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Learner autonomy and the theory of sociality

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Learner Autonomy and the Theory of Sociality

Introduction

In his classic definition of learner autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning’, Henri Holec (1981: 3) clearly envisages autonomy as an individual capacity. It is apparent too that, for Holec, learner autonomy involves a greater or lesser degree of independence both from the teacher and from conventional classroom resources:

Learning taken charge of in this way by the learner is *self-directed* or undertaken *on an autonomous basis*. This acceptance of responsibility for the learning may be done with or without the help of a teacher, with or without the use of teaching aids. (Holec 1981: 4)

Holec’s stance is entirely understandable, given the need to emphasize what was then an almost revolutionary truth: that learners were capable of gaining knowledge and skills without necessarily having to be taught in a conventional classroom manner.

Over the years however, characterizations of learner autonomy in terms of either individualism or independence have regularly been challenged. Boud, for example, argues that independence is little more than a phase through which the learner must pass, in the process of attaining autonomy in its fullest sense:

Interdependence is ... an essential component of autonomy in action. ... Independence from a teacher or authority figure, is a stage through which learners need to pass in any given context to reach a more mature form of relationship which places them in the world and interrelating to it rather than being kept apart from it. (Boud 1988: 19)

Boud’s views on interdependence are given further resonance by Palfreyman, in the light of the increasing widespread acceptance of sociocultural theories of learning:

Autonomy has sometimes been associated with a focus on the individual learner ... and yet sociocultural context and collaboration with others are important features of education and of our lives. (Palfreyman 2003: 2)

Earlier views of autonomy in relation to language learning evolved in parallel with the burgeoning of self-access resource centres. In recent decades, however, attention has increasingly been paid to learners who are exercising autonomy in clearly social contexts, such as the classroom, or the kind of online environments that simply did not exist in the 1980s. Little records the shift as follows:

To begin with, in the early 1980s, the concept of learner autonomy ... seemed to be a matter of learners doing things on their own. By the end of that decade, however, partly under the impact of learner-centred theories of education, it was beginning to figure in discussion of language teaching generally, and through the 1990s more and more national curricula came to include learner autonomy (...) as a key goal. This brought an important shift of emphasis: learner autonomy now seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves. (Little 2007: 14)

Yet there remains something distinctly disquieting about this last formula, which it is possible to read as condoning egoism. What are we to make, ethically, of an approach to learning which appears to advocate working with others, but in a way that remains essentially self-interested?

The unease triggered by the prospect of learner autonomy as an essentially self-centred concept is not simply a moral response. Learners are clearly capable of exercising autonomy in a wide range of contexts, many of which are social. It is therefore logical to inquire whether early definitions capture what is meant by the concept in its fullest sense. There has been little consideration of how learner

autonomy might look when it also involves social interaction. It is therefore legitimate to revisit the notion. As Little declares, 'the definition and redefinition of terms is a central concern of all theory; for only by a process of constant reflection and clarification can we hope to maintain an adequately coherent view of any field of activity. Practitioners of all kinds must also be theorists in this sense, if they wish to avoid fossilization' (Little 1991: 1). This chapter consequently argues for a more complex view of learner autonomy, which takes account of the fact that learners rarely act purely individualistically and recognizes that practising learner autonomy in social contexts involves a wider range of competences than those attributed to the solitary learner marshalling his or her resources in order to attain purely personal learning goals.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall consider just why it is that existing accounts of how learner autonomy might operate in a social context seem not entirely satisfactory. To do so, I will explore distinctions between fundamentally different types of human action articulated by the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Secondly, I shall attempt to develop arguments towards a theory of learner autonomy that might capture more adequately the range of behaviours displayed by autonomous learners in group settings. This involves three steps. The first is to outline the main features of human sociality. The second is to present evidence that such behaviours are indeed displayed by autonomous learners in a social environment. The environment chosen in this case will be an online discussion forum. Finally, I shall argue that these

behaviours may form part of a wider understanding of learner autonomy, which incorporates such features as 'respect for the autonomy of others', a concept integral to some theories of personal autonomy, but not, to date, of learner autonomy.

Habermas: categories of action

In his influential work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas identifies four fundamental concepts of action, which he labels as Teleological, Normatively Regulated, Dramaturgical and Communicative (Habermas 1984: 75-96). The last two of these are not relevant to this chapter and will not be explored here.

However, Habermas distinguishes between the first two kinds of action in a way that sheds light on the unease we might feel at the prospect of autonomous learners engaging with others in a way that might be characterized as selfish or at least self-centred. It also suggests that the source of that unease may be not so much ethical as epistemological.

Traditionally, Habermas argues, action has been viewed as teleological. This

Habermas characterizes as follows:

Since Aristotle the concept of *teleological action* has been at the centre of the philosophical theory of action. The actor attains an end or brings about the occurrence of a desired state by choosing means that have promise of being successful in the given situation and applying them in a suitable manner. The central concept is that of a decision among alternative courses of action, with a view to the realization of an end, guided by maxims and based on an interpretation of the situation. (Habermas 1984: 85)

Broadly speaking, for Habermas, reality may be divided into three 'worlds': objective reality; social relations; and subjective experience. Different types of action are appropriate depending of which of these one is dealing with. Teleological action, Habermas suggests is primarily applicable when dealing with the world of objects:

The concept of teleological action presupposes relations between an actor and a world of existing states of affairs. ... With regard to ontological presuppositions, we can classify teleological action as a concept that presupposes *one* world, namely the objective world. (Habermas 1984: 87)

The one-dimensional world of teleological action is also that of learner autonomy, as classically defined. Holec, for example equates learner autonomy with having or holding 'the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of [one's] learning' (Holec 1981: 3). He enumerates the learning management tasks that he expects the autonomous learner to be able to perform as follows:

- Determining the objectives
- Defining the contents and progressions
- Selecting methods and techniques to be used
- Monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.)
- Evaluating what has been acquired (Holec 1981: 3)

This is entirely legitimate for an individual dealing solely with objective facts. However, purely goal-driven behaviour is less acceptable when engaging with the social world. Fixing one's learning goals is all very well. But if achieving them requires the help of others, this will necessitate negotiation, agreement and probably compromise. Other people are not objects. They cannot be used simply as resources (that is, as walking dictionaries, or pronunciation tutors). They are likely to resist anything which impinges on their sense of agency or self-worth. They will probably not look at all kindly on undue borrowing or unacknowledged appropriation of their linguistic expertise (for example, plagiarism). Thus, for

Habermas, the interpersonal sphere is the arena not of teleological, but of normatively regulated action. It therefore makes particular sense to explore this notion. In Habermas's terms:

The concept of *normatively regulated action* does not refer to the behaviour of basically solitary actors who come upon other actors in their environment, but to members of a social group who orient their action to common values. ... Norms express an agreement that obtains in a social group. All members of a group for whom a given norm has validity may expect of one another that in certain situations they will carry out (or abstain from) the actions commanded (or proscribed). The central concept of *complying with a norm* means fulfilling a generalized expectation of behaviour. (Habermas 1984: 85)

What Habermas makes clear is that, when dealing with other social actors the idea of setting objectives and pursuing them regardless of the consequences, is inappropriate. Interacting with other human beings clearly requires a wholly different type of action.

By contrast [to teleological action] the concept of normatively regulated action presupposes relations between an actor and exactly two worlds. Besides the objective world of existing states of affairs there is the social world to which the actor belongs as a role-playing subject, as do additional actors who take up normatively regulated interactions among themselves. A social world consists of a normative context that lays down which interactions belong to the totality of legitimate interpersonal relations. And all actors for whom the corresponding norms have force ... belong to the same social world. (Habermas 1984: 88)

The cogency of Habermas's argument can be measured by attempting to imagine a world in which individuals ignore social norms and behave teleologically, or strategically, towards one another. Such environments may exist (one thinks of stock exchange trading floors). But they are scarcely optimal places in which to learn.

Human Sociality

There are in fact now fundamental reasons for questioning the individualistic view of learner autonomy as a model of human behaviour. The last three decades have witnessed large amounts of research in such diverse areas as experimental economics, developmental psychology, evolutionary biology and primatology, which have given rise to what seems to be a genuinely new field of interdisciplinary knowledge: human sociality. The combined findings of those working in the field suggest that an account of learner autonomy which relies largely on self-interest as its driver may be unable to give a full picture of human activity, whether in relation to learning, or more generally. Even game theorists, for whom our decisions are normally a matter of rational calculation, conclude that a winning strategy, rather than being purely egocentric, has to take into account the likely reactions and preferences of others. In what follows, particular (though not exclusive) reliance will be placed on the findings and arguments of scholars with international reputations in their fields: Ernst Fehr, Professor of Microeconomics and Experimental Economic Research, at the University of Zurich, Joseph Henrich, Canada Research Chair in Culture, Cognition and Coevolution at the University of British Columbia, Frans de Waal, Charles Howard Candler professor of Primate Behaviour at Emory University and Michael Tomasello, Co-Director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig. In his preface to a volume of empirical cross-cultural studies of human gaming behaviour, *The Foundations of Sociality*, Henrich explains:

The 1980s and 1990s have seen an important shift in the model of human motives used in economics and allied rational actor disciplines. In the past, the assumption that actors were rational was typically linked to what we call the *selfishness axiom* -- the assumption that individuals seek to maximize their own material gains in these interactions and expect others to do the same. However, experimental economists and others have uncovered large and consistent deviations from the predictions of the textbook representation of *Homo economicus*. Literally hundreds of experiments in dozens of countries using a variety of experimental protocols suggest that, in addition to their own material payoffs, people have social preferences: subjects care about fairness and reciprocity, are willing to change the distribution of material outcomes among others at a cost to themselves, and reward those who act in a pro-social manner while punishing those who do not. (Henrich *et al.* 2004: 8)

While nobody denies that self-interest plays a role in motivating both primate and human behaviours, there appears to be consensus among researchers into sociality that egoism on its own is insufficient to account for people's social choices and preferences. In his most recent book, *The Age of Empathy*, de Waal, a world authority on primate behaviour and social intelligence, writes:

We are group animals: highly cooperative, sensitive to injustice, sometimes warmongering, but mostly peace loving. A society that ignores these tendencies can't be optimal. True, we are also incentive-driven animals, focused on status, territory and food security, so that any society that ignores these tendencies can't be optimal either. There is both a social and a selfish side to our species.' (de Waal 2009: 5)

The fundamentally social nature of humankind is just as strongly emphasized by the developmental psychologist Tomasello. Tomasello views humanity as a uniquely cooperative species thanks to its distinguishing capacity for shared intentionality, which enables it to collaborate in the pursuit of joint goals:

To an unprecedented degree, *homo sapiens* are adapted for acting and thinking cooperatively in cultural groups, and indeed all of humans' most impressive cognitive achievements -- from complex technologies to linguistic and mathematical symbols to intricate social institutions -- are the products not of individuals acting alone, but of individuals interacting. As they grow, human children are equipped to participate in this cooperative groupthink through a special kind of cultural intelligence, comprising species-unique social-cognitive skills and motivations for collaboration, communication, social learning and other forms of shared intentionality. (Tomasello 2009: xv-xvi)

While there are differences of opinion among scholars about the degree to which the features of sociality are also displayed by the great apes, there is a consensus that these are as follows:

Empathy

Crucial though shared intentionality may be, in enabling joint action, a number of other traits are equally important in predisposing human beings towards cooperation. One of these is empathy. In many western societies at least, the capacity to identify emotionally with the feelings of others tends overwhelmingly to be regarded as a feminine trait. That, de Waal argues, is because we have been taken in by 'Western origin stories, which depict our forebears as ferocious, fearless and free. Unbound by social commitments and merciless toward their enemies, they seem to have stepped straight out of your typical action movie.' (de Waal 2009: 25). However, the reality of hunter-gatherer society is contrary to this. Here community is the dominant value:

None of this is in keeping with the old way, which is one of reliance on one another, of connection, of suppressing both internal and external disputes, because the hold on subsistence is so tenuous that food and safety are the top priorities. (de Waal 2009: 25)

In fact, de Waal argues, whatever our gender, we have no control over whether we feel empathy or not. Evolution has ensured that all humans are hard-wired to empathize with one another:

We're pre-programmed to reach out. Empathy is an automated response over which we have limited control. We can suppress it, mentally block it out, or fail to act on it, but except for a tiny percentage of humans -- known as psychopaths -- no one is emotionally immune to another's situation. The fundamental yet rarely asked question is: why did natural selection design our brains so that we're in tune with our fellow human beings, feeling distress at their distress and pleasure at their pleasure? If exploitation of others were all that mattered, evolution should never have gotten into the empathy business.' (de Waal 2009: 43)

Altruism

While empathy is a matter of feeling, altruism implies action. Indeed, experimental economists define altruism precisely 'as being costly acts that confer economic benefits on other individuals' (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003: 785).

Such acts are undertaken irrespective of the other person's previous actions and without anticipating any particular future outcome. That is not to say that they are without emotional resonance. But their primary dimension is moral. For Camerer and Fehr 'altruism thus represents unconditional kindness' (Camerer and Fehr 2004: 56) Tomasello for his part defines altruism as 'one individual sacrificing in some way for another' (Tomasello 2009: xvii). Tomasello too sees altruism as a distinctively human trait, which differentiates humankind from apes:

Children are altruistic by nature, and this is a predisposition that (because children are also naturally selfish) adults attempt to nurture (Tomasello 2009:47).

From very early in ontogeny, human children are altruistic in ways that chimpanzees and other great apes are not. ... In terms of collaboration, again, from very early on in ontogeny, human children collaborate with others in ways unique to their species. They form with others joint goals to which both parties are normatively committed, they establish with others domains of joint attention and common conceptual ground, and they create with others symbolic, institutional realities that assign deontic powers to otherwise inert entities. Children are motivated to engage in these kinds of collaborative activities for their own sake, not just for their contribution to individual goals. (Tomasello 2009: 104-5)

Reciprocity

Altruism and reciprocity are closely linked. While altruism may be defined as unconditionally kind behaviour, 'reciprocity means non-selfish behaviour that is conditioned on the previous actions of the other actor'. It has both positive and negative poles. 'Reciprocity means that people are willing to reward friendly actions and to punish hostile actions', regardless of the consequences for themselves. (Camerer and Fehr 2004: 56).

There are different degrees of reciprocity. Reciprocal altruists practice a form of reciprocity that is dependent on the existence of repeat encounters between partners. This means that they 'reward and punish only if this is in their long-term self-interest' (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003: 785). The behaviour of reciprocal altruists may be motivated by the desire to manage their own reputations. In a

situation where you will be called upon to work repeatedly with known partners, it is important to have a reputation for cooperativeness and reliability. However, strong reciprocators do not seem to be motivated by such considerations and will reward cooperators and punish defectors even in one-off encounters:

Strong reciprocity is a combination of altruistic rewarding , which is a predisposition to reward others for cooperative, norm-abiding behaviours, and altruistic punishment, which is a propensity to impose sanctions on others for norm violations. Strong reciprocators bear the cost of rewarding or punishing, even if they gain no individual economic benefit whatsoever from their acts. (...) Strong reciprocity thus constitutes a powerful incentive for cooperation even in non-repeated interactions and when reputation gains are absent, because strong reciprocators will reward those who cooperate and punish those who defect. (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003: 785)

One of the social functions of reciprocity is to pressure selfish individuals into cooperating. Studies using the Prisoner's Dilemma and Public Goods Games suggest that:

About a third of the subjects are purely self-interested, and never contribute anything'. (...) The reciprocal subjects are willing to cooperate if the other group members cooperate as well. However, in the presence of selfish subjects who never contribute, reciprocal subjects notice that they are matched with free riders and refuse to be taken advantage of by them. (Camerer and Fehr 2004: 67)

Fairness

Another principle clearly associated with reciprocity is that of fairness, or inequity aversion. De Waal espies the origins of inequity aversion in our evolutionary past:

The fairness principle has been around since our ancestors first had to divide the spoils of joint action. ... Researchers have tested this principle by offering players an opportunity to share money. The players get to do this only once. One player is given the task to split the money into two -- one part for himself, the remainder for his partner -- and then propose this split to the other. It is known as the "ultimatum game", because as soon as the offer has been made, the power shifts to the partner. If he turns down the split, the money will be gone and both players will end up empty-handed. ... If humans are profit maximizers, they should of course accept any offer, even the smallest one. If the first player were to give

away, say, \$1' while keeping \$9 for himself, the second player should simply go along. After all, one dollar is better than nothing. Refusal of the split would be irrational, yet this is the typical reaction to a 9:1 split.' (de Waal 2009: 185-7)

Some people feel so strongly about fairness that they are prepared to pay a considerable personal price for it. In the words of Camerer and Fehr: 'people who dislike inequality are willing to take costly actions to reduce inequality, although this may result in a net reduction of their material payoff. (Camerer and Fehr 2004: 56)

Collaboration

The human social preference for fairness appears to be inherited. It may be observed even in young children. Moreover, in a comparative study of human children and chimpanzees published in the journal *Nature*, Katharina Hamann and her colleagues conclude that 'children of around three years of age share with others much more equitably in collaborative activities than they do in either windfall or parallel-work situations' (Hamann *et al.* 2011: 328). In other words collaboration and a sense of fairness go hand in hand. The origins of this may lie in joint foraging activities. Hamann *et al.* hypothesize 'that humans' tendency to distribute resources equitably may have its evolutionary roots in the sharing of spoils after collaborative efforts' (*ibid.*).

For Michael Tomasello, collaboration is a distinguishing human capacity. While great apes hunt in packs, they do so as individuals. When humans forage, they do so as a group.

As compared with other primates, humans engage in an extremely wide array of collaborative activities, many of these on a very large scale with non-kin and many under the aegis of social norms in the context of symbols and formal institutions. ... While most primates live in social groups /p.186/ and participate in group activities, humans live in cultures premised on the expectation that its [*sic*: their] members participate in many different kinds of collaborative activities involving shared goals and a division of labour, with

contributions by all participants and a sharing of the spoils at the end among all deserving participants. (Tomasello 2008: 185-6)

Over time, Camerer and Fehr observe, cooperative behaviour may unravel or decay. They suggest that, in preventing the decay of cooperation, 'a potentially important mechanism is social ostracism'. (Camerer and Fehr 2004: 67)

The prosocial behaviours identified by Henrich, Camerer and Fehr, Tomasello and others, were they to be empirically present in the learning activity of students, would represent something of a problem for theories of learner autonomy which offer a view of learners acting teleologically and seeking to exert control over their learning environment, in pursuit of personal, purely cognitive, objectives.

Sociality and Learning – some empirical evidence

To explore the extent to which sociality theory finds expression in the actual behaviour of learners, a corpus of messages posted to online course discussion forums was assembled and examined. The course in question was for learners of French, with a target level of B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference. As students at the Open University, these were geographically dispersed adult distance learners, working in a supported blended learning environment, which means that they studied independently for much of the time, but met periodically both face-to-face and online for tutorials, study days and a one-week residential school. However, their most regular interactions occurred in online tutor group discussion forums.

Tutor group forums are small-scale asynchronous online environments, the purpose of which is to enable students to socialize and work collaboratively outside of formal tutorials, which are synchronous and held in Elluminate. A total of twenty one online learning activities were posted on the course website for

completion in the forums. Undertaking the activities was a matter of choice. There was encouragement for students to do so but no compulsion.

Thirty two tutor group forums were established for the 2009B presentation of the L211 *Envol* course. Normally, tutor groups contain between 15 and 20 learners. Following initial scrutiny, 2 such forums were selected for detailed analysis. They were selected precisely because of their different profiles. The first contained fourteen learners (of whom 5 were resident in France, 2 in UK, and 1 each in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Gibraltar, Greece and Italy and Luxembourg. The other contained eleven learners, all of whom were resident in United Kingdom. In the first forum the total number of messages posted over a 10-month period was 369 (in 128 threads) separate threads). Of these, the group's tutor posted a total of 11. She played no pedagogic role in the forum, her periodic interventions being primarily administrative (for example, notifying the group of an impending absence, or reminding learners about forthcoming tutorials or exams). In the second, learners posted 77 messages in 34 threads. Here there was no tutor presence. Instead learners themselves managed the discussion and their own learning. Together, the two forums were deemed to encapsulate the diversity of student experience. In terms of the number of posts, they might be said to represent the extremes of success and failure. However, as far as learner behaviour is concerned, these terms are entirely relative.

Study of the forums was retrospective, non-interventionist and non-intrusive. Its purpose was essentially illustrative, rather than empirical purpose. Extracts from individual postings were selected to exemplify the behaviours characteristic of human sociality. In some cases, for succinctness, a choice was made between several posts or passages, all of which appeared to exemplify the same behaviour. No attempt was made to quantify the number of occurrences. It sufficed to demonstrate that such behaviour was present. It would be possible, using qualitative analysis software, to code postings according to the behaviours encapsulated and thereby attempt a quasi-quantitative measure of the degree of

sociality (and the degree of autonomy) displayed by participants. That would be an interesting exercise, but requires greater resources than were at my disposal.

Permission to analyse the messages posted in them was obtained from the Open University's Student Research Project Panel. Posts are reproduced *verbatim*, so include errors, which will remain uncommented. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Empathy

The presence of empathy in this group of learners is illustrated by an initial exchange of messages between an inexperienced and self-avowedly nervous learner and mature and more expert peer. The exchange is reproduced *verbatim*. Several things happen in the course of it, including error correction by the more expert peer and an altruistic offer (a) of information about useful learning resources and (b) future assistance.

Bonjour

Je suis un peu nerveux, Parce que ma Française écrite n'est pas le plus bon!

OK. Je suis un jeune femme, j'ai vingt sept ans. Je suis une employée du bureau et il est très bien. J'ai choisie d'étudier le cours Envol avec OU parce que Je voudrais parler Français parfait (ou peut-être juste bien)

J'ai n'a pas le temps du étudier le cours tous les jours donc le OU c'est parfait pour moi.

Quand J'avais treize ans ma famille habite en France pour trois années, mais j'ai oublié beaucoup française.

Merci pour lire ma petite histoire.

Clarice x

coucou Clarice,

ne t'inquiète pas je suis sûre que ça te reviendra vite, le plus on pratique une langue le plus on s'améliore, tu sais si tu essayes de regarder des programmes télé français ça pourra t'aider, par exemple sur France2 ou même Arte il y a des reportages intéressants, et le journal télé (JT) aussi ça permet aussi de comprendre la façon de penser des français.

En tous cas bon courage, on est là pour s'entraider, si tu as besoin d'aide n'hésite pas.

à plus tard

Sarah

ps: lorsque tu dis je suis une "jaune femme" ça veut dire "I'm a yellow woman", car jaune veut dire yellow, peut-être tu voulais "young woman" ça ce dit jeune femme;)

à très bientôt

However, just as striking as the practical assistance delivered here is Sarah's identification of (and perhaps **with**) her novice partner's emotional state and her repeated attempts to reassure her, using such phrases as: 'ne t'inquiète pas', 'ça te reviendra vite', 'bon courage'.

Sarah isn't the only member of the group capable of showing empathy, however. In the following exchange, Clarice herself, when she has become an established member of the group, displays an almost equal capacity for emotional identification to a fellow learner, with whom she might otherwise have relatively little in common. He is a middle-aged, perhaps even elderly ex-railway employee. She is a young married woman. Perhaps that is why, despite showing a clear emotional understanding of Martin's nervousness, she uses the formal 'vous', rather than the more familiar 'tu', with which Sarah had addressed her.

... Quand j'avais onze ans, j'ai commencé aller au lycée - un "comprehensive". Ce lycée avait une très mauvaise réputation pour la violence, et j'étais vivement nerveux. Mais enfin, tout était bien, et bientôt je me sentais à mon aise.

J'ai quitté les études à l'âge de quinze ans. Après quelques années travaillant comme cheminot j'ai décidé de retourner aux études. J'étais encore très nerveux

le jour du commencement (parce que je n'étais pas sûr si je pouvais me débrouiller), si nerveux que j'ai bu une demi-bouteille de gin avant y aller.

Martin.

Je sais ce que vous voulez dire, J'étais très nerveux le premier jour aussi. Il a été depuis longtemps j'ai étudié

La demi-bouteille de gin est peut-être une bonne idée !

Clarice

What, one might ask, does a display of empathy have to do with Learner Autonomy? In fact a great deal. By enabling learners to share emotions it brings closer together individuals who might otherwise have little in common, builds trust between them and makes stronger the likelihood of successful future collaboration. Two days after this particular exchange, Sarah posts a message in the forum, with the title 'Entraidons-nous', in which she writes 'J'aimerais bien que par l'intermediaire de ce forum nous puissions nous entraider et essayer de nous améliorer'. To this Martin – clearly no longer quite so nervous - replies: 'C'est une bonne idée – j'espère que quelqu'un me corrige mes fautes'. In other groups, arrangements for such mutual support went even further, resulting in the setting up of both online and face to face self-help groups.

Altruism

Altruism is just as clearly on display in our forums. Here a request for help receives an immediate response. The request comes from a new member of the group (this is her second message). The response -- an offer of information -- is not motivated either by familiarity or by the expectation that the respondent will derive any benefit from responding. To return to the definitions of altruism

offered above by Camerer and Fehr (2004: 56) and Tomasello (2009: xvii), the respondent may not be sacrificing much more than her own study time in providing this information, but nor does she anticipate the receipt of any recompense for what is clearly an act of unconditional kindness.

salut a tous,

j'ai de probleme a ecrire en francais car mon ordinateur utilise vista windows et je ne sais pas comment changer mon clavier de "QWERTY" a "AZERTY" a cause de la difference entre les lettres en anglais et le francais et la redaction comme: l'accent aigu, l'accent grave, l'accent circonflexe ...ect

je ne sais pas comment faire!!!

de l'aide svp

Ablah

COUCOU

lis ce post du forum group,il y a différentes solutions d'évoquées:

<http://learn.open.ac.uk/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=47526>

J'espère que ça pourras t'aider,

bon courage

A bientôt

Sarah

Reciprocity

The altruistic individual who provided information about how to alter keyboard layouts in this last exchange may not have expected recompense. It is a truism that kindness is its own reward. But the following exchange, which took place seven months later, after an interruption of some months to forum activity, suggests that kindness to others can also be repaid by kindness from others. Having difficulty opening a file containing instructions for the group's speaking test, Sarah asks for help. Almost certainly in something of a panic, she uses English to do so. (This is the sole thread in English in this forum.) The classmate who responds to her is precisely the person whom she herself had helped, in an act of unconditional kindness, when both were still newcomers. This does not appear wholly accidental. Ablah clearly reads the contents of the forum. But she posts only three messages to it. In the second of these, which follows immediately on her request for help in reconfiguring her keyboard, she explains that she has a medical condition which has forced her to abandon a career in finance and which means that she spends much of the day in bed. Responding to Sarah's request clearly necessitates significant effort on her part. It does not appear to be a merely casual act.

Hi

I hope you are all well,

I have a problem with the attachment our tutor sent today regarding the speaking test, I just cannot open the file, am I alone in that case and what should I do?

I don't know if somebody will respond but just needed some help,

thanks

Sarah

 [Speaking Test email - September 2009.docx](#)

Hi,

I hope you can open that one, let me know if you can't.

Regards

Ablah

Fairness

As we saw above, in game theory experiments, inequity aversion has often been tested by means of the Ultimatum Game, in which a partner is offered a manifestly inequitable sum of money, to gauge whether s/he will react as a 'rational maximizer' (that is, s/he will accept the sum, however inadequate, as being better than nothing), or respond emotionally (and ethically) by declining. A similar experiment is conducted with primates, using grapes and cucumber, although here there is some doubt whether what is being tested are fairness preferences or food preferences. In our illustration, the fairness issue at stake is a little more complex. It revolves around attendance at tutorials, in order to familiarize oneself with the virtual environment (Elluminate) in which the Speaking Test will be conducted. Apparently, two members of the group have waited until the mock exam to learn how to use Elluminate. Two of their peers feel that this has led to a waste of valuable preparation time and that had the two 'offenders' attended previous online tutorials, they would have avoided inconveniencing others. Their messages are reproduced below:

Newcomers

Our group has just had "un examen blanc" before the real exam on 30 September.

We were confronted with two new students who had never taken part in ANY of our on line tutorials, and some who hadn't bothered to read our tutor's instructions on preparation for that session. At least 40 minutes of the tutorial was wasted.

The "regulars" were not amused.

I think students should be marked for their attendance at tutorials, maybe that will bring them out of the woodwork before the last minute.

Fay

Fay, I totally agree with you. My tutorial was totally wasted even though I had carefully prepared for it. The 2 other students in my group that evening were the 2 you mentioned, so, as you know, there was no discussion for my practice session. I think that you suggestion that OU take into account attendance at the tutorials is an excellent suggestion.

Euan

The links between inequity aversion and learner autonomy are complex but real. Fay and Euan have set themselves specific goals for the online tutorial they have just attended, which relate to preparation for a forthcoming speaking test. Their plans have been disrupted by the presence of two individuals who are apparently less effective than they in managing their own learning activity. As well as protesting against a perceived infringement of their own exercise of autonomy, Fay and Euan's complaints are a rebuke for perceived selfishness and a criticism of a failure of autonomy on the part of their peers.

Collaboration

Finally, our learners offer a particularly impressive illustration of the human capacity for collaboration in a learning situation. The shared goal is to construct a joint narrative. The instructions provided on the course website for this activity comprised a photograph of an elderly 2CV, parked in front of a café, accompanied by the following text:

Pour cette deuxième activité de l'Unité 3 - Cultures, on vous demande d'inventer un scénario de film. Vous pouvez vous baser sur la photo ci-dessus si vous le désirez. Chacun d'entre vous propose une ou deux phrases les uns après les autres, jusqu'à ce que vous arriviez à la fin de l'histoire. Dans votre scénario, vous pouvez penser à parler des acteurs possibles, des décors, ou des styles cinématographiques, en plus de l'histoire.

Tellingly, the forum contains no discussion at all of how the collaboration can be organized. One student begins the story, by posting the opening fragment. 3 days later a second student comes across it and continues the story. And so on. In all, this episode takes place over seven turns and the narrative remains uncompleted. But what is striking is that the entire collaboration is based on a shared but tacit understanding about the desirability of working together:

On line activity 3.2

[Fay Thompson](#) - 11 May 2009, 09:28

L'action se déroule dans un petit village corrézien, en plein été. C'est la période des fêtes. Deux étrangers sont à table à l'extérieur d'un café; un autre homme est en train de regarder le menu.

Les étrangers s'intéressent à la petite voiture bleue, "la Deuche", qui est stationnée, très correctement, sur le parking.

C'est une scène typiquement française? Il paraît que non! En fait, l'homme seul n'est pas du tout intéressé par le menu; il a un autre projet plus important. Il faut que les étrangers fassent attention

[Carole Girling](#) - 14 May 2009, 17:25

C'est une histoire d'amour. Cet homme est fou d'amour d'une jeune musicienne qui interprète des chansons traditionnelles. Il est obsédé par sa voix de velours et ses chansons qui racontent des histoires d'autrefois. Il faut absolument qu'il aille la voir.....

[Priscilla Webb](#) - 15 May 2009, 10:34

Tout à coup, la chanteuse, Florette, apparaît sur la scène. Elle paraît être pressée comme elle ouvre la porte de la Deuche, et ne voit pas le jeune homme qui s'approche d'elle sans bruit.

[Irina Norman](#) - 15 May 2009, 20:58

Florette regard dans le rétroviseur avant démarrer la voiture, elle remarque le jeune homme à quelques pas d'elle qui la regard avec une intensité alarmante. Elle se pétrifie, son visage devient tout pale et un petit cri s'échappe de sa bouche. Elle l'a reconnu.

Florette quitte la scène en toute vitesse, suivie de regards interrogateurs de deux étrangers...

[Euan Perfect](#) - 18 May 2009, 10:48

Le jeune homme a désespérément besoin de une rendez-vous, mais il n'a pas l'adresse de Florette. Mais il a vu que le numéro d'immatriculation de la Deuche est du département de Corrèze. C'est l'espoir ! Elle habite dans la région....

[Fay Thompson](#) - 28 May 2009, 10:24

Hélas, non!

En fait la voiture n'appartient pas à Florette. Elle l'a volée. En plus, elle n'habite pas en Corrèze.

Bien qu'elle soit chanteuse extraordinaire, elle mène une autre vie

[Lucy Moore](#) - 29 May 2009, 11:56

Quelques kilomètres plus tard, elle gare la voiture dans un petit chemin loin des regards. Elle pousse un cri mélangé de terreur et de joie. Tremblante, elle baisse son bras et attrape son sac à main. Les larmes coulent à flot. Elle sorte une photo froissée.....

There can be little doubt that these learners are both autonomous and imaginative. It is equally apparent that, in this particular social context, far from being reducible to the wholly self-interested pursuit of personal learning goals, autonomy also involves the kind of cooperative attitudes and behaviours

predicted by sociality theory. In particular, these learners demonstrate empathy, altruism, reciprocity and a sense of fairness. They collaborate with others, in pursuit of both shared and individual goals, as opportunity arises. What is more, as we have seen, these behaviours seem to contribute to their effectiveness as learners.

Learner Autonomy and Respect for the Autonomy of Others

Although the behaviours we have observed may appear incompatible with learner autonomy as most narrowly defined, they are integral to the concept of autonomy in its fullest sense. A founding figure in the development of ideas about autonomy was the 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant defined autonomy as 'that property of the will whereby it is a law unto itself' and described it as 'the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature' (Scruton 2001: 81) However, rather than equating autonomy with an absolute freedom to act as one wished, Kant instead saw it as a capacity for rational judgment, which would guarantee that human beings curbed any tendency to act in an absolute or arbitrary manner, since it informed the capacity for self-control. Kant developed this idea into what was for him a crucial component of autonomy, respect for persons as ends. This can be illustrated in the reasoning he attributes to an autonomous human actor:

Insofar as Humanity is a positive end in others, I must take account of their ends in my own plans. In so doing, I further the Humanity in others, by helping further the projects and ends the adoption of which constitutes that Humanity. (Johnson 2012: 15)

In other words, crucially, for Kant, autonomy entails respect for the autonomy of others. Paul Guyer, a leading Kant scholar, expresses this as follows:

The condition of autonomy is precisely that in which a free action of the will preserves and promotes free activity itself, in the sense of preserving the possibility of further free acts on the part of both the agent of the particular act concerned, as well as other agents who might be affected by his actions. ... The fact that only autonomous actions *preserve* the possibility of

further free actions seems to point directly to autonomy as the necessary object of respect. (Guyer 2003: 89)

For Cornelius Castoriadis, who sees autonomy as an ongoing project, respect for persons is essentially respect for their potential for autonomy. Moreover, for Castoriadis, respect for the autonomy of others is not enough. One must also contribute to the unfolding of their autonomy.

Kant's least debatable formulations refer necessarily to some content. 'Be a person and respect others as persons' is empty without a nonformal idea of the person. ... This content is autonomy such as I define it, and the practical imperative is: Become autonomous and ... Contribute as much as you can to others' becoming autonomous. Respect for others can be required because they are, always, bearers of a virtual autonomy – not because they are persons. (Castoriadis 1997: 402)

How can respect for the autonomy of others be integrated into views of learner autonomy and what would that mean on a practical level? Much can be learned from developments in the theory of personal autonomy and in particular from the major contribution to it of the philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers. Meyers rejects traditional accounts of autonomy as the isolated exercise of free will, in favour of an understanding of it as a set of competencies (for self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction), exercised by socially-integrated individuals. For Meyers (2000: 172) autonomous actors have ceased to be 'cartoon figures, mechanically executing their previously elected plans' and are instead 'equipped both to benefit from others' input and to recruit others to their point of view' (Meyers 2000: 174). In Meyers' words, 'on a competency-based view of autonomy, it is not necessary to plot out every detail of one's life in advance, for one's autonomy skills enable one to address situations on a case-by-case basis' (*ibid.*).

Learner autonomy too may be more satisfactorily viewed as a variable set of competencies, rather than as a unitary capacity. Indeed some of the key skills which might constitute learner autonomy have already been identified by Holec and Little. For Holec, the list includes: setting objectives; defining contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques; monitoring the learning process (rhythm, time, place); and evaluating outcomes (Holec 1981: 3). To this Little adds: maintaining detachment; reflecting critically; making decisions; and acting independently (Little, 1991: 4).

This competency set remains incomplete. It takes no account of how autonomous learners need to learn to interact with others in social settings.

Clearly, social learning contexts call for a wider range of skills than those related solely to self-management or to the management of physical resources. So in an age in which learning is predominantly held to be a social activity and where technological advance constantly offers new affordances for social learning, it is time to reboot our understanding of learner autonomy. It is impossible here to give a complete list of what further competencies autonomous learners should be able to mobilize. But these will surely need to include the behaviours associated with human sociality and which I have identified as comprising respect for the autonomy of others: that is, showing empathy, helping others, responding to help received, practising fairness and collaborating as and when appropriate.

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