Interview with Leni Dam

Throughout her long working life, Leni Dam has advocated including students in their learning processes. The seed for this was sown when, after completing her upper secondary education, she came to England and took up a job at a private school for a couple of years. Here she became inspired by English school pedagogy at ‘primary level’, where – according to what she herself has stated – it was quite literally possible to see that learning took place. This visualisation of learning was to acquire great importance in connection with Leni’s later work focusing on placing the student at the centre in language teaching in English, work that spanned four decades.

Leni retired in 2007, but has remained active as a course leader and writer, where – outside Denmark in particular – she talks about student learning and teacher responsibility to create learning spaces where learning can take place. Bergþóra Kristjánsdóttir and Elina Maslo have interviewed Leni about her professional life and views on learning, and about holding onto the pedagogical ideals that she first got to know at the private school in England. When the interviewers met Leni, she had just returned from IATEFL’s (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) annual conference in Manchester, where she had just given a lecture on a

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LENIDAM
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A model for further education established in Greve Municipality by the then Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, Danmark’s Lærerhøjskole (DLH)) in the early 1980s.

I: Tell us something about your early life as a teacher, when you researched and developed innovative ideas in language teaching and student learning in Denmark.

I: I qualified as a teacher in 1964. After three years in Munkebo teaching the standard school curriculum, I started at Karlslunde School (Greve Municipality) in 1967, teaching my special subjects, English and Mathematics, as well as working with remedial teaching. The last-named – i.e. remedial teaching – has definitely, coupled with my experiences from England, helped to shape my attitude about seeing the individual child and taking care of the individual student’s learning. In 1973, I was the teacher of a very disparate Class 7 which, according to the then rules, was subsequently to be divided into A (generally oriented) classes and B (academically oriented) classes. In particular I recall two students who were best friends. The one had been labelled ‘weak’, while the other was regarded as ‘able’. I felt it was most regrettable that – ‘according to the rules’ – one would go into an A class and the other a B class. Fortunately, an ‘experimental paragraph’ had just been introduced into the Danish Folkeskole Act (§64) which made it possible to avoid course division after Class 7 – i.e. it was possible to retain the whole Class 7 during the rest of their compulsory education. I applied and was given permission to implement the experiment – also by the school education committee, after a tough battle (it had a Conservative majority, which asked ‘What about the bright students?’). At the same time, I was looked askance at by the Danish Union of Teachers, which then forbade teachers to make exceptions to course division unless there was extra funding earmarked for this.

Development programmes offer new opportunities in schools

I: So you received no extra funding for breaking new ground?

I: No, there was no extra funding connected to the experiment. On the other hand, all development work was followed and supported by the Council for Experimental Primary and Lower Secondary Education (Folkeskolens Forsøgsråd) that included assistance in the collection of data and guidance with regard to the writing of reports.
– a requirement for the implementation of the experiment. Only five schools implemented a three-year experiment (Class 8 – Class 10) with mixed-ability classes, including the National Innovative School (Statens Forsøgsskole). This resulted in a bulky report with the title ‘Avoidance of course division - what, why and how’. With hindsight, it is clear that the reporting requirement was a good one, because in that way we documented our experiences. The obligation to report also made heavy demands on us to reflect on our own teaching. We became highly aware of how we could best take into account the needs and optimum development of the individual – differentiation of teaching. This marked the beginning of the development of learner autonomy. It sounds banal, but basically it has to do with curiosity regarding the question: How can one establish a learning space where all students are taken into consideration? That question has been guiding principle in my view of learning during all these years.

I: You presumably acquired new partners to cooperate with in connection with the experiment. There were five schools and you were all required to be in contact with the Ministry of Education. What did that entail?

L: Yes, I and my colleagues acquired many new contacts. Our experiments with differentiation of teaching, resulting from the experiment with mixed-ability classes, opened up new doors for us. Of course this was mainly in Denmark, but there was also considerable interest at a Nordic level for work with mixed-ability classes. The focus was on the principles in connection with differentiation of teaching. This meant that I and my colleagues had to justify the subject-relatedness on which our principles were based. Experts at DLH showed great interest in our development work – particularly Gerd Gabrielsen, a senior lecturer in English. It was, among other things, on her initiative that I went on summer courses in Lancaster on communicative language teaching that were led by two researchers, Mike Green and recently deceased Chris Chandlin. Until then, I had ‘only’ worked with learner autonomy at lower secondary level. But why wait until Class 8? Encouraged by Mike Breen, I started on learner autonomy in Class 5 in English in 1981. That was the same year that learner autonomy was seriously placed on the agenda under the auspices of the Council of Europe. In cooperation with Gerd, the work in Class 5 was documented in a report “Beginning English – an experiment in learning and teaching”. At the same time, with technical assistance from DLH, a black & white video of the class
was made with the title “Beginning English”. The video showed some “ordinary” lessons taking place where one sees the students busily at work on self-chosen activities. This was something big. In 1986, Gerd also took the initiative for the first conference in the series of workshops under the title “Nordic Workshop for developing learner autonomy” with participants who worked with autonomy from the Nordic countries as well as other parts of the world – Poland, Germany, France, Spain, Ireland, Hong Kong, Japan, etc. The 12th Nordic Workshop took place in Copenhagen in autumn 2015, where a number of the very first participants were also present.

Bottom-up school development – a window on the world

I: Seen from today, where school development can in many respects be characterised as being governed top-down, it is interesting how the development work you describe has the teacher as an acting player to a very high degree. Tell us something about how the outside world got to know of the development work being carried out at Karlslunde School.

L: Initially, the ‘dissemination’ took place via conferences and seminars at a Nordic level. But in 1979-81 learner autonomy – as I have mentioned – was seriously placed on the agenda under the auspices of the Council of Europe. In connection with its project no. 12 “Learning and Teaching Modern Languages for Communication”, a workshop led by Gerd took place in Gilleleje in 1986. But the greatest impact probably came from the contribution “Developing learner autonomy in a school context – a six-year experiment beginning in the learners’ first year of English” prepared in collaboration with Gerd. The article appeared in the Council of Europe publication “Autonomy and self-directed learning: present fields of application” in 1988. I find it fascinating that our own small local “experiment” – “Experiments in learning and teaching” – was found interesting in a European context.

I: Back to Denmark. What happened then in Denmark?

L: A cooperation between Greve Municipality, DLH and Lancaster University was established for a new type of course, the aim of which was to make teachers action researchers in their own teaching, cf. my newly given lecture in Manchester. To begin with, we called it “Experiments in teaching and learning”. The development of the
The course programme has been described in the article “The evolution of a teacher training programme” (Breen/Candlin/Dam/Gabrielsen 1989). The main ingredients of the programme were and are: Presentation and start based on the teachers own backgrounds, a period of testing self-proposed plans in one’s own teaching, a follow-up with an evaluation of experiences based on the classroom data brought along, and the drawing up of new plans for the “next step”. The form of the course reflected the autonomous classroom. The challenge was and is that teachers who want to try out something new return to a school with, generally speaking, exclusively traditional, teacher-controlled teaching – and in Denmark plenty of self-confidence is not always considered a virtue! But the courses have had some influence. I still meet teachers who tell me: “Believe me, I’m very pleased with the things I took with me from your courses.”

After having been pedagogical consultant in Greve Municipality in a combi-job, I got a part-time job as a pedagogical consultant at DLH in 1983. At the same time, I retained my teaching job at Karlslunde School – also part-time – where I had contact with students and their parents. It was a great asset for me as a continuing education instructor that I myself was an active teacher. At that time, there was a department at DLH that was responsible for research and education at BA level as well as departments at other locations in the country that were responsible for development work and continuing education. My job was to take care of school development and continuing education and in that connection I had fantastic cooperation with research colleagues at DLH, who – apart from the already mentioned English senior lecturers Gerd and Kirsten – also included Hans Lammers (German) and Niels Iversen (French). One could also mention Danish as a Second Language in this connection, which was developed as a special subject area at DLH under the leadership of Jørgen Gimbel. There was an understanding for and an interest in breaking new ground in foreign language teaching, as regards both the research perspective and the practical, pedagogical aspect. Such a cooperation is alpha and omega for one’s own development.

Learner autonomy as a driving force for learning

Tell us a bit more about what lies behind the key concepts that you use again and again: learner autonomy, differentiation of teaching and student-controlled learning.
It has a lot to do with an awareness of roles – student and teacher roles. Teachers are to focus on learning instead of teaching. They are to see learning through the students’ eyes, but the students are to be involved. They must be drawn into their own learning, but it is the teacher’s responsibility to create learning spaces where learning can take place. Processes must be made transparent. Teachers must dare to say: “I want to try that out” and focus on processes. What action research can contribute is to make visible processes towards goals, where one can speak of a movement from teaching objectives to learning objectives. Both teachers and students acquire the role of action researchers.

People talk a lot nowadays about evidence. The documentation that is the core of making learning processes transparent, i.e. students’ logbooks and portfolios, shows that learner autonomy is a success – one that has been described in many of my articles. My experiences with the subject, published in Sprogforum over the years, can also be said to be a form of documentation. One ought further mention the LAALE project (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment) which was carried out in cooperation with Lienhard Legenhausen, Münster University, Germany during the 1992-1997 period, with the aim of documenting what had been gained from working in an autonomous class. The results show, among other things, that students become good at language, good at using language, at acquiring a large vocabulary and grasping the form and functions of language. The project has been described in detail in quite a few articles. But developing learner autonomy involves much more than linguistic competences. It also involves the increasing of students’ self-confidence – which is crucial if one is to dare to set targets. And of course it also has to do with making a new content visible. The life-worlds of the students differ and that diversity must be brought out into the open. Teachers cannot know what their students come with in the way of experiences and knowledge. So their life-experience must be activated. Teachers must create spaces for questions to be asked about what one did not know in advance. If this is to take place, it is important to involve the students in their own learning. If a teacher is to learn this, time must be devoted to it. It is a long process to learn how to create such learning spaces, and my best suggestion for the continuing education of teachers is action research. That the teachers become aware of the stages in action research: planning, action, observation and reflection. The same stages that the students must be able to implement.
in working on their own learning: planning, the implementation of the plans, evaluation, planning the next steps.

In my presentations at conferences and in my articles I develop these key concepts and provide examples of what they mean in practice. In my opinion, learner autonomy is the optimum form of the differentiation of teaching, as our experiments with refraining from dividing up the students showed in the 1970s. Today we see attempts to differentiate with the aid of various teaching activities, various types of teaching materials, etc., but all these measures are teacher-controlled. Very rarely are all students successfully involved. Learner autonomy, where the students themselves are also involved in choosing where the learning focus is to be must be the optimum form of differentiation of teaching. It is the individual student who knows that is too easy and what is too difficult for him or her. Teachers can never hit spot-on without including the students. If it is too easy, you lose someone. If it is too difficult, you lose someone. Some teachers will ask if students then do not always take the easy way out – do they set themselves any goals? Of course they do – they are more than willing to do so!

I: If it is so simple, why isn’t it put into practice everywhere?
L: Yes, that is a good question. One of the problems, in my opinion, is that teachers cannot let go of textbook systems, which at best do not help the students much. Pardon me for saying this, but it kills every form of creativity to skate from one activity to the next, which students often cannot see any point in at all, and which do not really take their life-world as their point of departure – do not include their identity. As far as I can see, it is also a big problem that earlier English teaching has apparently not led to any real change in the form of teaching – it is still teacher-controlled and one still does not use the students’ previous knowledge as the point of departure. Nor does one make students aware of their own learning – a prerequisite for being able to set goals. If teachers had experienced a class with motivated and industrious students – the result of learner autonomy – I am sure that they would say, as one of my course participants once did: “Tomorrow I will do everything differently!” (Dam 1995). I also think that it must mean something today that people at the universities do not profile languages. I have spoken about how the former DLH profiled languages with many staff involved in the assignment. You two are employed at what was then DLH – what are things like today? As far as I know, things are on the back burner. Who would
ever have believed that things would go that way? Where’s the zest gone? My guess is that the last few – well, many by now – years of top-down control of the entire developmental and teaching sector within foreign language teaching, along with cutbacks, are the culprit.

Learner autonomy means preparing the students to assume responsibility for their own learning – that cannot take place from one day to the next. There will be some students who will never achieve it during their time at school, but we can help them along the path towards what it means to be able to take responsibility for one’s own learning. Unfortunately, teachers are prone to saying “It can’t be done”. Developing learner autonomy is a long process for both teacher and student. Students must be prepared for what is to be learnt, must become aware of what it involves, they must try things out before they can choose. One cannot just throw them out into it and say “What do you want to do?”. As a teacher one has to consider all the things that are involved in the complex process of moving forwards towards the final aim – to enable the students to set goals for their own learning, to take responsibility for it, and to become good language users. But it’s difficult. My main thesis is: Stop thinking “How am I to teach this or that?” Think instead: “How can I best support my students’ learning?” If this is to be successful, teachers must believe in it! But, as I’ve said, it can only be successful if the students are involved in the process.

An honorary doctor on a world tour

I: In 2004, Leni, you were made an honorary doctor by the Linnaeus University (Kalmar) in Sweden. Why does one gain such an honorary title for one’s pedagogical ideals, and what has it meant for you, both in Denmark and internationally?

I: Apart from implementing new paths in language teaching and disseminating experiences with them throughout the world through courses and lectures, I think that it was probably my quite comprehensive activity as a writer that was the deciding factor. For me it was a form of recognition for many years of work. At the same time, it animated me to continue my work with even greater vigour – and to make my ideas even more widespread. In that connection I have met many exciting researchers around the world. Naturally, it makes me happy when the known motivation researcher Ema Ushioda refers to my work in her writings.
I: You are going into retirement, but the work on learner autonomy doesn’t stop because of that. You are in demand as a lecturer “worldwide”, e.g. Kuwait, Dubai, Switzerland, Germany, Turkey, Macedonia, Japan, Hong Kong – but we do not see all that much of you in Denmark!

L: Yes, there is great interest in learner autonomy worldwide. Unfortunately, interest in Denmark is limited, even though a few people, e.g. a young colleague Frank Lacey, are doing what they can to spread the concept here. I am occasionally asked to hold course in connection with Danish as a Second Language, where the idea of involving the participants in their own learning is an obvious one.

One bright spot is that it would seem that young people in both Denmark and abroad are attracted by the principles in connection with developing learner autonomy. If a real change is to take place in Denmark, there must be a change from top-down control to an inclusion of teachers in their own learning (action research). Funding must be earmarked for continuing education that is based on long-term development. Confidence must once more be created in teachers and their ability. There must not only be talk of learner autonomy in teacher education – there must be teaching in accordance with the principles.

I: A paradigm shift has taken place in teaching from content-control to teaching by objectives. A perspective for the future. What possibilities open up with teaching by objectives in relation to learner autonomy?

L: Teaching by objectives fits in well with learner autonomy if it takes places in a cooperation between students and teachers. It is the students who are to set the objectives, in cooperation with the teachers. The teacher is mistaken if he or she believes that there is chaos, and that the children are simply allowed to decide everything for themselves. That is not the case. The teacher must naturally have the teaching objectives as the point of departure and communicate these to the students. The teaching objectives are the point of departure for student-controlled learning. The development of learner autonomy is the actual process of moving from teaching objectives to learning objectives – a process that supports lifelong learning.

The interviewers have asked Leni to suggest to readers of Sprogforum key literature about learner autonomy and responsibility for one’s own learning in a teaching space that is staged by the teacher.
Literature


