Visualising Learner Development: An Introduction

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We began editing this first issue of the journal with a shared interest in metaphors for learning. Darren locates his interest in his current research focusing on learners' metaphors for learning, and ways in which learners' metaphors connect to autonomous actions and beliefs. He writes, "… when this theme was suggested I saw an instant connection. Of course, metaphor is just one way of "visualizing." I wanted to see how other teacher–researchers in different contexts interpreted the theme. I am really happy with the diverse range of ideas and voices we will be presenting in the first issue."

Hugh connects the theme of visualising learner development to his awareness of learning environments as new worlds that he needs to imagine fully in order to navigate and understand them. He recalls, "I am remembering first my work with elementary school children who lived in the neighborhood of the church my family attended in Washington, D. C. in the 1960s. We had moved to D. C. from rural Maine, so acting as a reading and writing tutor (as a junior high school student myself) with mostly 8 to 10-year-old African American boys constituted a challenging and engaging introduction to the complexity of the world. My second shaping experience began just after I graduated from high school, when I started training to become a mountaineering instructor. Those experiences took me back to the woods of my early childhood, but also triggered efforts on my part to link the physical, conceptual, and leadership challenges of working in outdoor education to ideas of an intuitive sense that my natural way of framing learning and teaching questions is essentially kinaesthetic. Having later become a professor of American literature and cultural history, I see all of the key issues in learner development as part of a great interdisciplinary continuum, where, just as for Darren too, the centrality of metaphor is fundamental to the journeys we undertake as learners and as teachers."

From these shared perspectives, as we worked with the teacher-researchers whose work is collected here, we became increasingly aware of the complexity of the puzzles we all face in trying to share our understandings of autonomy. For some writer-researchers, for example, the importance of metaphor may be thought of as a way to represent abstract concepts, while for others metaphor may entail more concrete images. In other cases, narratives combined with images—such as *The Language Learning Tree* in Porter and Hilton's paper (in this issue), or in the free drawing learner self-portraits Alice Chik has used with Hong Kong learners of English—provide the basis for reflection and feedback, in which learning and language learning selves are transformed into artifacts for reflection and dialog on learning practice and learner identity. This is the same process (and struggle) we enter into as researchers and writers, as we build bridges between our teaching worlds and our professional communities of practice as academics and/or administrators of language learning programs.

Our views have been shaped by our individual experiences of learning, researching, teaching, and writing and by the communities to which we belong—especially the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Learner Development SIG, and sister communities of teachers and researchers around the world who endeavour to understand and promote holistic learning. In seeking to encourage curiosity and empathy with communities of learners and teachers, we unashamedly align ourselves with the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP) and other models for participatory research and practice. We thus face many of the same dilemmas that Judith Hanks (2017, p. 1) identifies when she states that "it has become axiomatic that research into classroom language learning and teaching should be participatory, egalitarian, and empowering." How to reach those aims remains open to lively discussion, as Hanks also notes. This led us to several recurrent puzzles that we asked the authors and ourselves to contemplate as we worked on the papers in this issue:

- In what way does visualising learner development advance the principles that learning and teaching should be "participatory, egalitarian and empowering"?
- How, in turn, does this mesh with what we perceive as our institutional responsibilities (i.e., to adhere to a curriculum and to assess learners)?
- How can we envision our institutional constraints differently, thus transforming them into affordances for learning and research?
- How can we picture identities, our learners' and our own, differently? Similarly, how can we learn to see our research field otherwise and make connections with neighbouring disciplines and ways of knowing?
- ABeAnd, importantly in the inaugural issue of a journal seeking to promote exploratory practices in research and writing, how can we visualise the writing of research in new and engaging ways?

Using metaphor, narrative, and visualization innovatively, the contributors to the first issue of *The Learner Development Journal* each try different ways to make the invisible aspects of learner development (more) visible. Four of the papers were written by Japan-based individuals or author teams. It is our pleasure too to share papers from the Italian teacher/researcher Luciano Mariani and a pair of language counsellors working together at the University of Helsinki, Fergal Bradley and Leena Karlsson. We are also delighted to include a final reflective commentary from Alice Chik, who, looking back over the whole issue, draws our attention to the issue's fundamental thematic puzzle: "… how do we explore different ways for learners and their development to be seen?" Using visualisation of identity and learning, Alice's research has grown out of her studies of children in Hong Kong who deepened their interest in English outside of school. The research featured in this issue, however, comes from puzzles that arise in school and university classrooms, which brings us to how learners and teachers within different institutional settings may conceptualise learning and autonomy, and visualise learner development.

In the first paper, "One Year Later: Students' Visualizations of 'Independent-Mindedness' in the L2 University Classroom," Tanya McCarthy reports on her use of an Independent Learning Scale (ILS), adapted from Toyota's Kanban Board Technique (KBT), to help her students visualise their "thoughts and feelings" about learner autonomy and their independent learning abilities. McCarthy notes that autonomous learning, viewed as essential for learner engagement and achievement is being assessed in relation to Japan's Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, Culture, and Technology's (MEXT) policy of goal of increasing "indepen-

dent minded learning." Interestingly, the MEXT policy documents link "independent-minded learning by individuals" to the achievement of greater "independence, collaboration and creativity" in Japanese institutions and in society as a whole. Universities, McCarthy observes drily, "have tried to adopt new measures in the L2 classroom…with mixed results." Our familiarity with Japanese university settings, and the pressure to adhere to MEXT guidelines elicited a nodding empathy on our parts, and a strong measure of respect for McCarthy's efforts to research *with* her students, rather than *on* them.

The second article, by Mathew Porter and Scott Hilton, explores the use of a visual metaphor, *The Language Learning Tree*, to help students—at a Faculty of Nursing and a high school respectively—reflect on their language learning goals, practices, and attitudes, in two different institutional settings. Their paper discusses the challenges and discoveries the teacher/researchers made with their respective groups of students, and also provides readers with a narrative of collaborative professional development across institutional boundaries, the benefits of which Porter notes towards the end of their paper with this observation: "Although it is easy to see how learning a complex system such as language can be represented by a growing tree, discussing how the tree could be used to introduce a growth mindset added a new dimension to my understanding of the metaphor."

Then Luciano Mariani's "Exploring Italian High School Students' Metaphors of Language Learning" reports on a survey conducted with Italian secondary school students studying a variety of foreign languages: English, French, German, and Spanish. Mariani is particularly interested in what students mean by "knowing a foreign language" and how they see, i.e., what they understand as the processes, the *how-to(s)* of learning a foreign language in their school (institutional) settings. Participants were asked to visualise their learning through the use of metaphors, in their L1, Italian. Mariani uses this analysis to identify key metaphors that leaners use to represent their language learning experience—and to uncover what he defines as "aspects of the 'hidden curriculum'"—students' attitudes and beliefs about language learning and how those beliefs affect learning outcomes.

In the fourth article, Mayumi Abe's "Integrating Metacognitive Knowledge for Planning in Self-Directed Language Learning" returns us to Japan and reports on a case study conducted with two students enrolled in a Self-Directed Learning course Abe teaches. Her goal is to help learners develop a greater metacognitive awareness of their learning practices in an effort to help them more effectively plan and reflect on their learning goals. Her work also highlights the inevitable tensions teachers and learning advisors will struggle with as they formulate and reflect upon their efforts to help their students acquire more expertise in taking control of their own learning, or, in becoming more successful, more effective in defining and meeting their next language learning goals.

Yoshifumi Fukada, Tetsuya Fukuda, Joseph Falout, and Tim Murphey—although based at different Tokyo-area universities—research and write as a collaborative team. Their paper, "Collaboratively Visualizing Possible Others," takes a multi-faceted approach to "collaborative, self-reflective research" in working and researching with students imagining ideal classmates and themselves as more collaborative possible L2 selves. Their collaborative arrangement has allowed them to explore inter-institutional peer feedback systems, giving them a learning experience that in some ways parallels those of their students. They explore these interconnections through reflective discussions and shared narratives of their classroom lives as teachers and researchers.

Our sixth research paper, by Fergal Bradley and Leena Karlsson, returns us to two key themes introduced in previous papers—learner metacognitive awareness, i.e., "learning how

to learn," and learner advising as a mode of helping learners to plan and evaluate their own learning. Bradley and Karlsson describe their learner advising work (*language counselling*) as a parallel journey, in which their conceptualization of their counsellor selves is the counterpart to the work they encourage their students to do as they conceptualize "learning and themselves as language learners." One intriguing aspect of Leena and Fergal's work is that while the language is primarily conceptual and abstract, rather than explicitly visual, the metaphors of learning, research, and writing as "journey" link the inherently emotional, intersubjective experience of working and learning with others to the reconstruction of understandings in more formal (academic) senses.

All of the papers collected here serve as touchstones: testimonies to an inescapable conclusion as we struggle yet again to re-construct the fundamental questions and tentative understandings at the heart of the learning-teaching relationship. They help us to remember that we need to be reminded from time to time—especially when we are under the pressure of curricular requirements, course content, assessment rubrics, notions of language as a technical skill, grade and ranking systems, and so on—not to draw conclusions about our learners without ensuring that they have been given the opportunities to fully tell their own stories.

And that also brings us to the story of how the two of us as editors visualised working—and worked—on this inaugural issue of *The Learner Development Journal* together. We tried to offer writer-researcher-practitioners a chance to collaborate much more closely than they would on a regular journal. We, therefore, worked fairly closely with the writers of each paper, and at various stages, each of the writers has read and commented on other papers submitted to the first issue. A couple of the papers we received were almost complete, but have been re-written after commentary from other writers. Some of the papers started off as research notes or proposals and have taken a lot more work to build into the final versions we are now publishing. We also looked to members of the journal's Review Network who responded to later iterations of each paper and gave yet more useful feedback. In the end, each paper was seen by at least half a dozen people, all of whom have made astute observations, before completion.

Our aim was to develop papers, rather than accept or reject submission. The paper we worked on the most was one that came to us as a proposal rather than a piece of completed research. For various reasons, the research didn't go entirely to plan… but the process of reworking the goals was really interesting. It is actually rare that research does work out exactly as intended, of course. What was particularly interesting from an editorial perspective was assisting the "writer-researcher-practitioners" in repositioning themselves within the data they had, and discussing with them how they could come up with a paper quite different from the one they had originally proposed. It has been a great pleasure for both of us to work together with teachers who are committed to research writing that grows out of their exploration of the dynamics of the teaching-learning relationship as they have engaged with visualising learner development in quite different ways.

In the end, tantalizingly, the deeply puzzling and mysterious aspects of trying to visualize learner development often seem as opaque and resistant as ever. Perhaps this comes with the territory, given that efforts to answer questions about how people learn things and what any of us can do to help are so difficult to resolve coherently. We therefore hope, in sharing this collection of writing in the inaugural issue of *The Learner Development Journal*, to inspire both contributors and readers to puzzle out new understandings of visualization in language learning and teaching for, by, and with both learners and teachers.

References

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Editor bios

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Hugh Nicoll (American Studies, The Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington, USA) retired as professor of English and American studies at Miyazaki Municipal University in March 2015. He has been teaching in Japan since 1983 and been an active member of the Learner Development SIG since 1994. He currently teaches at Miyazaki Municipal University, Miyazaki International College, and the University of Miyazaki as a part-time lecturer, exploring, with his students and like-minded friends and colleagues, academic literacies, learner autonomy, and critical pedagogies in language education.

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