



## Learner Training Worm

*Started in Nottingham with Barbara Sinclair, visited Gail Ellis in Paris and went to Denmark to be with Leni Dam (see below) before Barbara reported on the whole journey in Aberdeen.*

# Learner Training – The Worm at my Doorstep

*Leni Dam*

Ever since I was given the worm, it has wriggled at my doorstep wanting to get in. People who know me also know that I am not happy with the term ‘learner training’ for a number of reasons that I shall return to a bit later. However, accepting to receive the worm from Barbara Sinclair forced me to consider what to do with this ‘slithery and slippery’ (Barabara’s words) concept. I was forced to consider on the one side what I have against the term and on the other side how I see the place of learner training in the context of learner autonomy.

Let me try to explain my aversion to the term itself. To me the term or rather concept, as Barbara quite rightly points out, is two-fold. *Learner training* seen from the teacher’s perspective is for me something you *do* to the learner, which is partly against my own as well as David Little’s belief (I am referring to his five negatives (Little 1991) concerning what learner autonomy is not). Training someone is for me also something that you can do if you have a very fixed and well-described goal at the other end. When talking about learner autonomy, the overall goal, I suppose, is more or less agreed upon. However, I don’t think that it is that fixed, is it? This problem, in my view, also holds true if we consider the term *learner training* from the learner’s point of view. There are some elements when learning a language and when developing learner autonomy that learners can *train* themselves in on their way towards their goals (linguistic aims or ways of working towards autonomy). I can think of vocabulary training or training in the technical procedures involved when writing their logbooks (Dam 2006)<sup>1</sup> as two examples. David Little in his book has a whole chapter describing what he sees

as *learner training* (Little 1991: 51-56) when *developing learner autonomy*.

Let me continue along these lines – the place of *learner training* within the *development of learner autonomy*. When describing approaches to implementing *learner training* – along a *teacher–learner directedness continuum* – Barbara Sinclair describes a possible continuum from totally teacher-directed content of a course to learner-directed content of a course (Sinclair 2000). I myself have for many years talked about not a continuum but a close relationship between on the one side teacher-initiated and teacher-directed awareness-raising activities supporting language learning and the development of learner autonomy being the teacher’s responsibility (Dam 2003) and on the other side learner-initiated and learner-directed activities supporting the individual learner’s progression towards improved linguistic competences, a growing awareness of their own learning, and a capacity for directing their own learning (Dam 1995:31). A constant dialogue and negotiation between the two sides are for me crucial when talking about developing learner autonomy in an institutional situation – it is not an either/or. The phase that Barbara calls a compromise position (Sinclair 2000) between the teacher-directed pole and the learner-directed pole is well-known in my model. However, I do not see it as a *compromise*, I see it as an important and necessary aspect of the process of learning

Let me finish this very short meeting with the worm, a meeting which has made me think – once again – by saying that I do not think that *learner training* and *developing learner autonomy* are the same. Some readings give you the impression that they are. To me learner autonomy in language learning is far more diverse and process-oriented than learner training. Could we perhaps find a *compromise position* where it is clear what we are talking about? Many attempts from ‘both sides’ have been made to clarify the two issues over the years. But can we get a joint clarification?

<sup>1</sup> In this (2006) article I have described how learners can express how they go about planning, carrying out their plans, and evaluating the outcome.

## References

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*Leni Dam recently retired from the position of pedagogical adviser and in-service teacher trainer at the Centre for Higher Education for Copenhagen and Northern Zealand, where she was responsible for the Diploma in Education. She had also been a practising secondary school teacher of English, at Karlslunde School, for many years.*



## Motivation Worm

*Started in Warwick with Ema Ushioda, moved to Sheffield to visit Terry Lamb, wriggled to Leeds to see Martin Lamb, went to Japan to see Tim Murphey, then stayed there with David McLoughlin (see below) before returning to Warwick for Ema’s report in Aberdeen.*

## Down a wormhole ...

*David McLoughlin*

**W**ormhole (n.): a theoretical tube-like structure allowed by Einstein’s theory of relativity, which serves as a shortcut between two distant regions of space-time.

To keep up the worm metaphor and to provide justification for what might seem a sharp detour, I am using the analogy of the wormhole. The field of motivation research is an extensive one, with a wealth of theoretical constructs being offered (Dornyei & Skehan, 2003). Some regions of the field might seem distant and hazy to researchers in a different area. Perhaps, by sending our heroic worm down a wormhole, we can visit one particular

theoretical construct that people may not have reflected on. The construct I want to introduce is attribution theory.

In his article, Tim Murphey referred to hope and expectancy (in relation to psychotherapy) and talked of students having the persistence to do something. This theme is central to attribution theory. Having the persistence to keep trying is intricately bound up with one’s expectancies for future success. Not only are expectancies for future successes and failures determined to a large extent by past successes and failures, they are also shaped by the *explanations people give for their past successes and failures* (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Attribution theory (Weiner, 1992) is a cognitive