

OPEN LEARNING: NEW ROLES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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Abstract

The perception of open learning can misleadingly imply that a person can learn what they want, how they want and when they want. Whilst in part this is true, such an optimistic view of learning sits at odds with the complex interplay of the learning processes used by learners (Naiman, et al,1995), and their distinct preferences; some of whom are motivated to learn in classrooms and some alone from books (Longworth, 2005). This paper argues that moving from traditional teacher-centered face-to-face teaching to a more open model involves individualizing instruction and placing responsibility within the hands of the individual (Dickenson, 1987:10). This necessitates a transformation of the roles implicit in teacher-student relations, as well as a change of *attitude*.

Keywords

education; independent learning, open learning

Introduction

Recent years have seen a shift in the nature of language teaching; where roles, expectations, methods and learning/teaching styles have altered the parameters of language learning. These have all been subsumed into methods variously called Learner-Centered Approach (Tudor, 1996), or the Communicative Language Curriculum (Breen & Candlin, 2001). What they all reflect is a more *flexible, open* view of learning which involves greater participation, a more active role in decision-making and the realization that learners bring with them their own individual skills and insights into the learning arena which can facilitate self-learning. But as we will argue, truly open and flexible learning requires a paradigm shift, necessitating a new alignment of relations between the teacher and the learner; with the learner placed at the centre.

This paper focuses its discussion on the changes occurring between the learner and the teacher in language classrooms. In particular we focus on roles, and the type of learning which 'open' implies for language learning. This has fundamental repercussions for each agent in the learning process as it puts the student at the *beginning and the end* of the teaching process. The new roles and responsibilities identified in this paper focus on five key changes towards open learning:

- Changing from surface to deep learning.

- Changing nature of power distribution
- Changing nature of the teacher's role
- Self-learning - teaching the learner how to learn
- Active learner involvement

Changing from surface to deep learning

In order to detail the new roles and responsibilities implicit within open forms of learning let us first identify the roles associated within traditional forms of teaching. To explain this, Ramsden's (1988) (cited in Lockwood, 1995) distinction between 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning is employed which identifies traditional learning as involving a type of learning based on teacher orientated learning. This 'surface approach' emphasizes five points:

- Focusing on discrete elements
- Memorizing information and procedures for assessment
- Unreflectively associating concepts and facts
- Treating learning as an external imposition
- Emphasizing 'demands of assessment, knowledge cut off from everyday reality'

(Lockwood, 1995: 56)

The teacher's role in a surface approach is to create the cultural capital necessary for participating in society and therefore places responsibility at the feet of the teacher. This is enforced by the implicit roles inherent in traditional face-to-face teaching, based on a high degree of subservience by the student. Recognizing this, Wright (1987) maintains that in most countries the social roles of teacher and student are accorded high and low status respectively with power residing disproportionately within the teacher's domain. Part of this imbalance is due to individuals – teachers and students – 'acting out' their socially defined roles according to culturally defined beliefs and expectations, but it also emanates from a teaching model which stresses high pedagogical control directed by the teacher.

Conversely, a 'deep approach' to learning attaches significance to the quality of learning outcomes based on the underlying goal of gaining a thorough understanding of learning. Some examples of the processes cited by Ramsden (1988) are:

- Relating concepts to everyday experience
- Relating and distinguishing new ideas and previous knowledge
- Emphasizing 'A window through which aspects of reality become visible, and more intelligible.'

(Lockwood 1995:56)

This learning focuses on a type of self-directed learning in which the learners own knowledge is accessed and related to new knowledge. Learning is determined by the freedom which the learner is given to set learning goals, to identify resources, and to determine allocation of time and under what evaluation learning will take place (Long, 1989). It is easy to see the roles of the learner in this form of open learning as less idealized, less fixed and which allow the learner to choose between a highly directed course or an autonomous one. It is this freedom and flexibility that sets open learning apart from traditional learning.

Changing nature of power distribution – Perception of Power

Partly because of the different types of learners and teachers, deciphering the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and student is an arduous task, and it is made more difficult because of the myriad roles involved in teaching/learning which include both social and psychological factors. Moving towards a more open form of learning involves a shift in the direction of a learner-centered model, the kind now being seen in language teaching. In many respects this shift is reminiscent of the CLT boom, but what marks it as different is not the method of teaching but the *perception* of the teacher and learner expressed through the new roles which are encouraged (Wright, 1987). Perception involves expectations involving cultural, social and personal values. Part of this perception involves the role of power between the teacher and the student.

The most visible expression of power stems from the arrangement of the classroom; with the teacher and student placed hierarchically within this pedagogically arranged space. Even today most schools and universities are designed in the same lecture-based, forward-facing model, with the architectural design of the classroom assuming and conferring certain roles and assumptions: the teacher at the front; as leader, socially and spatially divided from the learner by virtue of his/her knowledge, and the learner as student, involved in passively receiving this wisdom.

Open learning requires more *symmetry*, with the rights, obligations and duties placed in equal proportion and agreed on by the learners and teachers. The following section will focus on analyzing this symmetry of power by looking specifically at teacher and student roles.

Changing nature of the teacher's role – flexibility

Where is the teacher located if not in the centre of the teaching process? Dickenson (1987) notes that a naïve view of learner independence is one where the teacher is made redundant. This

is also shared by Nunan and Lamb (2001) who accentuate the importance of flexibility within teaching; this means for example, that teachers operating in a CLT mode may make an occasional 'foray' into traditional ways of teaching. It is this flexibility and lack of rigid dogma which is crucial to open learning. Furthermore, the role of teacher in a learner directed setting is less determined by domination and more by *negotiation*, with the teacher not seen as the 'sage on the stage' (Longworth, 2003:12) but less obtrusively a 'guide at the side' (ibid.). But with this change in dynamics follows a new responsibility on the learner which emphasizes greater involvement in shaping their own needs and goals to best maximize the teacher's presence.

A New Relationship

With CLT learning came a fundamental shift in thinking; placing the learner in a more *active* relationship within the learning process as a 'negotiator' and 'interactor' who gives (pair work, group work) as well as takes (passively receiving instruction). This view is also reflected in learning strategy research which emphasizes the active involvement of learners in shaping their learning methods (Tudor, 1996). Echoing Nunan and Lamb's distinction, Tudor goes on to list two of the most important changes to affect learners as: (1) learners should be consulted with respect to the content of teaching, and (2) that this should involve negotiation between the teacher and the learner. This type of learning incorporates the ethos of open learning which aims to bring about learner-autonomy by empowering the student and involving the learner in structures other than teacher-plus-class-group formula (Tudor, 1996) which so dominates traditional roles of teaching and learning.

How do these changes affect learners' roles? First, the idea that learners should be consulted recognizes the learner as responsible for the creation of his own learning objectives whilst also investing them in activities within the lesson (e.g. Task-Based Learning). By including the learner in shaping their own goals, learners are also able to acquire a better understanding of the process of learning (deep learning) itself as well as acquiring the relevant language skills (Tudor, 1996). Ownership of learning is not however transferred automatically, showering the student with freedom of choice – this would be the sort of archaic freedom heeded by opponents of open (adjective) learning systems¹. Nor, as we have acknowledged, does it mean the teacher being made irrelevant, rather the whole relationship is qualitatively different to traditional perceptions of teacher-pupil dynamics. It is more facilitatory, involving recognition and negotiation of learners' style, their motivational and attitudinal differences and the importance of social interaction (Longman, 2003). Furthermore it embraces the philosophy that the learner should be

¹ Bloom, 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York, Simon & Shuster.

taken as the central reference point for decision making, content and form of language teaching (Tudor, 1996).

Active learner involvement

Some confusion surrounds self-direction which often describes a world of opposites: self-directed or other-directed (Long, 1989:56). Proponents of self-learning would argue that it mediates dependence between different learners and self-direction is best viewed as a continuum that exists to some degree in every person and learning situation. This distinction is made by Dickenson when he differentiates between learner-centeredness and material-centered forms of learning. For Dickenson, learner-centeredness implies a responsibility on the learner for making and implementing decisions in their learning, an essential element being *self-direction* which he describes not as a method of learning, but *an attitude to learning* which is imbued within the learner's sense of responsibility. Responsibility is defined as knowing where to locate 'expert help and advice' (p.12). In contrast, material-centered learning whilst being more flexible for the learner (i.e. freedom of location, teacher and time), organizes materials in a way which takes any decision-making away from the student, where most of the decision-making and management of learning is 'built into' the learning materials, increasing the responsibility in favour of the teacher/course provider.

Central to the idea of independent learning is the assumption that others cannot learn for us; they can lead to our learning (through the teacher) but the 'act of learning must always be a personal, individual act' (ibid. p.9). This is an important point and central to the change of shift in the roles and responsibilities of teacher and learner. Unlike traditional teacher-led classes, an 'open' approach puts the learner at the beginning and the end of the learning process, most clearly encapsulated in the phrase 'learner-centeredness'.

Conclusion: Implications for teaching

Teaching is an interactive process, which means that by definition any change in the dynamics of one role will have ramifications for another. The changing roles we have examined in this paper have considerable implications for teaching, particularly with regard to demarcations of power and responsibility. As we have discussed, open learning requires fundamental changes in the distribution of power by encouraging self-directed, collaborative learning and deeper learning. As the concepts of 'open' and 'flexible' learning suggest, this type of learning encourages change. It is not a method or an ideology but an evolving practice which seeks to express itself

as an idea which strives for diversity in teaching. So within a learner-centered, open approach, learners' roles become less dogmatically fixed, and more open to negotiation, dispensing with the contention that there is a '*right way*' either to learn or teach. It is an approach which recognizes the complexity and diversity of learning and which seeks 'open answers' to ways of learning over 'neat, pre-packed solutions' (Tudor, 1996:25).

The challenge for the teacher in moving towards open forms of learning outlined in this paper is to position him/herself in correct confluence with learners needs by facilitating self-directed learning, this will require more conscious teaching. But before we launch into a crusade on open learning we must recognize that these new roles for teachers (and learners) represent an 'ideal' form of learning, and like any ideal requires incremental steps and liberalization of the classroom (Dickenson, 1987) to bring about true learner autonomy or semi-autonomy. Furthermore, contrary to the idea that open learning means total learner autonomy, the ever increasing information overload brought about by the ubiquitous Internet ensures the teacher's role is ever more crucial.

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