllabuses and textbooks) with reference to assumptions and principles of a pedagogy for autonomy
- Designing and developing EFL teaching/learning experiences that foster learner autonomy
- Fostering collaboration among participants
- Developing strategies for professional (self-)development
- Disseminating the group’s work, in oral and written form

Since it was created, the group has grown considerably and our tasks have fulfilled the above aims in various ways, but perhaps our most important accomplishment is that we gradually grew into a learning community seeking to come to new common understandings about learner autonomy and teacher development, and also to invent pedagogical and teacher education approaches that are both consistent with those understandings and useful to scrutinise their practical validity. These are our shared goals.

1.2 Who belongs to GT-PA?

Potentially, any teacher or teacher educator who is interested in our activity.

At present, the group includes about 45 EFL school teachers coming from different schools and backgrounds, with a wide range of experiences, all sharing a basic concern - pedagogy for autonomy -, and a basic wish - professional growth.

Some of these teachers have a large teaching experience, while others have just completed their teaching degree at our university; some are or have been school supervisors collaborating with us in the supervision of student teachers; some are post-graduation students with some research experience, others are taking their first steps in research, others still are not interested in research but rather in developing practical theories to solve practical problems; some have worked with us on previous projects, and have experience within a learner-centred approach, while others are just starting to be curious about it or beginning to explore it in a more systematic way.
The group also includes three colleagues from my department who help me coordinate it: Maria Alfredo Moreira, Isabel Marques and Madalena Paiva. We have been working together as trainers and researchers in the fields of language pedagogy and language teacher development, trying to articulate reflective teaching/teacher education with a learner-centred approach. We strongly believe in the interplay between these two orientations, in both pre-service and in-service teacher development programs.

The heterogeneity of the group is something that enriches us as a learning community, since it prevents the adoption of single perspectives and methodologies, increases the criticality and potential relevance of our work, and intensifies the need to communicate with one another.

1.3 What kind of work does GT-PA do?

Potentially, anything that interests at least one member in the group and is related to our basic concern: learner autonomy.

The papers published in this volume illustrate the three dimensions of our work: teaching/learning, teacher development and research - which are sometimes interwoven within the same activity.

The main activities we have done so far, most of which are documented either in Cadernos 1/2 (Vieira, 1999b and 2001b) or in this volume, are:
- Syllabus analysis
- Materials analysis (mostly from textbooks, but also from resource books for teachers and teacher trainers)
- Research into teachers' and students' beliefs/representations about teaching and learning (mostly through questionnaires, but also through observation and case studies)
- Research into teacher development processes (mainly with student teachers in training)
- Pedagogical experiences (usually aimed at solving students' learning problems, sometimes as small-scale action research projects)
- Teacher development experiences (mainly with student teachers in training)
- Materials design (mostly to be used in the classroom, but also in self-access centres or other school activities like for example "Actividades de Apoio Educativo", and for teacher development purposes, mainly with student teachers in training)

These activities have fulfilled various aims of GT-PA (see above). The first four focus on understanding some of the situational factors that can facilitate or hinder the development of a pedagogy for autonomy: the official syllabus, published materials, teacher and learner beliefs and representations.
At the beginning of each school year, the group identifies one or two situational factors to investigate, choosing from several possibilities on the basis of the group's interests. The last three activities are more practical and always involve some kind of experimentation. They constitute permanent lines of work, varying according to perceived problems in the participants' working contexts. The interplay between both types of activities is not linear (e.g., pedagogical applications of research results), but there is a common conceptual framework underlying them and some research instruments have been used with pedagogical purposes (for e.g., using a grid primarily designed for textbook analysis to monitor the critical use of textbooks by teachers).

Some of the activities have been carried out individually, others (especially those involving research) have been conducted in pairs or small teams. All are discussed within the group in the planning stage and supported by the group or the university team during their development. This means that although there are always different activities being carried out at the same time, there is also joint reflection on what is being done, on how it is proceeding, on the difficulties met and ways to overcome them, etc. Therefore, one of our tasks, not listed above, is to get together periodically in order to share and discuss our work, a crucial dimension of a learning community, although not very easy to put to practice due to constraints of time, distance, work overload, etc., apart from the fact that meetings take place on Saturday mornings to ensure that everyone is free from classes, which does not mean that people are free from other personal commitments. The publication of our work is also a means of reinforcing group cohesion and making everybody's work accessible to everyone.

1.4 How does GT-PA work?

Essentially, in voluntary, context-sensitive, flexible ways.

Freedom of choice, context-sensitiveness and flexibility are basic features of our work as a learning community. From retrospective analysis of how it has been conducted, we can pinpoint the following characteristics:

- in working contexts
- whenever and with whoever we want
- either individually or collaboratively
- involving other people (learners, student teachers, other teachers)
- according to perceived needs and interests
- building on previous knowledge and experience
- at a personal pace
- with variable degrees of structuring and depth
- for variable periods of time
- trying to share what we do with one another (in group meetings, about five times a year)
- trying to share what we do with others outside the group
trying to deal with constraints in a positive way
trying not to feel guilty for not accomplishing our goals
supporting one another
feeling committed to the group

The roles of participants depend on the kind of activities they engage in. Also, not all are doing something at a given time. Some (especially, but not necessarily, newcomers) may choose to act as "observers" trying to learn from others, or as critical partners in group reflections, and later become engaged in some task; others may just need a rest from a previous intensive period of work; others still may need to get credits for career progression, which impels them to do some task within a given period of time.

My main role as the coordinator, with the help of my colleagues, is to promote enquiry into theories, practices and contexts, and to support the group in finding ways to explore learner autonomy from as many different angles as possible, according to what people feel more interested in. We also participate actively in some of the group's activities.

As a learning community, we came to realise the importance of describing and disseminating our work, and that is how Cadernos appeared, as a space to express our voices and make it possible for other teachers outside the group to hear us, and eventually join us, if not physically, at least in their pedagogical reasoning and action.

Teachers are often said to resist dissemination and publication procedures, and this is probably true, but I also believe that academic researchers have been unable to understand that voices can be expressed through different kinds of discourse, and that when teachers talk or write about their experiences, they do not have to follow the rules of academic discourse. Although there is constant effort to build a common language to describe teaching and learning with reference to the pedagogical approach defended, discursive plurality is recognized as legitimate within a learning community. This does not mean that discourse loses relevance or criticality, it only means that relevance and criticality are situated concepts that can be realised through different kinds of discourse and should be assessed from an understanding of the context where each piece of discourse comes from, as well as of the context where it is delivered.

One of the aims of this paper is to explicit some crucial elements of the context of our work, so that the relevance and criticality of other papers in this volume can be better understood as "part of a whole". As the coordinator of the group, I have tried to make some kind of meta-analysis of the different studies and experiences carried out so far, as a way to increase our critical awareness of the direction we are taking, and of what is common to "the different parts of the whole" (see also Vieira, 2001b).
2. Conditions for learner autonomy and teacher development: learner and teacher roles

What I will do next is to propose some facilitating conditions for learner autonomy (see Table 1) and teacher development (see Table 2) with a focus on roles. The work of GT-PA tries to fulfil these conditions, although we are quite aware that they are ideal and not easy to put to practice. Let us say that this is the direction we have been moving towards, as we try to mediate between intentions and constraints.

The focus on roles is intentional. The promotion of a pedagogy for autonomy has strong implications both on the roles the learners should be given the opportunity to take in pedagogical contexts and on the roles the teachers should be given the opportunity to take in teacher development contexts. Although learner roles have been the focus of attention in the literature on learner autonomy, very little attention has been paid to the roles of teachers in teacher education programs. In my view, which is illustrated in the functioning of GT-PA, the former can not be dissociated from the latter.

2.1 Learner roles towards learner autonomy

Table 1 was constructed from four concepts that represent main role dimensions in a pedagogy for autonomy: reflection, experimentation, regulation, and negotiation. Although the Portuguese national syllabus values autonomy as a learning goal, teachers have to face a variety of constraints that limit their freedom of choice, so what they can do is try to explore those conditions as far as possible. A massive absence of the roles proposed here would indicate that students are not given the opportunity to develop their learning competence, a necessary component of any kind of learning.

**FACILITATING CONDITIONS: LEARNER ROLES**

**REFLECTION: Developing language/learning awareness**

*Develop language awareness*
- Formal properties of language
- Pragmatic properties of language
- Sociocultural aspects

*Develop learning awareness*
- Sense of agency (self-control, self-esteem, self-confidence)
- Attitudes, representations, beliefs
- Preferences and styles
- Aims and priorities
- Strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, strategic, socio-affective)
- Tasks (focus, purpose, rationale, demands)
- Instructional/didactic process (objectives, activities, materials, evaluation, roles,...)
**EXPERIMENTATION:** Experiencing learning strategies
- Discover and try out learning strategies in class
- Use learning strategies outside class
- Explore (pedagogical/ non-pedagogical) resource materials

**REGULATION:** Regulating learning experiences
- Monitor/ evaluate attitudes, representations, beliefs
- Monitor/ evaluate strategic knowledge and ability
- Assess learning outcomes and progress
- Identify learning problems or needs
- Set learning goals
- Plan their learning
- Evaluate the instructional/ didactic process

**NEGOTIATION:** Co-constructing learning experiences
- Work in collaboration with peers
- Work in collaboration with the teacher
- Take the initiative, choose and decide

**Table 1:** Learner development towards learner autonomy (Vieira, 2001a)

What is not explicitly integrated in the Table is what teachers do most: to develop the students’ language ability or communicative competence, which is the main aim of language education. Although a pedagogy for autonomy involves the development of the students’ autonomy as language users, it assumes that communicative competence can be better developed if it is combined with the development of their learning competence, i.e., their autonomy as language learners, which is our focus of attention here.

Learning how to learn is viewed not only as an integral part of language learning, but also as a necessary condition for language learning to fulfill educational goals which go beyond learning a specific subject, covering attitudes, knowledge and abilities that can be transferred to other school subjects and, in fact, to life outside school. Only when learning competence is integrated into the school curriculum can school be said to be moving towards transformative education.

Finally, I would like to point out that the conditions here suggested apply not only to schools, but also to language learning in higher education. In fact, if pre-service teacher education programs cared more about the development of the students’ autonomy, these would probably be more willing and able to develop their own students’ autonomy when they become teachers. Pedagogical homology at both levels can facilitate the transformation of school practices.

The pedagogical experiences undertaken within GT-PA, as well as the research activities that focus on the analysis of situational factors, all try to integrate aspects of learner roles as presented in Table 1.
2.2 Teacher roles towards learner autonomy

Table 2 summarises some main requisites for teacher development programs, especially in-service programs, to facilitate the development of a pedagogy for autonomy. Our belief is that only a reflective approach can fulfill those requisites: critical understanding, enquiry, action (research) plans, initiative and decision-making, contingent communication, self-/co-evaluation, and dissemination.

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<tr>
<th>FACILITATING CONDITIONS: TEACHER ROLES</th>
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<tr>
<td>➢ Promote a critical understanding of language education, with a particular emphasis on a pedagogy for autonomy in the school context: assumptions, facilitating conditions, constraints, methodological approaches, research...(critical understanding implies the reconstruction of one’s theories, with a focus on practical, theoretical and ethical justifications for action; it can not be dissociated from critical self-reflection and critical action)</td>
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<td>➢ Foster enquiry about theories, practices and contexts as a necessary condition for critical thought and action (a transmission-oriented, top-down approach is inadequate since teachers cannot be reduced to passive consumers of external knowledge/prescriptions; teachers should become self-regulated practitioners)</td>
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<td>➢ Promote the development of action (research) plans whereby teachers challenge the limits of their freedom and explore alternative routes in teaching/learning (counteracting the “paralysing” effect of situational constraints by finding “spaces for manoeuvre”)</td>
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<td>➢ Encourage initiative and decision-making (good teaching is not about applying “good” theory to practice; emancipation involves choice and responsibility, risk taking and creative action, managing tensions and dilemmas, dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, negotiating and compromising)</td>
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<td>➢ Foster contingent communication among participants within an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect (reducing asymmetries and democratising relationships facilitates the social construction of knowledge and the collaborative innovation of practices)</td>
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<td>➢ Involve teachers in self/co-evaluation of professional development processes and outcomes, according to negotiated criteria which are context-sensitive (evaluation is not a special duty or right of the &quot;trainer&quot;: evaluation undertaken by teachers helps them regulate their own development and can provide relevant information to assess the effectiveness of programs/institutions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ Encourage the dissemination of experiences (confronting one's voice with other voices among the professional community facilitates the critical examination of one’s theories and practices, as well as the emergence of collective knowledge, language and experience)</td>
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Table 2: Reflective teacher development towards learner autonomy
Again, what we have here are ideal conditions to promote reflective teaching towards learner autonomy, which our group seeks to create and sustain, both in our own professional growth and in that of other teachers, especially student teachers, who we work with.

Because participants get involved in different tasks, the development potential of our work can be assessed in two ways: at an individual level, where each member's gains are different from any other's, and at a collective level, where we try to build a sense of togetherness that makes everyone feel as part of the same whole. Both levels of development seem to be important in the group as a learning community.

The basic assumption of Table 2 is that if teacher development programs aim to help teachers develop learner autonomy, then they must foster the teachers' autonomy as well, and abandon a transmissive approach in favour of a reflective one. If teachers are educated to become passive consumers of external knowledge or prescriptions, not only emanating from academic research but also from educational policies, then how can we expect them to develop their own and their students' autonomy? As long as this is not acknowledged by the academy and those who control the decisions in education, teachers will always feel disempowered. On the other hand, universities and governments may well be wasting their time and effort trying to improve education.

This does not mean that adverse conditions should paralyse teachers, teacher educators and researchers who wish to counteract the dominant state of affairs. On the contrary, adverse conditions may act as a challenge to move forwards, even if not as far as we would like to go. This is the case of GT-PA. Part of our growing interest in learner and teacher autonomy derives from this need to "swim against the tide". In fact, I would argue that this need is a crucial drive, part of the essence of what it means to be in favour of education that is empowering and seeks transformation rather than reproduction.

3. With or against the tide?

Having introduced GT-PA, I guess we might say that out work somehow counteracts more traditional approaches to teaching and teacher development. This is not to say that our way of thinking and acting is determined or constrained by dominant structures and cultures. In fact, we may be said to be swimming against the tide as we swim with it.

So, my questions to teachers, future teachers or teacher educators is not whether we want to go with or against the tide, but rather:

With or against the tide, are we always aware of the direction we take?
With or against the tide, what determines our choice of direction?
Maybe we could start a debate from this metaphor.

Note
(1) GT-PA (Grupo de Trabalho-Pedagogia para a Autonomia/Working Group on Pedagogy for Autonomy) is coordinated by the author and funded by Centro de Investigação em Educação, University of Minho. For further information on GT-PA: flaviav@iep.uminho.pt and www.iep.uminho.pt/gtpa.

References

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