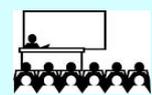


Teacher Autonomy in the Language Classroom

by Paul Arenson (Miyazaki, Japan)



The Corporate Agenda & Language Education

Choice and empowerment are key words associated with learner autonomy, critical pedagogy and student-centered teaching. Yet the workplace can be littered with obstacles that limit a teacher's autonomy and job satisfaction. Some lay the blame squarely on what Gray and Block (2012) call the "marketization" of education:

Students are increasingly seen as customers seeking a service and schools and teachers are, as a consequence, seen as service providers. As this metaphorical frame has been imposed... the semantic stretching of keywords from the world of business... has become commonplace. Thus terms such as "outcomes", "value added", "knowledge transfer", "the knowledge economy" and above all "accountability" have become part of the day-to-day vocabulary of education.

<https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/tag/outcomes/>

Teacher Perceptions

In my teacher survey and Pan-SIG 2014 talk, I asked teachers to consider the extent to which the institutions that employ us help or hinder our efforts to foster autonomous learning. I was particularly interested in teachers who identified with approaches involving global education, critical pedagogy, learner autonomy and cooperative learning. I wanted to know if they found a conflict between their own values and the corporate values which underlie what they're asked to teach. By inviting them to examine and share their attempts to create a supportive learning environment in the face of workplace limitations, I hoped to gauge the extent to which a corporate agenda gets in the way of promoting learning. The use of the term "corporate agenda" should not be misconstrued as applying only to business English or to those teaching in companies but to all institutions where the corporate ethic dominates.

I also wanted to know how such teachers responded - if they chose to avoid dealing with the conflict by conforming to corporate values, if only to be able to have steady work, or if they resisted those values somehow. I was hoping to find teachers willing to be subversive in their choice of materials and in how they managed their classes.

Regardless of whether or not teachers felt threatened by their students' needs and interests being defined by top-down, corporate values, I was also

interested to find out if teachers were struggling to make ends meet, working umpteen hours a week. This is an often overlooked issue directly related to the marketization of education where teachers are viewed as being expendable.

The responses I got revealed a great deal of concern about a deteriorating work environment, such as professors finding themselves looking for work at the end of a fixed-term contract and others being forced to betray their values as educators by having to teach TOEIC or TOEFL prep courses. I believe this is a result of the corporatization of our institutions, which see teachers as expendable and secondary to the needs of perceived markets.

Testing Blues

Gray and Block's critique of the marketization of education has much to say about how a single company has done so much to sabotage the efforts of those of us who are trying to make our classes relevant to our students as human beings.

The villain in both cases is ETS (*Educational Testing Services*), a company which has received much bad press about alleged bias in its standardized tests. These tests are now part of the broader debate about high stakes testing and how schools have ceased being places to develop the whole person but just facilitators of the same old corporate agenda of ranking and classifying people.

The company just rakes it in, suckering Japanese learners by convincing them that they are somehow deficient in learning. In reality, it's because just about everyone and her aunt is persuaded that they need this test in order to lead a happy life and reach enlightenment that more people take the test in Japan than anywhere else. This drives scores down. And profits up for ETS. (TOEFL and TOEIC are marketed by different companies in Japan, but it is the same old ETS.)

Publishers and language schools follow suit, and even whole university programs are based around these (or similar) tests. Even JALT presentations are not immune. Sooner or later, everyone is looking for advice on the best ways to use the tests, the best ways to prepare your classes for them and the best ways to increase students' tests scores. Since everything revolves around these tests, language education becomes just one big test preparation course. Scott Thornbury says:

I have an almost pathological horror of testing and assessment... Things can be going along just swimmingly until the day of the test, or the day

when I'm required to post a grade. Then all hell breaks loose. The cozy relationship I had built up with my class or with individual students is shattered irreparably.

Often this has to do with failing a student, but just as often it has to do with a student not getting the A grade they had always got in the past. Or, worse still, not getting the one percentage point that will make the difference between continued funding or having to leave the program for good.

[Testing] provides feedback, in accordance with principles of validity, reliability and fairness. But, at the same time, testing is evil... [b]ecause it assigns a value to the learner, and, since the value is almost always short of perfection, it essentially de-values the learner.

Worse, testing typically involves measuring students one against the other, thereby destroying at a blow the dynamic of equality that the teacher might have judiciously nurtured up until this point.

It is evil because it is stressful for all concerned, and because the conditions under which testing is conducted (separated desks, no mobile phones, etc.) imply a basic lack of trust in the learners.

It is evil because it pretends to be objective but in fact is inherently subjective. Why? Because, as Johnston points out, 'the selection of what to test, how it will be tested, and how scores are to be interpreted are all acts that require human judgment'. Ultimately, it is the tester – not the test-taker – who decides what counts as knowledge, and how you count knowledge.

In an invigorating swipe at the culture of accountability, Frank Furedi, a sociology professor in the UK, condemns outcomes-driven education as 'a technique through which a utilitarian ethos to academic life serves to diminish what would otherwise be an open-ended experience for student and teacher alike. Its focus on the end product devalues the actual experience of education. When the end acquires such significance, the means become subordinated to it'...Isn't this, finally, the real problem of testing?

Source: "O" is for Outcomes <https://scotthornbury.wordpress.com/tag/assessment/>

The subversive nursing school teacher

Most of us are conditioned to think of subversion as a no-go area, no matter how unbearable the situation we find ourselves in. In Japan the *gambare* spirit, the appeal to harmony and not making waves is held up as a cultural given when, in fact, much of this can be traced to the Meiji era and a nationalist ethic. Nevertheless, it can be extremely hard to be subversive in this context.

Here, I'd like to offer one personal example which, although not concerning a language teacher, can be instructive for those of us who are looking for a way to reassert our values in the classroom.

My wife taught nursing for the first and last time two years ago in an extended high school program (3 years plus 2). Though her students had already completed their 3 years of high school, she was still required to check their skirt length and make sure their hair had not been dyed.

20 years earlier, before she herself had become a nurse, she studied at a progressive school for social work and took humanistic education courses. And yet here she was in a teaching situation that demanded she play the role of authoritarian.

At the entrance ceremony, there was no way that she was going to promote patriarchy and sing the required national anthem, *Kimigayo*. Although she would have liked to sit down through it, she stood but did not open her mouth.

In the classroom, the students reflexively stood and bowed whenever she entered the room. This did not sit well with her, so she decided to go and stand with the students and bow in the direction of the blackboard with them.

"Why didn't you just tell them you didn't like hierarchical customs and ask them not to stand?" I asked. "But then they would still have had to obey me. Too authoritarian," she replied.

Conclusion

The survey responses that I received provide many insights into how teachers who value student autonomy are themselves thwarted as educators by a system that tries to fit both teacher and student into the corporate mould. Those teachers who don't conform, and even many that do, are tossed out on their ears when their services are no longer needed. Employment insecurity — at least in the case of non-Japanese nationals — can affect visa, health and pension status and potentially lead to destitution and/or deportation.

Sample Teacher Survey Responses (excerpts)

The biggest issue for many teachers was how control of the curriculum has been taken out of the hands of teachers and students. Several described how they tried to subvert the system and provide something more meaningful to students than they otherwise could if they'd only followed the agenda.

Being subversive carries risks. Whether or how to resist, then, is a question that many of us have to confront. I hope this article serves to stimulate discussion on how to be a subversive - but safe and gainfully employed - language professional.

(a) Rare and Relatively Good Places to Work

▪ Teacher A: *At my vocational school, we were paid like professionals and given responsibility for creating an integrated curriculum with clear goals, yet we could meet them in individual creative ways*

(b) Ageism

▪ Teacher B: *At my institution, the administration violated their policy of no forced retirements in order to attract younger non-Japanese teachers.*

(c) Working Conditions

▪ Teacher G: *I was attracted to teaching because I was sure I would love doing it and never tire of it. But then you're worked to death in a full-time job that ends after 4 years. I love my students and I love teaching. Sometimes, work gets in the way.*

Teacher H: *As far as job security is concerned, ageism and sexism are a huge factor. I've reached an age (54) where I can expect one more contract, then will have to rush from university to university as a part-timer in order to provide for my family.*

(d) MacDonaldisation of Language Teaching

▪ Teacher I: *To our companies (and increasingly universities) we are service personnel and they are clients. We offer a one-size-fits-all product with materials churned out under sweatshop conditions.*

(e) Overtesting

▪ Teacher L: *What I hate is how our company started adding more and more tests (which we have to squeeze into our limited classroom time, then grade and enter into a computer). Never mind that we test things that are arbitrary, where even the teachers can't agree on the right answer.*

(f) Little Subversities

▪ Teacher M: *In the sweltering factory where I teach, the students are engineers. Despite warning signs on maintaining a proper intake of salt and water, a blue collar worker died one year. When I asked if he'd had time to cool off, a student said that workers had no time to rest. One white collar worker told me he had to work 3 days and nights in a row with no sleep. I was supposed to mark him late or absent when he missed 30 minutes of class. I never did. Last I heard, he's still alive. Another had to take leave because he was depressed. I gave him a passing grade, as a fail would put pressure on him from Human Resources. I wrote to him recently to see how he was doing. I'm worried about his mental and physical health.*

These comments are a few short excerpts from my survey. Contact me for the full set of responses.

Personal Background: Underlying Values

Who we are as human beings and as teachers has as much to do with what we were exposed to as children as with what we studied on the road to becoming educators. Here's a brief history of significant events that have affected me.

1964-1970: I was a rebel: my mother was thrown out of the PTA for trying to integrate my all white elementary school, Public School 64, Ozone Park, New York. At John Adams High School, my friends and I were targets of the school football team because we refused to stand up and say the *Pledge of Allegiance* during the Vietnam War. I started writing poems and protest songs starting in 1966, which I've continued up until the present.

1972: At Queens College, my professor's brother was Michael Schwerner, killed by the KKK in Mississippi. I handed out flyers against Honeywell Corporation land mines used in Vietnam. A detective from the New York City "Red Squad" phoned my parents and asked if they knew what their son was doing. My father told him to "fuck off" and hung up. I was prepared to go to jail or Sweden rather than fight in the war. They never called me.

1977-78: I went to graduate school, where John Fanselow and others encouraged us to look beyond orthodox methodologies. My first boss at Queens College took off points when I dropped my Silent Way pointer in class. She didn't like "new fangled methods". I taught writing at LaGuardia Community College to inner city freshmen whose previous teachers had called them stupid because they wrote and spoke a non-standard dialect. I can't forget Sandra, who wrote a beautiful essay about the day she realised that she wasn't stupid.

1979-2013: I've been a full and part-time teacher in Japan and was a co-founder of my first school's labor union. I helped my wife as a homeless volunteer in Tokyo's Sanya area. We moved to Miyazaki in 2012 after the Tepco nuclear disaster, and gave up our jobs. A year ago, I began teaching for a company which used slave labor in World War II. Then again, IBM helped the Nazis, so there's no escaping ethical dilemmas. Though some prefer to look the other way, these dilemmas are everywhere if we choose to see them.

Gray, J. & Block, D. (2012). 'The marketisation of language teacher education and neoliberalism' in *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics*. Routledge.

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