

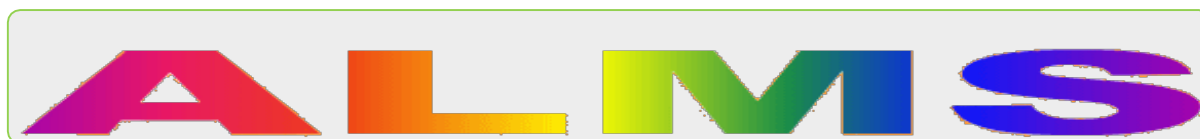
Conversations

The University of Helsinki Language Centre: A legacy of autonomy in the making

Felicity Kjisik, Leena Karlsson and Sandro John Amendolara talk with Carol Everhard

At the IATEFL Conference in Manchester, 2015, I had the good fortune to attend a presentation given by Felicity Kjisik, Leena Karlsson and Sandro John Amendolara of the University of Helsinki Language Centre, on a subject which is close to my heart: mentoring. This is one of many major and innovative projects in which members of staff in Helsinki have been involved.

We took some time off from the conference to meet in the convivial atmosphere of Jamie Oliver's Italian restaurant in King Street, where the three colleagues from Helsinki very kindly gave me an overview of some of their work. I thought readers of *Independence* would want me to share these insights with them. I will introduce each of the colleagues in turn.



Felicity Kjisik, who prefers to be known as Flis, will soon² retire from her post at the Language Centre of the University of Helsinki (UOH), where she has been based since

1985. Flis has a long-standing interest in developing autonomy in language learners which, in a sense, all started with a workshop conducted by Henri Holec in her workplace. This was then followed by a visit to his home institution of CRAPEL, at the then University of Nancy, where Flis and colleagues met with Philip Riley and more autonomy-minded people.

The topic of my discussion with Flis was the **ALMS project** and this is how our conversation went ...

Carol: I have been following the progress of your work for many years now. In the 1990s I was lucky enough to come across some of your

writings, and then, of course, your beautiful book, co-produced with Joan Nordlund and Leena Karlsson, *From Here to Autonomy*. Could you tell me a little about how you and your team came to be involved in the promotion of autonomy and how the ALMS (Autonomous Learning Modules) project developed? I'm also curious about how the artwork for the book and website came about.

Flis: All the talk in the early 90s was about self-access centres, learning strategies and learning-to-learn. My institution, Helsinki University Language Centre, asked me to organise a workshop on these topics and we invited Lew Barnett from ESADE Barcelona, and Henri Holec from CRAPEL. This was when Henri's message resonated with my own pedagogical questioning at the time and I became more attracted to the concept of the autonomous learner, per se, rather than simply the development of a self-access centre. At about the same time, in 1994, I attended the seminal autonomy conference in

² This interview took place in April, 2015 and Flis retired in August, 2015.

Hong Kong, where I presented the budding outline of the ALMS programme and, where, incidentally, I first met Leni Dam!

I suppose we could say that ALMS itself came about as an outcome of an action research project in which teachers, as learners of autonomy (cf. Benson), collaborated in creating a new kind of learning environment that entailed a change in pedagogical thinking.

The artwork for the book was produced by a Finnish artist, Hanna Kalla, who had previously done some work with Joan, which we all liked. When we later created the ALMS³ homepage we asked the designer Anu Merenlahti to incorporate the cats in her design.



Carol: Interest in autonomy seemed to be catching on within the Scandinavian region as a whole, with the inception of the Nordic Conferences, which will soon be having their 12th meeting.⁴ Would you say that your work was part of a wider movement which was gathering momentum at that time? Besides Henri Holec and Philip Riley, who would you say are some of the people who have most influenced your thinking and decision-making?

Flis: Yes, I would say that there was a widespread, but relatively small movement. There were a number of teachers in the Nordic countries – Leni, of course, in Denmark, Turid

Trebbi and others in Norway, and in Finland, Irma Huttunen and Viljo Kohonen. The Nordic Autonomy Group was a great support but I soon came into contact with colleagues and friends worldwide. Certain conferences have been especially brilliant – the two major Hong Kong conferences at the University of Technology, and then those organised by the Independent Learning Association. There are really too many people to mention ...

Carol: Your on-line resources were inspirational to undergraduate students of mine who were interested in organizing self-access and in organizing Online Self-access Centre (OSAC) resources, in particular. Even so, I get the impression that you balk slightly at the thought of promoting autonomy mainly by means of self-access. Is this impression correct, would you say, and if so, why?

Flis: Well, in my view, self-access centres are simply collections of tools or resources that autonomous learners may choose to make use of. The counsellor's role is to help learners develop their autonomy in order to make these choices. In reality, at least in Finland today, self-access centres are pretty redundant, thanks to the Internet, social media, studying through English, and student exchanges.

Carol: The 10 aspects on which you state ALMS is based, as outlined in your book, seem like strong guiding principles. Over the years, have you felt the need to add to or modify any of these, or have they stood the test of time?

Flis: It's interesting you ask that because I have actually been re-visiting these ten aspects as my contribution to a seminar, entitled 'From *There* to Autonomy', to be held at the Language Centre just before I retire. I have asked my current ALMS students to offer their views on these same

³ Some of these designs are reproduced here, with permission.

⁴ This took place in Denmark in August 2015. See Sandro John Amendolara's reflections on the event, as a first-time participant, in *Independence*, Issue 66.

aspects having completed their ALMS programme. Their writings show clearly that students still find them relevant and valid.

Carol: Would it be right to say that working with the ALMS programme necessitated not only changing as a teacher, but changing as a person? Over the years, have you encountered much resistance from students? Do their previous language-learning careers at school make it easier or more difficult nowadays for students at university to work towards autonomy in their language learning?

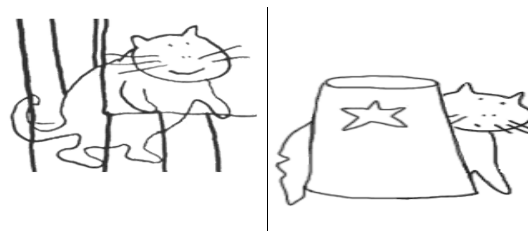
Flis: Our approach has always been that in learning as well as in teaching, we take the whole person into account. Leena and I have written about the value of not only lifelong learning but also lifewide and lifedep learning (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011). This is why we've encouraged group and individual reflection as part of learner/teacher development. If you believe in autonomy, you also believe in personal freedom to learn or teach in the way you believe is right for you.

Carol: What seems very admirable to me is the records that you have kept and the investigative research that has been completed by way of support for your methods. Do you sometimes wish that your findings could have had a more far-reaching effect within Finland, Europe or elsewhere? Have you had many visiting teachers or researchers?

Flis: There are numerous constraints that teachers everywhere have to contend with when proposing radical change. They may be historical, institutional, political, even personal. You only have to read the personal stories (including our own, by the way), told in *Stories of Practices* (Barfield & Delgado, 2013) to understand the complexity of educational change experienced by teachers in the field of autonomy.

As for your second question, yes, we have had many visitors, especially recently with the growth of the Erasmus teacher exchange system. One special and heart-warming example has been our exchange with teachers at Masaryk

University in Brno, Czech Republic. They have actually established a programme called *English Autonomously*, which was inspired by ALMS but, happily, was adapted to suit their own particular context.



Carol: Flis, the time has come for you to leave behind your work at the UOH Language Centre, but you are leaving behind a legacy for future generations of teachers and learners. That must leave you with feelings of great satisfaction. For those who are perhaps new to the field and would like to read more about ALMS, can they find the book or any of your articles on-line?

Flis: I'm sure that interested teachers/researchers can find our publications, online or otherwise in the usual way! As for my upcoming retirement, I'm extremely happy to leave ALMS in very safe hands, and especially so because I know it will not stand still. The current group of ALMS teachers have huge enthusiasm for research and development, and Leena will still be there for a while to nudge, advise and support them. Anyway, I will still be around. We look forward to hosting the next Nordic Autonomy Workshop in Helsinki in 2017 (17 years after we previously hosted it!) and nothing will keep me away from that!

Carol: That's good to know, Flis. Thank you!



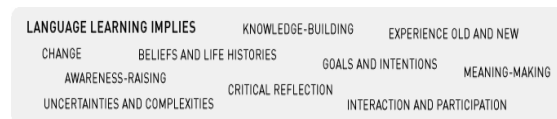
Leena Karlsson has also been teaching at the Language Centre since 1985. Together with Felicity Kjisik and Joan Nordlund, she formed the core of the movement for change

within the Language Centre. I chose to ask her about Kaleidoscope, an online tool for reflection, which Leena and Flis created in one of their collaborative projects carried out as practitioner-research. Soon after, Leena conducted research for her PhD, which focussed on the use of narrative in promoting autonomy.

Carol: Leena, you were one of the prime instigators of the move towards autonomous language learning at Helsinki University Language Centre. Did this involvement come about by chance, were you influenced by colleagues or did you somehow become caught up in a language learning revolution? Can you explain how the Kaleidoscope project evolved in relation to ALMS?

Leena: I had been teaching ESP/EAP at the Language Centre for almost ten years and was strongly feeling how pedagogically narrow the space was for me as a teacher. I was concerned with student *motivation* and *learning*; this was probably the prime driving force for me to join Flis and Joan in an effort to move beyond the rather 'technical' role assigned to me of putting into practice educational knowledge created by others. I would say collaboration, 'learning autonomy' together and engaging in research together, were the key inspirations, and, obviously, reading literature on learner autonomy (e.g. Dam, Little, Vieira). As for Kaleidoscope, I had been working on my Licentiate degree from 1999, which was made possible by our changing teacher roles in ALMS and, as a result, my growing confidence as a practitioner-researcher. The research made me aware of the relevance of learners' *histories* to what they expected of and how they felt about ALMS. We soon introduced written learner histories into ALMS counselling and realized that students had wonderful things to say about their learning backgrounds and that these would be

beneficial for other students when they started their ALMS work. In Kaleidoscope, we have used original student comments from their texts and from the counselling discussions arising from these texts.



A sample text from Kaleidoscope

Carol: One of the great benefits of Kaleidoscope is that it can be used in relation to the learning of all languages and anybody can create a profile through it. How can it then be used? What kind of changes have been made to the Kaleidoscope materials since they were first produced?

Leena: In ALMS, Kaleidoscope is introduced to students as a tool for reflection, at the beginning of a new course, and the reflection is always a deeply autobiographical experience for them. As a scaffold and inspiration, they read advising sections on different aspects affecting language learning (needs, skills, motivation, personality, learning background) and engage in dialogues with student voices on the website and then write their own stories. This, we feel, helps them to plan their own learning programmes and starts the reflection on learning and their identity as learners and users of English. The reflection process continues all the way through their course in their diaries and journals and in the counselling discussions. We believe that Kaleidoscope can work in a similar way with students learning in other contexts, formal or informal: as an impetus for continuous reflective work on learning. We have recently worked on the advising sections in Kaleidoscope and rewritten them, inspired, for example, by Ema Ushioda's work on motivation and by Dörnyei & Kubanyova's work on L2 selves and the role of vision in language learning.

Carol: An area you have explored in your counselling work and in your doctoral research is the use of narrative and of (auto)biography. How much has your work influenced your research and your research influenced your work? Is this

something which just grew naturally out of the ALMS and Kaleidoscope projects?

Leena: Absolutely! From the very beginning, my individual research efforts, just like our collaborative projects, have been pedagogically-motivated and have formed an organic whole with my counselling practice. I've been very much concerned with the ethics of practitioner-research and what it means to our students when they are involved as participants in our research. Narrative has offered a non-invasive, caring approach to research (cf. Exploratory Practice). Moreover, it is *experience* that I have been after in my research. Narrative and stories touch upon experience which is evolving and elusive; they have the power to evoke resonances, even vicarious experiences, in readers of our research. Stories in and about education matter. Coming to understand the auto/biographical nature of educational stories was a big influence on how I analysed my research materials in the doctorate and has continued to influence my research writing ever since. On a daily basis, counselling encounters put me face-to-face with auto/biography: in trying to understand and interpret my learners' experiences I am using my own life.

Carol: Has finding the time and opportunities to showcase your work through writing and presentations been difficult?

Leena: We have been lucky in having support from our Language Centre both in terms of small annual teaching reductions and funding for conferences and travel. Our international autonomy networks and, in particular, the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG have meant a lot to us through providing opportunities to share our work.

Carol: From what we could refer to as the original trio of autonomy pioneers at UOH, Joan Nordlund is long-retired and now Felicity Kjisik is retiring, so where does that leave you?

Leena: We've got a team of 8-9 counsellors in ALMS: some have been with us almost from the beginning; others joined the team later. We work

closely together all the way through the term: planning, replanning and fine-tuning the programme, such as in the Skills Support Groups we offer. We also have regular Summer and Winter Seminars in which we get together to discuss theory and practice in ALMS. During the last two years, since I took part in a nation-wide Peer Group Mentoring training scheme in Finland, we have also had monthly PGM meetings. These meetings give us the opportunity, first of all, to take counsellor development into our own hands and, secondly, to provide a sharing and caring space for counsellors. We even experimented with academic writing arising out of the PGM discussions, which, as you know, we also talked about at this conference (see Bradley, Karlsson et al. 2016). So, I am left with a community of counsellors who will continue working together and developing our diverse versions of and visions for pedagogy for autonomy.

Carol: What advice can you offer to others who would like to promote autonomy in a similar way to the UOH? Can you suggest to readers of *Independence* where to look for more information on Kaleidoscope and your research on narrative/ (auto)biography?

Leena: I would say that they need a trustworthy team, an inquiry-orientation and a will to learn. They will also need the courage to work from and in their own specific context, not transporting ideas from elsewhere but making them theirs. And, of course, the persistence to keep at it!

More information and reading sources are suggested in the bibliography provided at the end of these conversations and also on the ALMS website.

Carol: I wish you and your team all the best, Leena. Good luck!



Sandro John Amendolara

is a more recent addition to the teaching staff at UOH, joining them in 2007. This means that he arrived there to find ALMS and Kaleidoscope in place and has been able to see its advantages (and possible disadvantages) from a position of neutrality. As this was his first IATEFL conference, I asked him about the subject of Peer Group Mentoring, which he was co-presenting with Flis and Leena.

Carol: Sandro, I hope you've enjoyed your first experience of an IATEFL Conference here in Manchester. Before you joined the staff of UOH, had you already been introduced to the concept of autonomy or was it something relatively new to you? Did you find it easy to assimilate and use the ALMS framework with Finnish students?

Sandro: IATEFL has been a wonderful experience and thanks to Leena and Flis, it has been especially rewarding from an autonomy-networking perspective. When starting out at the University of Helsinki, the concept of autonomy was completely new to me. Flis introduced me to the pedagogical underpinning which immediately resonated with my teaching philosophy. There was no hint of any group hierarchy whatsoever, and I felt myself an integral part of the ALMS team from day one. Once the underlying framework became clear to me, it was extremely simple to adapt my teaching to it.

Carol: The project you all described in your talk at the conference, entitled *Creativity in teacher development: Peer group mentoring and collective writing*, was concerned with counsellor development and with generating visions for your counselling programme. This was presented as an ecology, which is dynamic and therefore unstable and involves peer mentoring among staff. Did all counsellors decide to participate no matter how experienced they were? What about you? How did you personally feel about PGM?

Sandro: Leena's 'caring and sharing' has become something of a motto for our PGMs. The acronym, together with the motto, beautifully capture the essence of our sessions. What we do in these sessions is closely linked to what we, as counsellors, expect our students to do with us: they share their learning experiences with us, and we, as mentors, need to respond with a certain degree of empathy. So, as you see, the 'caring and sharing' that we experience in the PGMs, is then transferred to other spheres – also beyond ALMS.

Carol: I see, so narrative again figured large in this mentoring process and from the writing you were producing, there was a new form of listening and counselling among peers, in groups of three, which you referred to in your presentation as 'trialogues'. In what respects would you say that 'mentoring' through trialogues differs from the 'counselling' that takes place with students in ALMS? What new qualities arise among the participants in a mentoring relationship and, because they are new, do they lead to feelings of vulnerability?

Sandro: Being ALMS, each teacher can be expected to have an individual, autonomous take on counselling. From one perspective, this allows us to conduct our role as counsellors in a manner that feels most natural. From another, we are somewhat bound by our own personal experiences and biases. PGMs allow us to sit down and think about the reasons behind what we do. Having to explain them to others can make you feel a tad exposed. Leena has been wonderful at endorsing peer mentoring by placing emphasis on elements such as well-being at work and empathy. Nevertheless, there was much talk of vulnerability, especially when engaging with the trialogues. We all agreed that there was an extremely positive side to this: difficulties in expressing one's own deeper thoughts and feelings offered access to experiential insight of what students may be experiencing throughout the process.

Carol: Did counsellors feel that their counselling improved as a result of this additional training?

What were the main lessons learned from this approach to counsellor development?

Sandro: After we wrapped up the project, I wrote to counsellors asking if they felt it had affected their counselling. It had, but in different ways. Principally, it made us fully aware of how our expectations can, at times, be a little misaligned, or as one counsellor put it: “How can we expect students to do things we shrink from ourselves?”. Issues regarding reader-writer roles were also raised. For instance, one counsellor explained how some texts resonated with her whilst others were examples of ‘otherness’, specifying how this is also a challenge we are faced with when reading our students’ texts. It was evident that PGMs were just as much about developing trust in and understanding of one’s peers/students as they were about professional development.

Carol: Would you say that your experiences in ALMS and PGM have influenced you as a teacher in general?

Sandro: I would indeed. Intrinsic motivation, so crucial in ALMS, is woven into the fabric of all my courses. Furthermore, I have designed a hybrid academic skills course for Humanities students in which elements of a regular course and ALMS converge. I also team-teach a course on intercultural communication with an ALMS colleague. We are, at present, reconfiguring our course, and although our opinions may, of course, differ, e.g. regarding reader-writer roles in personal narratives, we do find ourselves listening attentively to one another’s perspectives, which, in turn, allows us to converge towards workable compromises. The ripples of the PGMs have made an imprint, both upon my courses, and on how I relate to others.

Carol: This has been enlightening, Sandro. Many thanks!

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Websites

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