Encouraging Autonomy Through a Community of Practice: The Role of a Self-access Centre

Maria Giovanna Tassinari, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Corresponding author: Giovanna.Tassinari@fu-berlin.de

Publication date: June, 2017.

To cite this article

Tassinari, M. G. (2017). Encouraging autonomy through a community of practice: The role of a self-access centre. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 8(*2), 157-168.

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun17/tassinari

Scroll down for article

Encouraging Autonomy Through a Community of Practice: The Role of a Self-access Centre.

Maria Giovanna Tassinari, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Abstract

Implementing autonomy in language learning and teaching in most institutional contexts is still, even after decades of research and practice, a challenge for teachers and learners. Facing these challenges may be easier, if this is done not in isolation, but rather as part of a learning and teaching community.
My experience at the Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL) at the Language Centre of the Freie Universität Berlin is that the first step towards implementing autonomy is encouraging it by building a community of practice.
In the present article, I describe the opportunities I create for teachers and student assistants to discuss their understanding of autonomy, share their experiences, compare perspectives, and reflect on the provision of the CILL in order to promote a culture with more space for autonomous and reflective teaching and learning. Although the work is challenging, this community of practice brings its fruits both in everyday life at the CILL and for the personal and professional development of each of the participants.

Keywords: autonomy, self-access centres, community of practice, learning community

When I started to work on autonomy twelve years ago, while setting up the Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL) at the Freie Universität Berlin, I thought, quite naively, that giving learners opportunities for exercising control over their own learning would have been enough to foster their autonomy. Interestingly, I seemed to have forgotten that besides giving opportunities, many other factors may foster or hinder the development of autonomy, among others the institutional context and its constraints (Tatzl, 2013). It took me some time to realize that autonomy can blossom only in an environment in which the actors of the educational context cooperate towards common educational goals.

In other words, seen from the perspective of complex dynamic systems (CDSs), autonomy needs a community – a learning community, a community of practice – in order to be exercised by individuals in a given context. This community can support individuals and give momentum to their actions, allowing them to join forces, if necessary, to confront issues or overcome possible institutional constraints (particularly if these are unfavourable to autonomy), and in order to obtain more space for autonomy.

The first step for building a community of practice aiming at developing autonomy was when I started as a manager of the CILL. I was also confident enough to believe or hope

that the understanding of autonomy, which I had worked out for myself through my study and research, would be shared by colleagues and management at my institution. However, this belief was soon weakened and I came to realise that, in order to foster autonomy, a significant effort should be put into negotiating a common understanding of it with faculty members and learners.

In the present paper, I will describe how I tackled this challenge with the help of structures and resources set up at the CILL. I will start by briefly explaining why I chose the verb 'encouraging' in the title, then I will describe the context of the CILL, and its function within the Language Centre. Afterwards, I will illustrate how the work of the staff of CILL, of the student assistants, and of some teachers is aimed at reaching more space to manoeuvre, and autonomy; I will then briefly illustrate the advantages issued from this community of practice. Some recommendations will conclude my contribution.

Encouraging Autonomy: Still a Challenge?

To describe the work with student assistants, teachers and learners at the CILL, I prefer to use the word 'encouraging' instead of 'fostering' autonomy, since the first steps towards autonomy require that individuals feel the courage to change, to develop themselves towards different ways of learning and/or teaching, and feel free to do so. I am well aware that the institutional environment at the university strongly focuses on rules and requirements (such as the curriculum, study regulations, course attendance, and the form of the examinations). Therefore 'fostering' autonomy, in the sense of requiring the students to be autonomous, may result in a paradox such as 'be spontaneous' (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011) or in a mask of autonomous behaviour (Breen & Mann, 1997). Thus, the actions I take as a self-access centre manager aim at encouraging, not at imposing (more) autonomous behaviours. An atmosphere of freedom, of responsibility, and of support, is one of the determining factors to stimulate learners' and teachers' motivation to engage in this challenging process.

Looking at the question in the subheading of this section "Still a challenge?", I can say for myself that yes, encouraging autonomy within an institutional context is still a challenge. It requires willingness and the capacity to motivate learners; to help them to reorient themselves, if they want; to involve and inspire teachers; to ask uncomfortable questions; and to initiate in ourselves and in the other actors of the educational process reflection, critical awareness, self-evaluation, and the desire for inquiry.

In the following sections, I will briefly illustrate how this process of change is encouraged for the self-access staff at the CILL, the learners, and the teachers.

The Context: The Centre for Independent Language Learning at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

The CILL is part of the Language Centre of the Freie Universität Berlin. The Language Centre provides language modules both for specialists and non-specialists in twelve languages. Learning outcomes, content and forms of teaching and learning, as well as final exams, are defined in the study regulations. Besides learning within contact hours (in general 4 hours per week, about 1/3 of the workload), the language modules require learning outside of contact hours (about 2/3 of the workload). This is in the form of independent and cooperative learning, in close collaboration with the teachers (Freie Universität, 2015), which is why fostering autonomy, independent and cooperative learning should be part of each language module.

The CILL was set up in 2005 to support both students enrolled in a language module to organize their workload in the non-contact hours, and students learning a language in a self-directed learning mode.

The CILL is a self-access learning space which offers resources and learning support for about 20 foreign languages and it is based on the following pillars:

1. a variety of materials and resources in print form, as well as DVDs, audio resources and software
2. support for autonomous language learning in the form of study guides, workshops and a language advising service
3. a website (http://www.sprachenzentrum.fu-berlin.de/slz/index.html) with; a language learning-specific online catalogue, guidelines for autonomous learning, and a vast collection of links for language learning
4. a tandem programme for language partnerships
5. support for social learning in form of tutorials, game nights and space for self-organised learning groups

Within a space of approximately 350m^2, students can: work with printed learning materials and authentic materials; watch DVD movies; listen to audiobooks; read magazines; learn grammar (for German as a foreign language a big collection of take-away grammar

sheets is available); have access to dictionaries and reference books; and use computers or video workstations. Spaces for learning in groups and for conversation are also provided.

Although the language modules include an element of independent and cooperative learning, attendance at the CILL is not compulsory and may be negotiated with the teacher. Some students make use of the CILL for remedial learning while others complete an individual learning plan; some learn in tandem, while others work on a project; and some come for language advising sessions, either at the suggestion of their teacher or of their own accord.

The language advising service is optional and open to learners of all languages. Students can book one or more sessions with me as an advisor or with a peer advisor. During the sessions they are encouraged to reflect on their learning process and are supported in their decision-making, in choosing appropriate materials and tasks, and in evaluating their progress and/or their learning process.

The CILL staff is composed of the manager, a librarian and thirteen student assistants.

The mission statement of the CILL

The mission of the CILL is to foster learner and teacher autonomy and language learning. This is clearly stated on the CILL website, with a brief definition of our understanding of autonomy.

Learner autonomy is defined as the capacity and the opportunity to make decisions about one's own learning, and implement these, following one's motivation, interests and creativity. Teacher autonomy is defined as the capacity to act as "self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant[s] in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 1).

Key words for our understanding of autonomy are: self-initiative, responsibility, and self-determination, which may underpin and lead to new roles for learners and teachers.

Further function of the CILL - The CILL for teachers

Although at the very beginning the CILL was intended to support only learners, very soon I realized that teachers need to be supported too, in seeking approaches for organizing students' out-of-class workload and, more generally, in developing their own and their learners' autonomy. The support for teachers is therefore a peculiarity of the CILL and consists of offering lecturers of the Language Centre and of the Philology Departments

spaces and opportunities for rethinking their beliefs about and their practice of language teaching, for sharing experiences, for experimenting, and for reflecting on how to promote autonomy in language learning.

The support for teachers at the CILL consists of

1. giving information about resources available

2. offering the CILL facilities for classroom activities (at the CILL itself) and supporting these classroom activities

3. offering workshops about developing both teacher and learner autonomy, in specific skills such as reading or listening, remedial learning, developing materials, and tasks for independent learning

4. offering individual advising on specific aspects and projects, for example, implementing tandem or telecollaboration projects within a course.

In addition, a task force composed of a few teachers and the self-access centre manager (myself) works on further developing the link between classroom teaching / learning and out-of-classroom learning.

The CILL: Towards a Community of Practice

Within the framework of a social theory of learning (Wenger, 1998), a community of practice is constituted by a group of actors belonging to a same organization which work and support each other within a given frame(work). Essential to a community of practice is the development of individual and social learning, by sharing meaningful knowledge, experiences, resources and perspectives (Wenger, 1998). Unlike other work groups, communities of practice are generally self-organized, and not directly controlled by the management of an organization.

The CILL is a community of practice insofar as it involves various actors within the educational context in its everyday work and in its development: the manager, the librarian, the student assistants, and, although to a lesser extent, teachers, tutors, and learners. All these actors bring their own perspective and experience into the project and thus contribute to the learning environment. Therefore, as Gardner and Miller (1999) illustrate, the self-access context is constituted by, and developed through, the interaction of these various participants. For a detailed analysis of communities of practice around self-access language learning (SALL) see Gardner and Miller (2014).

In the following section, I will briefly describe how the work with student assistants, teachers and learners help on the one hand to encourage these actors' autonomy and on the other hand, to further develop the CILL provision.

Growing with the student assistants

The thirteen student assistants at the CILL are in charge of welcoming the students, giving them introductory information about the CILL, maintaining and further developing the website, running the tandem programme (language partnerships), and accomplishing other tasks. Due to their double status of students and of staff of the CILL, the student assistants bring stimulating perspectives into the work of the CILL.

They are employed on a two-year contract, renewable for another two years, so some of them stay four years. They work approximately 40 hours per month (10 hours per week). They are selected preferably from our philology students or teacher students, and, in general, they speak more than one language. Some of them are German, while others come to live and study in Berlin from different countries. The student assistants' team is therefore highly diverse; each of them has particular competencies, interests and skills which can be very useful to further develop the provision of the CILL.

In order to be fully involved in the CILL, they undergo an initial training, then an in-service training. These include: an introduction to the CILL; the pedagogical framework, the resources, and the student assistants' tasks; then pedagogical workshops are offered on a regular basis, on topics such as improving communication with CILL users, analysing learning materials for SALL and describing them in the online catalogue, analysing online resources for language learning, contributing to a wiki for SALL; and peer advising for language learning. The topics are negotiated with the student assistants according to their needs and/or priorities in the CILL development. Some of the workshops are directed by the student assistants themselves. Moreover, smaller teams are constituted among the student assistants, in charge of particular fields of the CILL work, such as the website, the tandem programme, or peer advising.

As the manager of the CILL, my task is to identify, together with each of the student assistants, their competencies, their areas of interest and their priorities for their personal and professional development. According to these, we decide together which tasks or projects they will be in charge of. It is essential to me to encourage their autonomy, giving them room for choice and experimentation; I then offer my support and guidance for implementing the project; finally, we reflect and evaluate together the outcomes and the process itself. In this

way, several projects have already been implemented at the CILL on the student assistants' initiative, such as redesigning the tandem meeting, planning a game night for tandem partners, offering peer advising for German as a foreign language, developing a new concept for the initial training of the new student assistants, and developing new study guides.

Each project undergoes a brainstorming phase, a planning phase, a piloting and/or implementation phase, and a final evaluation. Even if some of the projects cannot be carried out on a regular basis (due to external constraints, such as the departure of the student assistant in charge), all of them contribute to the broadening of the educational provision of the CILL and make the student assistants feel responsible for their work so that they feel they are active agents at the CILL. It is rewarding to see how the student assistants collaborate with each other, initiate projects together, share their competencies and experiences, and help each other out within (and even outside) their work at the CILL.

Over the years, I have realized that working in this way with the student assistants allows us to learn from each other. Personally, I have learned to respect and trust them, to listen carefully to what they say, and to acknowledge their unique contribution to the CILL.

Learning from learners

At the CILL, I also meet many learners on a daily basis. With some of them I just exchange a few words in passing when they come to the CILL, or when they leave after a study session. With others, those who come to the language advising service, I get involved in a real dialogue. These learners, too, contribute to the learning community of the CILL. Listening to their stories and the strategies they describe, and their unique experiences widens my professional and personal perspective on language learning autonomy. This then flows imperceptibly but constantly, not only into my own competence as a language advisor, but also (through the telling and retelling) into the collective competence of the CILL learner community.

This happens not only to me, but also to the student assistants: I often witness conversations between them and fellow students, sharing learning experiences, evaluating resources, or 'just taking interest in each other'. These spontaneous exchanges make the CILL a place where learners can find and build a community.

Encouraging teachers to dare autonomy

Working with teachers is crucial in order to integrate a self-access centre into the educational context. At the time I was appointed to set up the CILL, I remember a colleague,

the director of an innovative language self-access centre, who recommended me to involve the teachers.

Now, the Language Centre employs nearly 100 language lecturers, around 40% of them being full or part time teachers with a permanent contract, and 60% working on a free-lance basis. Therefore, involving language teachers in the CILL is a major undertaking.

At the beginning, a group of teachers of different languages were involved in discussing and validating the pedagogical framework of the CILL, and the criteria for the resources and the catalogue (Tassinari, 2016).

Then teachers were invited to take part in different activities of the CILL, such as describing materials for the online catalogue, suggesting websites for our collection of language links, or offering language advising or workshops for language tandem. The teachers involved in these activities obtained a reduction of their teaching load and, in the case of free-lance teachers, an extra contract for the work done. After various in-service training sessions on learner autonomy, self-directed learning and language advising from 2006-2008, a team of five teachers offered, to undertake language advising at the CILL, over and above their teaching load.

Unfortunately, due to changes in circumstances, this team is not available any more: some of them left the university, while others were assigned to other departments. Changes occurred also in the criteria for reduction of the teaching load, (mainly for administrative tasks), such that presently, teachers who cooperate with the CILL do it on individual basis and without any compensation. These factors have undeniably reduced the range of the community of practice, with less teachers actively involved in the development of the CILL provision.

However, the work with teachers continues: workshops on various aspects of teacher and learner autonomy are offered on a regular basis, both as a form of teacher training and as an opportunity to share experiences. In addition, I am available for individual consultations and as a support person for projects related to autonomy. Furthermore, a task force of teachers was constituted in 2014 to further develop the link between classroom and out-of-classroom learning.

Working with teachers is essential and beneficial for all of us. It made me realize that, rather than proposing / imposing my understanding of learner autonomy, it is crucial to share and reflect on different ways of understanding autonomy. In fact, as Stewart and Irie (2012) point out, in order to realize autonomy, it is necessary to "look beyond the surface to inquire how and what forms localized pedagogy for autonomy may take" (p. 1). Moreover,

negotiating a common understanding of autonomy and of what forms pedagogy for autonomy may take at the Language Centre of our university, helps to develop a shared pedagogical approach and is constructive both for teachers and learners.

From the work with teachers in the past ten years, the following areas emerged as crucial in encouraging their development towards more autonomy:

- reflecting on one's understanding of autonomy
- reflecting on and/or reorienting one's beliefs and attitudes
- reflecting on one's readiness and motivation for change and autonomy
- seeking opportunities for personal and professional development
- dealing with social and institutional constraints
- finding spaces of possible action i.e., the space of possibility overcoming external obstacles and internal resistance (Jiménez Raya, 2017, p. 23).
- further developing one's competence to critically use out-of-classroom and online learning opportunities
- finding support for implementing new approaches to autonomous learning and teaching

In spite of the energy and determination required, this collective reflection is essential in order to integrate the CILL facilities into the institution and into learning and teaching practice. Furthermore, in a language centre with teachers of different languages and cultures coming from various teaching traditions, it may help to create a common ground for intercultural reflection.

Tapping the Source: An Extended Community of Practice

Discussions with language teachers from other institutions working in a variety of circumstances, from attending conferences or workshops, and from teacher training, confirm my conviction that, in order to better integrate the development of autonomy and out-of-classroom learning in language teaching, it is crucial, first of all, that teachers become aware of and reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes toward language teaching and learning and, if necessary, their readiness to reorient these.

Since developing autonomy may require the capacity to think anew and overcome frustration which may arise from first attempts to implement change, it is crucial to share our experiences, thoughts and feelings with others. If we cannot do it within our institution, we may find allies and support outside our institution. Taking part in workshops, training, conferences, attending events of special interest groups on autonomy, such as the LASIG

group of IATEFL, ILA, AILA RenLA and JALT, can provide inspiration and impulse for renewing our own practice.

In my own experience, this beyond-the-boundaries community of practice and inquiry is constituted of colleagues and researchers I have met at conferences, whose papers or books I have read, and with whom I have shared conversations. This community includes people from Europe, New Zealand, Japan, Mexico and Canada. Communicating with them, reflecting with them, and sharing ideas and approaches, helps me to strengthen myself, to widen my perspective, to find new ways of tackling issues which I may be confronted with, and to keep improving my work. Being part of this community is, for me, irreplaceable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

How can a self-access centre contribute to encouraging autonomy? I would like to conclude with some recommendations deduced from my own experience at the CILL.

- **Provide a pedagogical framework** – In order to make a self-access centre a place to encourage autonomy, a clear pedagogical framework is needed and a shared understanding of autonomy, which takes into account the affordances of the context and of its participants.

- **Discuss your understanding of autonomy** – In order to reach this understanding, discussions with self-access staff, teachers and learners should be encouraged, keeping in mind that the development of autonomy is complex and dynamic, and emerges "from the interaction of different individuals together and in relationship with others" within the institutional and social context (Tatzl, 2016, p. 47). With this perspective, we should be able to review our own understanding of autonomy in order to negotiate a common understanding appropriate for the given context.

- **Give room for experimentation** – A self-access centre should be a space for exchange and experimentation in which all actors of the learning community (teachers, learners, student assistants, tutors) have a voice and scope of action, and can innovate and evolve both personally and professionally.

- **Listen to teachers and learners** – Involving oneself on the path to autonomy may raise doubts, anxieties, and frustration before being inspiring and rewarding. Within a humanistic vision of education, listening to learners and teachers, allowing them to express their feelings, their questions, and also the answers they have found on their way, is the first step in seeking and giving scaffolding and support.

- **Create a community of actors in the educational environment** – Encourage exchanges and dialogue, acknowledge individual and collective resources, and create and maintain spaces of dialogue among the different actors.

- **Make your centre visible to the management and administration** – Make the function of the SAC within the educational provision explicitly visible, and convince the management of the benefits of investing in structures involving learners and lecturers and members of the academic community, and in developing more spaces for autonomy. For this purpose, it may be useful besides the local work within the institution, to strengthen the influence of international networks.

- **Be humble and trust people.**

Notes on the Contributor

Maria Giovanna Tassinari is Director of the Centre for Independent Language Learning at the Language Centre of the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. Her research interests are learner autonomy, language advising, and affect in language learning. She is co-editor of several books and author of articles and chapters in German, English and French.

References

Breen, M., & Mann, S. J. (1997). Shooting arrows at the sun: Perspectives on a pedagogy for autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy & independence in language learning* (pp. 132-149). London, UK: Longman.

Freie Universität. (2015, April 15). *Amtsblatt der Freien UniversitätI* [Official website of Freie Universität] *11/2015*. Retrieved from: http://www.fu-berlin.de/service/zuvdocs/amtsblatt/2015/ab112015.pdf?1431335088)

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing self-access: From theory to practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (2014). The professional identity of SALL practitioners. In R. Watson-Todd (Ed.), *Proceedings of the DRAL2/ILA Conference* (pp. 106-114). Bangkok, Thailand: King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi.

Jiménez Raya, M. (2017). Teacher autonomy and agency: The space of possibility in overcoming external obstacles and internal resistances. In M. Jiménez Raya, J. J. Martos Ramos, & M. G. Tassinari (Eds.), *Learner and teacher autonomy in higher education: Perspectives from modern language teaching* (pp. 15-35). Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang.

Jiménez Raya, M., Lamb, T., & Vieira, F. (2007). *Pedagogy for autonomy in language education in Europe – Towards a framework for learner and teacher development*. Dublin, Ireland: Authentik.

Stewart, A., & Irie, K. (2012). Realizing autonomy: Contradictions in practice and context. In K. Irie & A. Stewart (Eds.), *Realizing autonomy: Practice and reflection in language education contexts* (pp. 1-17). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tassinari, M. G. (2016). Ein Selbstlernzentrum als Weg zur Autonomie: Chancen und Herausforderungen. [A self-access center as a path to autonomy: Opportunities and challenges]. *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Intercultural German Studies*, *40*, 269–293.

Tatzl, D. (2013). Systemic autonomy as an educational factor for learners and teachers. In A. Burkert, L. Dam, & C. Ludwig (Eds.), *The answer is autonomy: Issues in language teaching and learning* (pp. 63-77). Faversham, UK: IATEFL.

Tatzl, D. (2016). A systemic view of learner autonomy. In C. Gkonou, D. Tatzl, & S. Mercer (Eds.), *New directions in language learning psychology* (pp. 39-53). Basel, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin Bavelas, J., &. Johnson, D. D. (2011). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.