

## DISTANCE LEARNING, AUTONOMY DEVELOPMENT AND LANGUAGE: DISCUSSING POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS

(Aprendizagem a distância, desenvolvimento da autonomia e  
linguagem: discutindo possíveis relações)

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*ABSTRACT: This paper addresses issues related to autonomy in the context of online distance learning in order to examine possible connections between autonomy and distance learning, examine different concepts of autonomy, and map the language of autonomy in asynchronous communication. Three theoretical areas have given support to the study: distance learning as critical inquiry, as proposed by Garrison et al. (2003); autonomy development as proposed by Benson (2001); and interpersonal communication as proposed by systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004; Martin & Rose 2003). The context of situation to be focused on is an online teacher development course for Brazilian teachers of English as a foreign language – Teachers' Links. Within that context, specific reference will be made to some processes of apparent development of autonomous behavior and the linguistic trails they have left behind for us to observe. Data originates from asynchronous communication in discussion forums. Results indicate that the language of autonomy development can be mapped both at the level of register and genre.*

*KEY-WORDS: autonomy development; language indicators; distance learning.*

*RESUMO: Este trabalho trata de questões relacionadas à autonomia no contexto da aprendizagem on-line visando a examinar possíveis relações entre autonomia e aprendizagem a distância, examinar diferentes conceitos de autonomia e mapear a linguagem da autonomia na comunicação assíncrona. Três áreas teóricas fundamentam o estudo: a aprendizagem a distância como investigação crítica, conforme proposta por Garrison et al. (2003); o desenvolvimento da autonomia conforme proposto por Benson (2001) e a comunicação interpessoal conforme proposta por lingüistas sistêmico-funcionais (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004; Martin & Rose 2003). O contexto de situação a ser enfocado constitui-se em um curso on-line de desenvolvimento de professores para professores*

*brasileiros de inglês como língua estrangeira – o Teachers' Links. Nesse contexto, serão feitas referências a alguns processos de desenvolvimento aparente de comportamento autônomo e a algumas evidências lingüísticas por eles deixadas. Os dados observados se originam de comunicações assíncronas em fóruns de discussão. Os resultados indicam que a linguagem do desenvolvimento da autonomia pode ser mapeada em ambos os níveis, o do registro e o do gênero.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *desenvolvimento da autonomia; indicadores lingüísticos; aprendizagem a distância.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses issues related to autonomy in an interface with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the context of online distance learning. One main reason for this interest is my research and coordinating activities in online distance learning for the last ten years, during which language teachers' development programs have received special attention. In the scope of those programs, autonomy development has been a main issue, whether it relates to processes of digital literacy, language learning or language teaching development, and, often, with reference to all three areas simultaneously. A second reason might be, as Boulton (2006:101) puts it, that "ICT and autonomy are each "a good thing" insofar as they have potential to promote (language) learning".

But have they? What explicit connections can we establish between autonomy and distance learning? Can all connections presuppose the same concept of autonomy? Will processes of distance learning increase autonomy? Or is a degree of autonomy necessary for distance learning to be effective? These are the issues I shall try to address.

In order to deal with those issues, I will use a triangular support structure consisting of theoretical tools and concepts offered by research in three different areas of study.

In the area of Distance learning, particularly useful will be the key notions offered by Garrison et al. (2003): *community of inquiry, critical inquiry, critical thinking, social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence*. These notions are especially helpful in the context of asynchronous interaction,

the most appropriate medium in distance learning for exploiting connectivity and planning to the full.

To try and conduct a discussion about the meaning of autonomy development in distance learning, I shall bring in Holec (1981) and Benson (2001 and 2006). I shall first refer to Holec's definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", that seems to place in a central position the cognitive and metacognitive abilities to set learning aims, to plan one's learning route and to assess one's own performance. In Holec's view, autonomy is then a result of critical reflection and the capacity to make conscious decisions about one's learning. Also important for the discussion are the ideas that learner autonomy can be developed (Benson 2001) and that there are difficulties in developing the capacity for critical reflection required by conscious decision-making, the basis for autonomy development.

To complete the triangular support, this paper will draw on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004; Martin & Rose 2003) to observe how the development of autonomy in the context of distance learning can materialize in language. SFL provides analytical tools for the analysis of spoken and written interactions in terms of what people talk about, how they relate to each other and how language is organized into an overall structure and in patterns of language use. SFL tools enable linguistic descriptions at different levels of delicacy that explain how language is used to achieve a variety of communicative or educational aims.

The context of situation I shall refer to here is one of an online teacher development course for Brazilian teachers of English as a foreign language – Teachers' Links. Within that context, specific reference will be made to two processes of apparent development of autonomous behavior and the linguistic trails they have left behind for us to observe.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### *2.1. Distance learning as Inquiry*

The type of distance learning that is relevant for this discussion favors the construction of "a critical community of learners, composed of teachers

and students transacting with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that will lead to further learning. Such a community encourages cognitive independence and social interdependence simultaneously.” (Garrison & Anderson 2003:23). This critical community, also referred to as a community of inquiry, requires appropriately strong social presence (Garrison et al. 2003:50), that helps shape and support the community. In educational contexts, a community of inquiry also enjoys some form of teaching presence (Garrison et al. 2003:65), whether it is performed by the teacher or any other person taking up leadership and mediation. But a community of inquiry more importantly implies interaction among its members and collaborative construction of meaning – a well-developed cognitive presence among all members of the community (Garrison et al. 2003:61). Cognitive presence is crucial because it may result in, as well as it results from, critical thinking, as long as learners are able to construct meaning through continued reflection and discourse.

The three major components of a community of inquiry, *social*, *cognitive* and *teaching presence*, then refer, respectively, to the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as real people, to the construction of meaning through sustained communication and to the mediation of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and quality learning outcomes.

Continued reflection may result in collaborative construction of (new) meanings if the members of the community manage to move from the recognition of a dilemma or the posing of an issue to a gradual construction of a solution or a new proposition through intense exchange and connection of ideas. This entails taking an issue or a problem that emerges from experience to a brainstorming situation, then dealing with the different ideas that emerge during brainstorming so as to compare and contrast them, attempting some synthesis, and finally applying (or considering the application of) new meanings and solutions in real world situations.

Bearing in mind the framework for distance learning outlined so far, what definitions will be appropriate for autonomous behaviour?

## 2.2. *The social nature of Autonomy*

For many researchers in the field, autonomy is about the learner deciding what, how and when to learn. This position seems to derive from Holec's seminal proposal of a concept for autonomy, "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981:3). Although this definition is normally associated with the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of autonomy development, as stated above, it is possible to understand it yet another way.

Assuming that autonomy is intimately associated to cognition is a consequence of approaching learning mainly as a cognitive process. This is when "taking charge" acquires psychological meaning as *assuming a strong internal disposition to learn*. In a new learner autonomy process, from that perspective, an important part of the learning process will have been taken care of, for irrespective of materials, teachers, resources and dynamics, the learner will only learn under conditions he considers relevant to the psychological decision he has already made. In this sense autonomy is an attribute of learners, as Benson (2001:2) has argued: "...autonomy is not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process".

However, if learning is also conceived as a social process, then "taking charge" will, in fact, mean making social decisions that will affect learning as a social activity.

The difficulty in associating *becoming autonomous* to making decisions with respect to one's own learning in an online context, such as helping choose materials, is that in distance learning students' decisions can be made in some spheres of action but not in others. Due to the nature, methods and present conditions for the design of distance learning materials, course aims, instructions and a large amount of materials must be prepared well in advance, often long before students enroll for the course. The degree of decision making in relation to learning goals and course content will then vary from context to context and, in any case, must not be an important parameter for autonomy development in distance learning contexts. In other words, a smaller degree of decision making by students on content choice will not necessarily restrict the possibilities of autonomy development. If this were true, highly structured programmes would not

be able to promote autonomy. As Hurd et al. (2001:348) have argued, “then it would seem that highly directed learning programmes such as those developed at the OU (Open University) cannot promote autonomy, as the elements of choice and decision-making on the part of the student would seem to be almost non-existent”.

This seems to be, in fact, a confusing conceptual area. There is awareness about the often limiting operational conditions of distance learning course planning and design, that do not always allow for student choice of topics or incorporating students’ experiences into the program (for a discussion, see Sprenger and Wadt, this volume). But autonomy development in distance learning is claimed to be possible, in spite of not including much decision making in the planning sphere. However, when authors specify the relationship between distance learning and autonomy, it is possible to observe that only time, space, pace and isolation turn up as specific elements of the distance learning situation. Murphy (2007:74) exemplifies this position:

“Distance learners are often assumed to be learning autonomously because they control a number of aspects of their learning, such as the time, the pace, what to study and when to study, but they do not necessarily take responsibility for setting goals, planning or evaluating learning... Distance learning materials have to anticipate a range of potential language learning needs and cater for students working in isolation without immediate access to teachers or peers”.

This seems to indicate that distance learning is still regarded as a learning activity that differs from face-to-face learning activities only with respect to circumstantial elements: where people are, when they engage in the activity, how often they study. Nothing is mentioned about the effect that those elements of mode have on the other elements of the context of situation (field and tenor) of a complex linguistic activity that promotes learning and autonomy development. Maybe not enough is known about the interpersonal and representational processes involved in distance learning in online contexts. Besides, the fact that isolation is still associated with distance learning means that not all distance learning educators are tuned up with the role of digital communication for the expansion and the strengthening of professional and leisure networks. Maybe there is still a lot of mystery enveloping the processes of digital literacy and of reading and writing in online courses, whether they are directed to educational production or to communication within the course.

Given the issues raised above and considering at least two main approaches to learning autonomy, I would like to propose that, while acknowledging the psychological aspects of an autonomy-development process, more importance should be given to the social features of autonomous behavior. It is constructed in interaction with others, in relation to socially relevant tasks, in diverse social contexts and with different social aims. People do not seem to develop autonomy as a general, individual ability. Rather, one develops autonomous behavior in specific areas, in relation to well defined social tasks, with specific social purposes in mind. Moreover, it is only in relation to autonomy's social nature that educational action makes sense.

From the above discussion it seems clear that defining the nature of autonomy is a complex matter. Nevertheless, it is possible to say with a good degree of certainty that the type of distance learning I am committed to is not in any way related to self access, teacher-independent, solitary activities. If this position was not a matter of theoretical choice and practical experience, it would be a matter of historical intelligence: it is essential to pay attention to past research and take its results into account. Acknowledging "the difficulty of making self access centres work independently of teacher support for autonomy" is referred to by Benson (2006:26) as an important contribution from Gardner & Miller (1999). If in face to face education, learning mediated by little human interaction has lost credit, why should we agree that in distance learning it should pave the path to autonomy?

Therefore, since I agree with Benson (2001: 6-7) that "there is no necessary relationship between self-instruction and the development of autonomy" and that "under certain conditions, self-instructed modes of learning may even inhibit autonomy", it is possible to say that the type of autonomy requested and/or promoted by the distance courses I am involved with is not at all connected with the idea of "embracing the isolation, transforming it into a workable situation by fostering student independence from the teachers" (Boulton 2006:104). Rather, I believe that autonomy will develop as online interaction becomes more meaningful and effective and the use of tools more appropriate; as social presence supports cognitive complexity development; and as independence and isolation are gradually replaced by close interdependence and collaborative work. In a sense, then, autonomy development seems to be intimately related to the growth of

awareness that learning quality improves as social and cognitive presences are strengthened.

### *2.3. The trails of autonomy in discourse*

Relating autonomy to discourse is very important, especially in online educational contexts, because it is mainly through students' discourse that we are able to observe patterns of autonomy development. However, what we will be looking for in discourse, in order to relate it to autonomy development, depends very much on our concept of autonomy.

If one views autonomy as a capacity to learn in isolation and to become teacher independent (and, by extension, independent from colleagues), one will probably look for a decrease in the number of contacts between student and teacher and for an increase in discourse related to third party objects. Individual production will be expected to be about things and people, therefore ideationally focused.

However, if one approaches autonomy as social behavior, mediated by interaction and interdependence, one will look for completely different discourse patterns. The number of contacts between student and teacher and among peers is expected to grow and become more meaningful, effective and tool-suitable. Rather than focusing on cognitive independence, i.e. being individual and object-oriented, a good part of student's production is expected to signal relations in the course, i.e., to signal quality social presence. So, for example, one would observe who students address, when they use a discussion forum, and how they address each other.

So, SFL's analytical tools will be used for the analysis of some written interactions that may exemplify how autonomy development, as it is conceived here, materializes in discourse. Rather than looking at what students talk about, SFL analytical tools will be used for us to observe how people learn to relate to each other and how adequate their use of language becomes, in relation to the digital tool in focus.

## **3. The context of the present discussion**

The distance learning context I shall refer to here is a three-module course for teachers of English as a foreign language, Teachers' Links (TL).

The course participants come from a variety of schools, both state and private, but the majority come from state schools and are offered a grant by a local language school that is traditionally committed to continuing language teacher development programs.

The general aim of the course is to give a contribution to the continuing education of teachers of English as critical professionals. The main objectives are to help teachers become fully aware of the possibilities for development: out in the world as professionals of language education, in the classroom as language teachers and in the academic sector as classroom researchers. These aims necessarily imply a view of continuing education as a process that enables teachers to educate themselves as they move on in their task as educators.

The course is organized into two components, one that focuses on activities for development and another one that concentrates on reflective sessions about the issues that require the most awareness and disposition for transformation. In both components participating teachers are encouraged to deal with important teaching and educational themes, as well as discuss central issues in their own professional lives, to communicate with each other through synchronous and asynchronous tools and to produce collaborative and individual tasks that others are invited to comment on.

In the activities of both components teachers are expected to go beyond exchange of information, brainstorming and exploration of ideas to gain critical thinking depth through integration of ideas and resolution of problems.

However, as Celani and Collins (2005:46) have reported,

“one difficulty in the attainment of this aim is the fact that public school teachers of English tend to be pretty isolated and conversations with their peers about work or professional experiences are rare. Either they are the only teachers in their schools and rarely meet other teachers of English, or they work so many hours and have so many groups to cope with that no time is left for exchange of ideas, let alone collective practices that might foster critical thinking”.

So, when teachers join the program, they tend to have very little familiarity with critical thinking and reflective practices and only very rarely do they belong to a community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2003).

As an online course, TL requires high levels of interaction among participants, individual and collective use of course resources and tools, and guided use of Internet resources. Course instructions, resources like orienting maps and diagrams, materials like reading texts, video-lectures and activities like debates, discussions and reports, to name but a few, are mediated by different course tools. Together, course resources and their mediating tools require special study habits, specific navigation abilities, a reformulation of one's own concept of time and space and new communication dynamics. The use of the forum, as described below, will illustrate how and why this is so.

#### **4. The forum as a privileged data source**

The forum seems to be an appropriate locus for observation of trails of autonomous behavior, because it gives participants opportunity for planning and reflection, both of which are essential in the process of awareness growth. Of all communication tools, the forum is the one that best brings together the essential properties of online learning. As Garrison (2002) emphasizes, "It is the asynchronicity and connectivity properties of online learning that offer the potential for the unique integration of reflective and collaborative learning opportunities".

Besides, the asynchronous forum has received focal interest in this paper for the challenge it constitutes to all participants, teachers included: although it mediates the most important communicative events in the course, it is not easy to use. Communicating effectively in a forum, with autonomy, requires development of awareness with respect to a variety of specific features.

First, previous experience in the traditional classroom may not help for a successful forum discussion. When participants start their course activities, especially those with no previous experience in online learning, they often face a forum discussion as a lesson task (see Celani & Collins 2005:50-54 for details). However, a forum discussion does not share much with a traditional lesson but for the fact that it should have learning objectives, a theme and maybe make reference to specific course contents. Neither does it conform to a common lesson pattern, with a clear time-space context. Rather, the discussion must evolve during a certain period

of time. And since it is asynchronous, it builds up as people in different places and at different times read previous messages and contribute with a new one. Therefore, an online forum discussion is constructed and registered in a given virtual space but originates from multi time-spatial initiatives.

Second, a high degree of interaction with teachers and peers is expected. Here, the main challenge is to go beyond brainstorming, questioning, personal reports on everyday situations, unjustified opinions and simple maintenance of social ties. For the teacher, the main challenge is to mediate discussion and model contributions, so that students learn to structure effective arguments. As Coffin et al (2005:465) have stated,

“effective argumentation involves the ability to present well supported and reasoned arguments as well as to engage with alternative points of view—challenging, critiquing, reinforcing or defending them where appropriate.”

A successful forum discussion may help participants develop learning autonomy and improve on the construction of justified opinions and points of view, of clear relations between ideas from different sources and of solutions to problems. In fact, a forum discussion “gives students greater time for reflection on their own and others’ arguments than ephemeral seminar discussions” (Coffin et al 2005:465).

## 5. TL and autonomy

First, it is necessary to make it clear that the degree of freedom in TL is relative. When student teachers choose to take the course, they must be prepared to accept help and explicit orientation in order to do what an autonomy development process for online learning requires.

In other words, distance learning in TL requires a strong disposition to learn and a systematic process of informed and perfectly context-relevant decision making. In that sense, the course has some important pre-requisites. For those that manage to meet them, it promotes autonomous behavior of a certain kind.

However, not all teachers who choose to take the course succeed. Many dropouts have admitted that they thought the course would be less demanding, easier, less interactive and have claimed not to have had enough

time for all expected activities. Distance learning as practiced in TL can actually be more interactive than many of the traditional courses some of our student-teachers have taken before and for that reason be considered too much. In fact, student-teachers who concentrate on the end product seem to regard a demanding process as a waste of time. Boulton's (2006:28) reports on the difficulties of their ICT insertion in courses of Université Nancy 2 show that this feeling does not seem to be geographically or culturally circumscribed:

“... we still have the figure of 60% of students who had a maximum of 2 personal contacts in the first 7 months of the year. This may indicate that many students are less keen on ICTs than we often suppose, even if they do not reject them altogether... 52% choose to receive their courses on paper rather than on line; of those who do receive courses on line, 80% print them out...This is in fact one of the major lessons of our experience at the CTU: initially aiming to exploit ICTs to the full, we found that students simply did not see the point of spending time mastering complex tools when a pencil and paper will do...”

To try and bring these aspects of the problem together into a coherent reflection that can help us observe signs of autonomy development in online contexts, I would like to say that autonomy development will be observable in an online context when it is possible to see that there have been changes of behavior during the course of a learning process. These changes of behavior should happen in the direction of what is considered an improvement in quality and in frequency of occurrence. So, for example, considering that systematic interaction in an online context is naturally threatening and time-consuming, an improvement in the quality and frequency of interaction will signal autonomy development. Changes in quality, in turn, can be observed in discourse.

In order to show how autonomy can materialize as linguistic trails, it is important, first, to identify different kinds of behavior that will signal autonomy. Below are some of the most challenging and context specific activities in distance learning. I believe their presence will signal autonomy development in a distance learning context.

- Autonomy development requires making the most of the internet as a resource and investing time and effort to refine skills. It demands that students take into serious account the orientation provided. They must come to realize that the time they spend is worth while.

- Distance learning autonomy depends on good search skills. Students must develop the ability to evaluate the quality of the pages they bring to their screen, to tell the good from the bad. Since they must read a vast amount of documents on line, they must be able to develop strategies in finding, assessing and reading documents on screen. They must also go beyond the activities and materials provided and learn that collaborative work goes beyond contributing with part of a whole.
- In the sphere of interpersonal activity, autonomy development requires that students learn how to cope with intensive interaction with peers and teachers and develop more careful planning for successful asynchronous interaction.
- In relation to context bound modes of operating, developing autonomy means performing many different complex actions and operations simultaneously, transforming one's relationship with studying time and learning space, gradually building up speed and confidence.
- Finally, in the more specific area of technical literacy practices, autonomous development requires fluency in the use of the virtual learning environment.
- Technical literacy, interactive, content based and organizational practices seem to have a relationship of reciprocal dependency, since one cannot develop without the other and development of one seems to foster development of the others.

## 6. Linguistic trails of autonomy development

In order to examine some linguistic trails of autonomy development, I have selected a focal student teacher that has been pointed by his teacher as a notable case of autonomy development during the first module of the course. JR, as he will be referred to, is a state school teacher of English as a foreign language, has had near to no contact with technology when he joins TL, which is his first experience in online learning.

Before joining the first discussion forum of the course, students have read a text about conceptions of reading. The forum invites them to

contribute with reports on five different issues related to reading: Which everyday activities require reading? Is reading the same in all situations? What differences are there in the reading process in different situations? How do you react when you face a text written in a foreign language? What makes reading in a foreign language easy or difficult? The instructions posted by the teacher remind the students that the questions must not be answered one by one, that they are an indication of the route along which discussion should go. These are given explicitly because in previous experiences we have found out that many students tend to simply answer questions put to them at the beginning of a forum. However, we want them to use the questions as stimuli for a joint discussion.

Considering the messages written by JR in the first forum and the messages where JR or a contribution he has made is mentioned, I have put together a conversational thread. Bearing in mind that the language used in the messages may signal changes and transformations during the course, I first focused on his ability to use interpersonal strategies.

#### Excerpt 1

Subject: Why do we read? What does reading mean?

When we are interested in some subject we try to understand it.

So we start this process using everything we can. We look around looking for everything that could satisfy our curiosity; so every sense starts working.

In my opinion, we cannot forget that we can understand things by sense of smell, sense of hearing, sense of touch and so on.

When I am inside a classroom I ask myself if my students really know how to use all their senses in learning.

Many students of state schools are so stressed because of their family problems (unemployment and alcoholism, for example) that they cannot concentrate in class; they are not interested in paying attention to what teachers and their colleagues are talking about.

Maybe, we could start reading by teaching children and teenagers how to concentrate in class and how to use all their senses in learning with pleasure.

From the beginning of excerpt 1 it is clear that *we* is a collective entity he hides himself behind in order to express his world view, an impersonal choice he uses to expose his ideas about learning. For him, learning depends on *being interested* and *waking up one's senses*. Then he moves the argument to the classroom in order to say that his students *are stressed*, *cannot concentrate*, are prevented from *being interested* and from *using their senses*.

Although this is a message in a discussion forum, interpersonal markers are almost absent. JR is talking about things, people, ideas, beliefs, opinions, his classroom, but he does not seem to be talking to anyone in particular.

To illustrate the degree of interaction expected in a forum, let us look at excerpts 2 and 3, below. Excerpt 2 makes reference to two other messages, as well as to JR's first message. This is an interactive message in the sense that it is a response. Although there is no direct interlocution with anyone in particular, it makes reference to three other messages and shows that the writer is reading the other messages. Reference is made to what JR writes in relation to the topic of *students' attention*.

#### Excerpt 2

I agree with Colleague 2 and Colleague 3 when they say that we face a great variety of texts along the day and we use different strategies to understand them. But I think that we have been practicing all these together, without noticing them. But our pupils are not mature enough to understand that. They're intelligent but they don't want to think! Students only decode the message because they're not stimulated to go beyond that. They'll be aware of that when they go to college and see the tasks they need to produce, as concise reports and so forth... So, it's important to teach them to pay attention in class and to concentrate, as JR said, in order to show them that we can read or study for pleasure too, not only as an obligation. However, that's a hard job...

Excerpt 3, below, is very interesting because relations among many different things are established. This is a rare movement and is exactly what is expected in a discussion forum: that the participant establishes links between messages sent to the forum and across to other external relevant contributions, establishing endophoric and exoforic relations. The network this message establishes brings together the student's own views, the views of her peers, the message in a film, the message conveyed in their reading assignment and another reading reference of her own.

#### Excerpt 3

Hi, everybody! It's Easter! Have a nice day!

Talking about how we read....

Actually, except for working or studying, reading is such a natural aspect of life that I really don't think much about it, it's unconscious, as Colleague 7 said. I just read without greater reflections about what I am reading.

Of course reading is not the same all the time because there are some techniques that make the message appealing, as colors, images, sizes of letters, and so on. Besi-

des, the reader mood makes all the difference. One should be available to get into communication.

But a touching text is irresistible. I read it again and again and again. Have you ever been moved by a text?

...

Colleague 3 said that we have to change our lessons. I totally agree with you, Colleague 3. As teachers, we should help our students associate their realities to the message of the text and try to make them interested in reading, using challenging, enjoyable activities.

...

Applying the strategies suggested by Rojo demands qualified teachers as well as a good plan to make things work as expected, for developing critical reading.

...

JR talked about using the senses in learning and mentioned a very important aspect in education: pleasure. Well, JR, do you know that this is exactly what Celso Antunes says? This author recommends: "feel the text with all your senses: touch it, smell it, taste it!" So does Rojo, for whom emotion is one of the abilities to develop constructive reading. She says: discuss with the text, make it alive, interact with your reading!

This reflection has just reminded me of the film *Dead Poets' Society*, is that the title? Do you remember the way that the literature teacher taught them? Impressive, don't you think?

See you

Colleague 4

After having been exposed to a number of interactive messages like the two exemplified above, JR's second message (excerpt 4), shows a mark of interaction. The message is still stiff and he is still responding to a task. His questions are not addressed to his colleagues or teachers, his request at the end is clear evidence that he is simply doing his homework, but this seems to be an improvement in relation to the first message.

#### **Excerpt 4**

Subject: How do we read? Second text.

It is not easy to read a text in a foreign language but based on what I have learnt so far, we can reduce these difficulties. First, browse the text and make a dialog with the text, mixing the bottom-up and top-down strategies. Ask the following questions:

Why do I have to read this text?

What kind of information I need to assimilate?

Judging by its formatting, what is it about?

What have I just learnt about this subject so far?

How is the text organized?

Are there any pictures? What information can I infer from it?

Besides the cognates, which words are also familiar?

I believe that this process can improve our process of reading. What do you think about that, colleagues and teachers? Could you please check my work?

JR

In contrast to his status as a novice, as discussed above, the last forum of the module shows that JR's autonomy as a successful online learner has greatly developed. In this thread of 12 messages, JR posts 10. So, with respect to frequency, his contribution shows drastic improvement. With respect to rhythm, JR shows that he is acquiring the new study time concept. The dates tagged to the messages show that he logs on to the course nearly everyday and sometimes more than once a day. This is a sure sign of involvement and autonomy development. Moreover, the times of day shown to his messages allow us to see that rather than observing a timely routine, he keeps a rhythmic interactive practice attached to real needs (cf. for example, asking for help in excerpt 15).

In relation to collaborative work practices, JR not only talks about his own contribution (choosing and evaluating a website, cf. excerpt 8), but also requests the other people in his group to speed up their contribution (excerpts 7, 8, 9). It seems, then, that towards the end of the module he assumes the role of group leader.

<p><b>Excerpt 7</b>  <b>14. Subject: GROUP A.</b>  Monday, 06/17/2007, 17:29:26  Hello group A.  I took a look at our websites and I enjoyed all of them. What do you think? I'll be waiting for your decision. What did you think about them? We need to start our work. see you around.  JR.</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 8</b>  <b>17. Subject: GROUP A.</b>  Tuesday, 06/18/2007, 11:27:09  Hi, group A.  I looked better the websites and, in my opinion, the best is the third one. Have you ever decided? Please, make contact.  Bye,  JR.</p>
<p><b>Excerpt 9</b>  <b>18. Subject: Re: group A</b>  Wednesday, 06/19/2007, 00:29:18  Hi, Colleague  I thought we had to choose among those three that are in the unit two. Hadn't we?  JR</p>	

With respect to the use of interpersonal language, JR now shows a variety of forms and functions that bring together lively cognitive and social presence. In excerpts 13 and 17, for example, he uses effective appraisal markers to register social presence.

<p><b>Excerpt 13</b>  <b>33. Subject: GROUP A</b>  Friday, 06/21/2007, 23:59:25  Hi colleagues:  I loved the way you posted the text in our portfolio. Congratulations, girls.  JR.</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 17</b>  <b>60. Subject: BBC messages.</b>  Thursday, 06/27/2007, 10:34:34  Hi everybody.  I smiled with relief when I saw that I wasn't the only one with difficulties with this site (BBC). I have just sent many messages and I am also waiting to be considered a trusted member.  I'll see you there.  JR.</p>
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Still within the interpersonal domain, it is worth noticing that in excerpts 7, 8 (above) and 12 (below), his questions are true interactive questions (not homework questions as in the beginning). Besides, his requests and demands in excerpts 7, 8, 9 (above) and 11 (below) are strategically modulated.

<p><b>Excerpt 11</b>  <b>30. Subject: Hi members group A.</b>  Friday, 06/21/2007, 11:22:39  I sent my first contribution to our portfolio. I would like all of you read it and check (or delete) if necessary. Please, make contact and send your opinions about the work because I feel insecure about it.  I hope see you soon around.  bye.  JR.</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 12</b>  <b>31. Subject: Hello colleagues and teachers.</b>  Friday, 06/21/2007, 11:32:30 :  I am really in doubt about choosing an online community. I know that I have describe and evaluate the site that me and my group chose, but, do I have to be a member of it? Couldn't I choose another one for being a member?  Could you please send me an answer?  bye,  JR.</p>
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In relation to search skills, reading on the screen and evaluating sites, excerpts 8 and 11 make us think that they are being worked on. JR reports on the evaluation he has conducted and requests confirmation, saying he feels insecure about it. This seems to show that there is a considerable degree of awareness and care in the process of decision making that he submits to the group he is working collaboratively with.

A final remark on the signs of autonomy in this thread must be made with respect to JR's acquired ability to cope with several actions and operations. From excerpts 15 to 18, JR reports on enrolling at BBC's site, checking for confirmation in his email box, logging on to BBC's message board, interacting with people from three different countries and looking forward to a live chat session with people from all over the world, as well as uploading his work to his portfolio area in the course's virtual environment and interacting with his group in the forum. This set of coordinated actions is extremely complex and can only be accomplished because JR has got over the operational phase. This is indeed evidence that there has been a meaningful autonomous leap in the sphere of digital literacy development.

<p><b>Excerpt 15</b>  <b>45. Subject: BBC</b>          Tuesday, 06/25/2007, 12:11:00          Hi everybody,          I tried to join the BBC but I think I could not. Every time I try to write a message, another message appears and says that I have to answer some questions in my mail box, but their e-mail doesn't come. What can I do?          Thanks.          JR</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 18</b>  <b>61. Subject: BBC messages.</b>          Friday, 06/28/2007, 00:20:39          Hello everybody:          I am finally a trusted user of BBC site. I saw my messages on the board today afternoon and I answered some messages from Italy, German and France. It was very nice because there weren't other languages to communicate in but English. And how about you? How was your trial?          The next step will be to try the BBC live chat.          bye,          JR.</p>
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## 7. Final Remarks

This paper proposed to elaborate a few possible answers to the question whether autonomy and technology have the potential to promote learning, as well as to indicate connections between autonomy and distance learning. Additionally, it was suggested that not all connections presuppose the same concept of autonomy, that processes of distance learning may increase autonomy and that some degree of autonomy might be necessary for distance learning to be effective.

The tentative discussions here presented and the observation of trails of autonomy in distance learning communication data seem to point towards a couple of intriguing ideas.

First, it seems that autonomy and technology mediated activities do promote learning. But we need a special kind of autonomy and a special kind of technology-mediated activity to make the spark. As suggested, it appears to require a socially-oriented kind of autonomy development, as well as a human-mediated kind of online activity. The main connections between autonomy and distance learning seem to depend, then, upon the quality of human interaction.

Second, the connections between autonomy and distance learning seem to be a lot more complex than previously thought and it is difficult to understand them fully at this stage. If they depend on the quality of interaction, it is possible to conceive of processes where poorly organized interactive actions will lead to unsuccessful development of socially oriented autonomy. Or it is possible to think of processes that focus on ideation (content oriented) and tend to associate with the development of autonomy for human-independent activity.

To study complex social processes like these two, it might be beneficial to count on a theoretical framework that conceives them as object-oriented, rule-governed, community-shared activities. Engeström (1999), among many others, provides the background for the reflections proposed by Smith (2005), whose analysis was carried out from within an activity theory framework. According to him, the “factors that emerged as most strongly mediating the employment of autonomy were rules set out by both the institution and the teacher; community in the form of group decisions; division of labor, which concerned the individual’s role in the group”. Also based on Engeström’s approach to activity theory is the work of Blin (2004), who “seeks to demonstrate how activity theory can assist us in rethinking our understanding of learner autonomy in the context of technology-rich language learning environments and in formulating suitable criteria and questions, which can guide judgmental and empirical analyses.” Although there does not seem to be much published in that interface, it looks like a promising path towards understanding the complexity of those connections. It is my intention to continue my explorations in such small good company.

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