

13th Nordic Workshop on Developing Learner Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching

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Diane Malcolm, Reflections & reviews Editor of *Independence* writes: The Nordic workshops have been promoting language learner autonomy since the 1980s. The most recent meeting is reported by:



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Sandro Amendolara leads off: When, back in August 2016, at the Nordic Workshop on Learner Autonomy in Copenhagen, I was asked, together with Leena Karlsson, to organise the next Nordic Workshop, I felt a rush of excitement run through me. I considered it a privilege to simply be attending a Nordic workshop, and now, all of a sudden, I was being asked to organise one. After getting back to Helsinki, the first thing we both agreed upon was getting our colleague and University of Helsinki learner autonomy pioneer Felicity (Flis) Kjisik involved. She had, after all, organised the previous Nordic Workshop in Helsinki, in September 2000, and was a well-known and much appreciated figure within the LA community. She had recently retired but appeared delighted at the prospect. It was such a privilege to work with Leena and Flis in organising the conference. Beyond the pure efficiency of their method in all related matters, I was offered insight into the past Nordics through a series of narratives of their prior experiences. Even though it may be expected, it is still rather mindboggling how much time, effort and coordination can go into organising such a relatively small conference.

Even people oblivious to the Nordic Workshop and that could easily have circumnavigated the hullabaloo got pulled into it. For example, when the need for a logo arose we turned to my wife, Anna Salminen, a designer by profession. The journey was long, convoluted, but nevertheless, a joy. As for a narrative of the outcome, that's something I'll leave to Naoko Aoki and Anja Burkert.



A beautiful day in Helsinki

Anja Burkert reports first: The Nordic Workshop in Helsinki brought together for the 13th time in a period of more than 30 years a group of language

teachers enthusiastic about and committed to the idea of language learner autonomy. The overall theme of the conference was diversity, identity and plurilingualism. As the organisers – Felicity Kjisik, Leena Karlsson and Sandro Amendolara – had asked for diverse forms of presentation, speakers used a wide range of individual modes of presenting and interacting with the audience.



Leni Dam gives a presentation

In a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere, every conference participant shared his/her personal ‘autonomy story’, ranging from examples of practice and practitioner research to reflections on and queries about their own classroom practice. More theoretical input was provided by David Little, who illustrated in his plenary talk how learner autonomy ties in perfectly with the concept of plurilingualism.

In the two days in which the conference ran, amazing stories of teachers and learners were shared, but we also heard about worries and constraints with which some of us have to struggle on a daily basis. Yet in spite of these hurdles, everyone seemed to have found a way to still pursue and live their dream of promoting autonomy in their classroom.

The following short extract from a student’s reflection written at the end of an autonomously run course appears to sum up what lies at the heart of our common endeavour. “I want to live with English and I want it to be a long-term relationship. You have not to just study the language, you have to live with it. Like I do, when I am walking around the city and thinking in English about everything. Let English enter your life. See how good it is with you.”

Naoko Aoki continues with her personal reflection: It has been always nice to see old friends at Nordic Workshops. I have been going to these events for more than 20 years. Faces have changed. Some people have retired and stopped

coming. Yet others got busy with other things in life and are unable to keep coming back. Still there were quite a few people I have known for a long time. It was great seeing them as active as ever in the field. Also, I have relatively new friends, whom I only met one or two workshops ago, whose research and practice I follow with great interest. Then there were totally new people, who impressed me tremendously with their exciting work. This is a small, close-knit community that allows coming and going of members. I was able to see how the legacy of the first generation members will live on in the future.

What was intriguing to me particularly this time was the theme, ‘diversity, identities and plurilingualism’, which is right on track with my current interests and concerns. There was David Little’s plenary, which explained his vision of how learner autonomy has relevance to plurilingualism. Deidre Kirwan reported her school’s practice of including students’ home language literacy in their practice of learner autonomy, on top of learning English and Irish. Alla Goeksu and Sanja Wagner shared their innovative work with German L2 students learning English. And, of course, a proud teacher within me needs to mention Sho Shu’s fascinating language learning history as a plurilingual speaker of four languages. This is only a sample of the presentations I was able to attend. There were concurrent sessions and I had to miss out quite a few that I wanted to go to if only the programming had allowed. These are the two things that make me coming back to Nordic Workshops, people and shared interest in and value attached to learner autonomy. I will definitely plan to participate in the next Nordic Workshop to be hosted by Klaus Schwienhorst in Hannover sometime in 2019.



A workshop in session