Learner Empowerment - A Perspective

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This article proposes a framework for thinking about learner empowerment, discussing the assumptions underlying it, its development, and derived activities and principles. The framework is called "the ABC's of learner empowerment," because all of its keywords start with one of those three letters, and I see all of them as central in an empowering education.

Introduction - Autonomy and Empowerment

"The ABC's of learner empowerment" framework was developed as one way to address the centrality of learners in education, when working with marginalized students. Its principles are applicable to teaching students in any situation where the students are not aware of the impact that they can have on their environment, or where their common educational experiences do not serve to empower them. Before going on to a consideration of the framework itself, then, it is worth looking at how the term "empowerment" will be used here.

Learner autonomy and learner empowerment are terms that often go together. Learner autonomy refers to self-directed learning, or a shift of responsibility for learning from teacher to student. Empowerment often is seen either as a prerequisite for this to occur, or as a result of the process. It seems to me that because the focus of most literature in the autonomy vein has as its focus the teacher-student relationship, empowerment itself is often left unexplored (not a criticism). Here, my focus is on empowerment, by which I mean the process of helping learners become aware that they can have an impact on their environment, and can exert some control over their circumstances. For the purpose of this article, this should be seen as distinct from learner autonomy. Empowerment as I use the term here could result in a negotiation of classroom processes leading to learner autonomy, but there is a way to work with learners that leads toward empowerment that is independent of learners becoming self-reliant in language learning. Although I believe that the most powerful learning is autonomous, my focus here is on how a teacher can lead students to a more empowered state.

Underlying Assumptions

The framework below represents my own theory, in continual development, of what factors need to be addressed to make education empowering. It rests on three assumptions:

- we individuals can have an impact on our social environment, causing a degree of change in reality;
- language can be one of the most powerful tools for initiating and guiding change;
- as a language teacher, especially when working with marginalized students or students who have not realized the power of communication, one of the most important responsibilities the teacher has is to help the students become aware of how they can use language to influence the world around them.

These assumptions view people as what Ernest Becker would refer to as objects of primary value in a world of meaningful action; however, marginalized students may inhabit a different world, where they are unvalued, in a world of seemingly meaningless action. The ideas below are an attempt to help students become aware of their value, and aware of how to exercise some control in a world that may seem meaningless, harsh, and random, thus giving it structure.

The Genesis and Development of the Framework

The framework represents a view of education that seeks to help marginalized people capitalize on their marginality to become agents of cultural change. It is rooted in part in reflection on my own experiences with education, both negative and positive, and my own experiences as a person who made the transition from cultural marginal to cultural innovator. These experiences made me especially

interested in the lives of other people who made a similar change, the most dramatic of whom was, in my eyes, Malcolm X. Separate from the issue of whether or not one agrees with his views, it cannot be denied that he managed to make an amazing transition from a marginal man to one of the most influential, educated, and articulate leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. As I looked at what factors in his life (and the lives of other cultural marginals) may have helped in making such a transition, I began to notice a number of key elements that seemed to be important. This was interesting, but at that point in my career it was a topic I was not actively trying to use in informing my teaching.

Not long after I started language teaching, though, I was asked to teach at a school where many of my students would be children who faced discrimination. It was very important to me that my own classes with the students would not be a part of a system that kept them marginalized. Rather, I wanted the students to experience a different kind of lesson, one that would lift them up. To this end, I went back and examined how I could put my ideas on an empowering education into classroom practice. The result has evolved into the framework that I now use as a lens for thinking about activities and lessons, as well as classroom interaction patterns, when my concern is learner empowerment. This framework I will now explain.

The ABC's

The keywords that I use are: audience, ability and articulation, attitude, belief in self, belief in ideas, cause, community, and chance. Before reading my explanation of what each of these mean to me, please take the time to imagine for yourself how I might be using them. The terms as I use them are explained in turn below.

Audience

Audience stands for several things. It means having, finding, or creating an audience, communicating skillfully with that audience, and not being afraid of an audience. At more advanced levels, it can also mean things like identifying different types of media, and how to use them effectively. As schoolteachers, we and our students have a major advantage here. The class, or even the entire school, is a potential audience, if we can tap it.

Ability and Articulation

Ability and articulation are connected. They include getting your ideas together, collecting information that will help you support them (as well as understanding opposing arguments), and actually taking the time to use words and say the things you have to say. This includes developing the language to say what you want to say, and after saying it, finding ways to say it even better.

Attitude

Attitude means developing the desire to communicate, or awareness of why communicating is important, and how the act of skillful, persuasive communication can change your environment.

Belief in Self

This could be called confidence. It means developing a sense of self-worth, and believing that we as individuals have something important to communicate to others based on our own experiences. It also reflects an awareness that we can contribute to the world around us through sharing a part of ourselves.

Belief in Ideas

This means believing that you have something important to say. Sometimes having something important to say can help a person develop confidence as well.

Cause

This is what you believe in. It is identifying what you want to speak about. It could be a major social issue, or it couldbe something personal that won't really change much about the world, but it does mean finding something to communicate about. The important thing is that a student's cause is something that he or she cares about.

Community

This means a community, or group of people, to support you. It means having a place where your ideas are valued, and where people will listen to you. It is like audience, but learners need to gain experience both with groups of people who agree with their ideas, and with groups of people who may not agree. A distinction here is that "audience" may refer to groups where there is no sympathy for the speaker's ideas, whereas "community" represents a safer place where people cooperate and value each other, offering criticism when it is needed in a non-threatening,constructive way. The community should be a safe place to talk.

Chance

This means having a chance to speak out. It means, if we are teaching a class, providing a chance for students to speak out. It means we let students know that we expect them to speak out, and that we support their efforts and courage. It also means helping learners understand how to make their own chances to speak out, so they can create their own opportunities to affect their social reality.

A Work in Progress

These keywords are not an exhaustive list, but they do form the framework against which I look at my own teaching when I feel that learner empowerment is a key issue. The question now becomes how to use these ideas to inform teaching. For me, this involved rethinking how I teach, changing the relationships among learners, teacher, and community, and how students relate to information.

Derived Activities and Principles

Here I suggest some activities and principles derived from an awareness of the need to address the factors that the keywords represent. They have been developed in a process of working with children, teens, and adults, so not all of the ideas may be applicable with all levels. After each suggestion I have listed which of the ABC's I see the idea as working on.

1. Ask students to talk about what they know. As an example, have students tell about their own communities, where they choose what about the community might be interesting for people to know. (This works on: audience, ability, articulation, attitude, belief in self, belief in ideas, cause, community, and chance.)
2. Be sure that the language the students need to participate in any activity is at an appropriate level. (Articulation, ability, belief in self.)
3. Value what the students have to say, and encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect. (Belief in self, belief in ideas, community. It can also affect attitude.)
4. Don't attack students' ideas, but encourage them to take them deeper and find out more. (Belief in self, belief in ideas, cause, ability, attitude, and articulation.)
5. Set up a meaning negotiation based class, with an emphasis on student-initiated question asking (rather than the much more common pattern of teacher-initiated questioning). (Ability, articulation, attitude, belief in self, community, and chance.)
6. Don't talk at the students, ignoring their needs and ideas. This disempowers.
7. Emphasize the uniqueness of their experiences, and the contribution that it can make to the community. Even negative experiences can be looked on in this way. (Attitude, belief in self, belief in ideas, cause, and community.)
8. Provide examples of local level activists, especially people whose backgrounds are not so different from that of the students, if possible. (This gives examples of people who have probably mastered the ABCs, to some degree.)
9. Incorporate activities that allow students to directly impact the community that they are in, in a positive and interesting way. As an example, with elementary school students learning English in Japan, we worked toward a phase of the class where each student had a chance to direct the movements of the class as a whole. (Audience, ability, attitude, articulation, belief in self, community, and chance.)
10. Give students a chance to communicate with the larger group. They can make student newspapers, give presentations on topics of interest, etc. A critical reflection and refinement phase can help students make the delivery of their message even better. (Have them watch an example of a poor presentation given by someone they don't know, for instance, or have students watch themselves on video.) (Audience, ability, attitude, articulation, cause, community, and chance. Also works indirectly on belief in self, and belief in ideas.)

For Further Development

Again, the ABC framework is not exhaustive. Part of my hope is that bringing it to a wider audience will trigger dialogue that will help in further fleshing it out, and in helping other language teachers become aware of where our ideas overlap, and where they diverge. Currently, I am also thinking of two more categories - "consequence" and "content" - that will complement the framework, but that I have yet to develop explicit principles or activities for that link them up effectively with ideas expressed in the other keywords.

Conclusion

My proposed framework for thinking about the factors involved in empowering learners, and suggestions for how this could inform teaching, differs from some of the other ideas that I have seen on empowerment and learner autonomy. There are two advantages to this framework: if you are working in a context where a learner autonomous approach might be resisted by administration, colleagues, or students, this framework allows for work on factors connected to autonomy and empowerment in a more conventional way. Additionally, the framework suggests factors that a teacher can work with even on a modest scale if working with children in a foreign language setting, in a situation where a more conventional learner autonomous approach may not be an option due to the students' age or language level. My hope is that readers will use this as a springboard to develop their own ABCs, principles, and activities. If the article generates any dialogue in this vein, then it has served a part of its purpose.

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http://iteslj.org/Articles/Shrader-Empowerment.html