Note: The statement below launches Topic 4 in the ReNLA Research Agenda Project. Please feel free to join in with discussions and research work in this area and to share your ideas and findings via the ReNLA website or via AUTO-L, the Research Network’s email discussion list at AUTO-L[at]JISCMAIL.AC.UK, if you are a member of the ReNLA. Comments in the comment box below are also very much welcome.

Learner autonomy in groups

David Palfreyman, Zayed University, UAE

Autonomy has historically been associated with the notion of "independence" (from a teacher, from a classroom, from formal educational contexts); but social factors need to be considered in researching learner autonomy (Palfreyman, 2003). Kohonen (1992) and Little (1995), among others, argue that learner autonomy ultimately involves interdependence between learner and teacher and between learners. The idea of pedagogy for autonomy (Smith, 2002) necessarily involves a teacher role in learner autonomy, and a number of recommendations have been made regarding this role (e.g. Voller, 1997; Crabbe, 1993; Vieira & Moreira, 2008). Interaction between learners has been a focus of research in sociocultural approaches to learning (e.g. Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Lantolf, 2000); links have sometimes been made between collaborative learning and learner autonomy, especially in relation to blended learning (e.g. Ho & Crookall, 1995; Schwienhorst, 2003), but the connections between these two concepts could be investigated in much more detail, and in classroom/ other contexts.

POSSIBLE TOPICS/QUESTIONS:

1: The autonomous learner in a group.
(How) do groups support individual autonomy?
In what sense can an individual studying/learning in a group be considered autonomous?
In what ways can his/her autonomy develop through being part of a group?

2. The autonomous learning group:
In what ways may a learning group be autonomous?
Can a group exercise or develop autonomy in a way separate from the individuals within it?
What would be the contribution of individuals to such autonomy?
Can a "learning community" be considered such an "autonomous group"?
Does individual autonomy help the group as well as the individual him/herself?
Are autonomous learners "team players"?

3. Differences between groups:
How does the "climate" or "culture" of a learning/study group affect learner autonomy within the group?
Are some groups more conducive to autonomy than others?
What prompts some groups to come together and work on study/learning projects in an autonomous way?
What factors maintain an autonomous learning group?
Do certain kinds of individual (or certain combinations of personality/learning style/knowledge level among the members of a group) benefit more from group work than others, in terms of developing their autonomy?

4. Different types of group formation:
How do all of the above processes work in different kinds of group: groups set up by teachers; groups which form spontaneously for learning purposes (e.g. informal study groups); groups formed in other ways which take on a learning aspect/orientation (e.g. peer groups, family groups – cf. Palfreyman, 2011)

The questions above could be researched in various ways: using qualitative data such as interviews or observation (e.g. 2, 3) but also some quantitative data (e.g. instruments for measuring individual differences for 4).

References:
