

This marvel of an elephant  
Is very like a fan!  
The sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
'I see,' quoth he, 'the elephant  
Is very like a rope!'  
And so these men of Hindostan  
Disputed loud and long,

Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
They all were in the wrong.

Source: Saxe, J.G. (1968) *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, in Akaduh, E. ed. *New Nation English Book: Book 5 (B)*. London: Nelson.

## Measuring Learner Autonomy: A Response to Jo Mynard

*Knowing of his own interest in the 'assessment' of autonomy, we asked David Dixon to reply to Jo Mynard's article 'Measuring learner autonomy: Can it be done?' published in the last issue of Independence (no. 37, Spring 2006):*

*David Dixon*

I don't feel able to really "reply" to Jo Mynard – I don't have any major disagreements with her, and my grand theory which would make measuring possible is not fully worked out yet. However, moving swiftly on.

Q: Can learner autonomy be measured?

A: No.

B: Yes

C: It depends.

D: Why, yes certainly it can. But if I told you how, I'd have to shoot you.

I suppose I'd have to choose option A, though deep down in my unreconstructed positivist bones I want to say Yes. What a thing it would be. I can see it now: a quick, multiple-choice-type questionnaire with around 30 items, online with automated processing of results, diagnostic feedback, banding of students, maybe also supplying an "A.Q." ("autonomy quotient"). It would be universally applicable, agreed on by every theorist, and adopted immediately by educational institutions around the world. I would call it "David's Autonomy Measure, for Learners" (or DAML).

Meanwhile, back on planet Earth. Jo Mynard talked about the difficulty of measuring learner autonomy in a "Traditional sense", and much of what I describe above illustrates the problematic nature of the task. How can it be universally applicable if autonomy is task specific (e.g. Sinclair 2000), or manifested differently in different cultures (Holliday 2003); how can it be agreed on by every

theorist, if the field is, as Oxford says (2003: 75), "beset by conflicting ideologies", and, "roiling inconsistencies"? OK, but apart from that, what's the problem with measuring learner autonomy?

Well, it has been pointed out to me that there is an ethical problem – who are we to seek to create "autonomous life"? Is it the place of teachers to change students, and then to measure what we have done? Well, that is what teachers do, but the problem is that as we don't have a universally applicable, or a universally accepted definition of autonomy which is amenable to measurement, which is not intrinsically situated, there is no essential description of what this capacity or potential for autonomous learning is. No one said teaching was easy.

At which point I push the table over. It's all backwards – what we need is to create a theory that fits my ideal test. Then all that would be left to do would be a little fine-tuning to the acronym.

If you are, say, a self-access centre coordinator, you may well be called upon to write a mission statement. You may have to come up with targets for the year. You may be working in an institution which has embraced learner autonomy to the extent of including among its goals "promoting learner autonomy" or "increasing learners' autonomy". This might mean that you are called upon to show someone who has a hand on the purse strings some evidence that you are doing your job and getting

results. Something like the DAML might be handy here.

The instrument would have to be specific to your system and your learners, but there is a case to be made for a tool that checks that the learners know what they have to, and have the skills they need to operate autonomously within the strictures of your SAC context. Narrow down the items to your particular situation, e.g. skills needed to find books on your shelves, how to use your photocopier, where to find help, who's who among the SAC staff. You may be aware that many of your learners don't know how to use an index in a book, maybe are not aware that such things exist, so assessing the skills specific to your situation which they will need to prosper seems like a helpful service you can provide. It helps you to adapt, and helps learners to see what skills they will need. It is not a measure of autonomy, but an indication of how they will cope, of how ready they are for a certain type of learning environment.

Key skills assessment literature, such as EDEXCEL's "Improving own learning and performance" could be useful starting points for adaptation to suit your students and your context.

In my Independent Learning Centre in a college in the United Arab Emirates I had an online interactive multiple choice questionnaire, "How autonomous are you?" It contained items drawn up based on my experience with the students in that college and what was expected of them. The students' answers caused a pop-up box with a short piece of feedback to appear designed to make them reflect on the opinion about learning, or their study habits referred to in the question. It was not perfect, but could easily be adapted based on what the learners told me.

Granted, "all measures of mental ability are necessarily *indirect, incomplete, imprecise, subjective, and relative*" (Bachman, 1990: 32); but that doesn't mean we don't try anyway. We have to do the best we can, and aspects of autonomy are accessible to "measuring".

It may not be a case of measuring autonomy, but it is an indicator of potential performance in an autonomy-related area.

## References

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## VELA (Virtual English Language Adviser)

*Sarah Toogood*

Unable to keep in mind all materials in our Self-Access Centre (SAC), drawing a blank as to which strategies might be most suitable for this particular

learner, feeling stressed about getting to the next class on time and unwilling to impose selections on the learner... we were struggling at the Advice Desk.