Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests

ISBN: 978-4-901352-44-4
http://ldworkingpapers.wixsite.com/ld-working-papers

Published by The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT)
Learner Development SIG, Tokyo http://ld-sig.org/

Aiko Minematsu & Andy Barfield

Introduction to *Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests*

The online version of this paper can be found at:
http://ldworkingpapers.wixsite.com/ld-working-papers/introduction

Date of publication online: November 2014
Aiko Minematsu <aikoominematsu@gmail.com>
Andy Barfield <barfield.andy@gmail.com>

The full (APA) citation reference for the online version of this paper is:
Minamatsu, A. & Barfield, A. (2014). Introduction to *Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests*. In A. Barfield & A. Minematsu (Eds.), *Learner development working papers: Different cases, different interests* (pp. 1-7). Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Learner Development SIG. Retrieved from http://ldworkingpapers.wixsite.com/ld-working-papers/introduction

Introduction to *Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests*

Aiko Minematsu & Andy Barfield

The starting point for this project was the Learner Development SIG Forum at JALT2012 where those taking part took a critical look at different cases of learner development within the Japanese context. A few months before the forum took place, in July 2012, the two of us agreed that it would be interesting to co-edit a set of working papers on the same theme, so we contacted all the presenters about taking part in a publication based on their forum presentations.

> *Each working paper would (a) present particular case(s) of learning / learner practices, and also (b) theorize from such cases about what learner development may mean/is about within the author's/their learners' local context and practices …*
>
> (from the initial Call for Proposals)

We received many positive responses, which were later augmented when we sent out a general invitation to all LD SIG members. We were fortunate to be both involved as presenters in the forum, which Bill Mboutsiadis, the SIG programme chair at the time, organised and animated in his inimitably enthusiastic way. On the day, the forum had something of a jamboree atmosphere - presenters with posters, iPads, projectors; participants moving around freely from one presentation space to another; animated discussions left, right and centre … and in all four corners too! Like others, we were simply swept along by the uplifting energy and dynamism that the event generated through its bewildering range of perspectives and interactions. Over the last two years as we have worked on this publication, that range and diversity have, we hope, been re-synthesized into the present collection of working papers. Now as we move towards publication ahead of JALT2014, we would like to look back at the overall process of production and further development of *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests*, and share with you, in this brief introduction, our perspectives on the project, its rationale and realization. By way of reflecting the interactive quality of

the whole publication, we continue with a dialogue where we each speak in our own voice about our work as co-editors of *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests*.

Aiko: The LD Forum at JALT 2012 featured simultaneous presentation sessions by a number of Learner Development SIG members, with the overarching theme of "Defining Learner Development: Different Interests."

> *Cases may be drawn from classroom learning, self-access learning, outside-class learning, at different levels and ages of education and development, and they may also be fully language learning-based or to do with academic study, content-based learning, or learning across the curriculum. To move beyond just an account of practice or method, each working paper would aim to critically explore issues such as:*
> *· different theories of learning and the learner (for example, cognitive, constructivist, or socio-cultural views)*
> *AND/OR*
> *· different areas and tools of, and/or approaches to, learning (for example, advising, self-access, self-assessment, collaborative group-based learning, learning strategies, vocabulary development) …*
> *AND/OR*
> *· different questions and principles to do with interaction and learner development (for example, agency, autonomy, criticality, differentiation, identity, motivation, narrative knowledging, near-peer modeling, positioning, scaffolding, voice)*
> *AND/OR*
> *· other relevant discourses and ideologies of education, learning and development.*
>
> (from the initial Call for Proposals)

As one of the presenters in the forum, I was astounded by the variety of topics that each presentation focused on, and the enlightening discussions that followed. Being new to the SIG and to the field itself, the forum made me both excited and perplexed; excited to see so much diversity all coming together under one common theme, and perplexed to see the organic way in which the different topics intertwined. So when Andy asked me if I wanted to be a part of this Working Papers project, I felt excited to be able to explore and re-live that feeling I experienced before and during the LD Forum in October 2012.

Andy: I was looking forward to the collaboration with Aiko because she had been doing some interesting work on alternative forms of assessment at high school. I felt that we would get on well and really enjoy working together because we had different perspectives and a similar enthusiasm for this project. Part of the challenge of moving from forum to publication was to try and take the written exploration of different cases of learner development beyond a conventionally formatted collection of working papers. We thought we might be able to do this by including reader responses within each chapter, as in previous SIG book publications on learner autonomy (e.g., Barfield & Nix, 2003; Barfield & Delgado Alvarado, 2013).

> *... we would like to ask you to nominate one peer reader responder to write a 500-750 word response to your working paper. This peer reader responder would ideally have interests close to your work and be able to offer constructive and critical comments on your paper from a second language education perspective...*
>
> (from the initial Call for Proposals)

But a new dimension in *Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests* is that each chapter involves two different types of reader response - a "Peer Reader Response" and what we call an "Interdisciplinary Reader Response". While the idea of peer responding will be familiar to most readers, including an interdisciplinary response in each chapter was a new venture for us - and for the chapter authors, too.

> *... We would also like to ask you to nominate one interdisciplinary reader responder to write a second 500-750 word response to your working paper. This reader responder should be someone working outside the field of second language education who you believe can bring interesting and critical perspectives to the issues raised in your working paper. For example, if your paper deals with learner advising, one possibility might be to invite a personal counselor or counsellor trainer to contribute as your interdisciplinary reader responder. On the other hand, if your paper deals with the development of academic literacy, you could nominate an educational theorist or critical literacy specialist to be your interdisciplinary reader responder...*
>
> (from the Initial Call for Proposals)

Aiko: Each chapter of this book starts by presenting particular case(s) of learning or learner practices, and aims to theorize from such cases about what learner development may mean within the author's and their learners' local context and practices. Within the process, two responders, one peer responder and one interdisciplinary responder, join the writer in discussing and raising issues. Since it was my first time to work as an editor, I was not sure what to expect from this book project. However, Andy's idea of including an interdisciplinary responder in the writing process seemed innovative and exciting, and my instincts told me that this was going to be a project that I would want to take part in. Looking back, this collaborative style of writing seems reminiscent of the inclusive nature of the LD forum at JALT, or even the Learner Development SIG itself, and this is most likely the reason why I felt so attracted to this writing project.

Andy: As the project unfolded and drafts started coming in, the collaboration between writers and reader responders had a noticeable effect not only on the writing of each chapter, but also on our work as editors. From a technical point of view, for the three or more authors of each chapter, each working paper was built up in distinct stages, going from Part I by the writer to the Peer Reader Response, then to Part II by the writer, before moving to the Interdisciplinary Reader Response, and the closing of the chapter by the writer. We believed that this incremental development would make the writing of a chapter less daunting than writing a solo 6,000-8,000 word chapter by one author alone. Thus, the project would be accessible and unpredictable for the writers. For us as editors too, this step-by-step also made responding to each piece of the evolving chapter less daunting (even if it more than tripled the number of drafts that we received for each chapter!). We were consequently able to respond closely to the writers in each chapter, and from that came a deepening sense of creative satisfaction in our editorial work.

From an ideological point of view, as Aiko has just mentioned, the collaborative turn in *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests*, also speaks to what we might call specific values of co-constructed and collaborative teacher education that the Learner Development SIG has tried for many years to adhere to in different events such as forums, in different publication projects, and in local get-togethers - and the way these discussion-based meetings are written up in a multi-vocalic fashion. I find that another interesting and appealing dimension of the whole project.

Aiko: As the co-editor of this book, it was not long after I had started reading the chapter drafts that I felt as if I had opened the Pandora's box. The more chapter drafts I read through, the more questions I seemed to have about learner development, such as: *What is learner development? Is it a fairly new*

concept in Japan? Why is there no Japanese equivalent (translation) of learner development? Is it a Western concept, like autonomy is said to be? Ironically, the more I tried to "define learner development," the more confused I became. Moreover, I was overwhelmed with the variety in the focus that each writer presented in their chapters, from teacher training (Hideo Kojima, Masuko Miyahara, Atsushi Yoshinaka: Chapter 4) and teachers' self-reflections (Chika Hayashi, Guy Modica, & Yukiko Banno: Chapter 1) to learner autonomy courses (Martin Mullen, Chris Fitzgerald, Paul Crook, Phil Benson, & Michael Hennessey: Chapter 2; Stacey Vye, Fumiko Murase, & Adriana Edwards Wurzinger: Chapter 7), English seminar classes (Alison Stewart, Robert Croker, & Judith Hanks: Chapter 8; Hugh Nicoll, Joe Tomei, & Debra Occhi: Chapter 9) and the empowerment of learners through lexical phrase development (Andy, Zorana Vasiljevic, & Mary Jo Pichette: Chapter 6), or even practices in primary and elementary schools (Peter Cassidy, Mike Nix, & Mike Mahon: Chapter 3) and curriculum development of speaking courses (Nathan Ducker, J.D. Brown, & Mark Posselius: Chapter 5). This all added to my confusion about what learner development entails!

Andy: That sense of disorientation was there for me too, in the way that the different perspectives that chapter contributors brought to the project started to make me keep looking at the issues from different directions. That can, as you mention, be traced back to the peer responders and interdisciplinary responders too. The main author of each chapter was free to nominate and then contact would-be responders. The peer responders in each chapter commented with a critical expertise drawn from their shared interests in the learner development practices explored by the main author, while the range of professional interests of the interdisciplinary responders has been striking for the diversity of views that it led to. In Peter Cassidy's chapter on code-switching by young learners in an international school, for example, Mike Nix shares a fascinating, critically minded peer reader response about issues to do with translanguaging and learner development at university that Peter's work raises for him about his own pedagogic practices. As the interdisciplinary reader responder, Mike Mahon, the principal at Peter's school, looks at the code-switching issues from the completely different perspective of the development of a school curriculum accredited by International Baccalaureate Organization. This kind of interplay helps, I feel, to move the reader to re-orient their understanding through engaging with counterpointing perspectives across each chapter. And from this there seems to emerge a further critical and empathetic reappraisal of the learner development case under discussion - a sense, if you will, of "So in what other ways can we look at this case? What other interests may come into play here? What assumptions are we making as we look at this case together from different perspectives?"

Aiko: Or to put it another way, the diversity in the responders' backgrounds brings about a sense of critical reflection not only to each case and discussion, but also to the readers as well. In Nathan Ducker's chapter on formative assessment, his interdisciplinary reader, Mark Posseliuss, who is a karate teacher, gives suggestions to Nathan on goal-setting and teacher feedback. I feel that this unexpected similarity between karate training and language learning forces readers to think critically about Mark's suggestions and the discussion that follows as Nathan responds to Mark and develops the contours of the case further. In this respect, the readers become part of the interplay between the writer and responders.

After reading in depth and focusing on the various approaches to learner development that each chapter had taken, I realized that learner development was not necessary a Western concept that was merely being transmitted to the Japanese context. The cases discussed in each chapter undoubtedly come from local (in this case, Japanese) contexts and needs, and it is through these local cases that the contributors to this book attempt to theorize what learner development may mean within their respective local contexts. The co-constructing of the dialogue between the writers and their responders is a crucial aspect of this process, because the responders' perspectives make the discussion all the more critical and objective. It may be said, in other words, that this Working Papers project is a collection of critical observations of learning and learner development practices in Japan.

Andy: Aiko, perhaps "extended critical observations" is a term that captures what we are trying to express here? "Extended" in the sense that each chapter moves beyond the author's own starting points and takes the author and the reader into new ways of looking at the case in question? That is, as the writer responds to the concerns of the reader responders, the writer's voice becomes extended through including the voices of the responders too. Doesn't this somehow contribute to the texturing of what we could call an "empathetic criticality" in each chapter that we have come to see shaping the whole anthology?

Aiko: Yes, that sense of "emphatic criticality" runs through each chapter, and it is the co-constructing of the discussion and interweaving of the writers' shared voices that make the Working Papers project distinct from other writings. Each chapter goes beyond an individual account. Through the dialogue that goes back and forth between the writer and reader responders, the readers can experience the developmental process of each exploration, as well as recognize the different and critical perspectives the responders bring to the process.

The whole editing process has been a major learning process for me, in that I was able to learn from each contributor and the dialogues that they have developed with their responders. They have all presented different answers to my question "What is learner development?" by bringing into play different theories, approaches, practices, and experiences of learning and learners. The chapters in *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests* have shown me that learner development is multifaceted, is approachable in various ways (and not just a fuzzy concept!), and is indeed localized in different contexts and settings in Japan.

Andy: That's a neat way of putting it, and maybe too this is a good point for us to speak in one voice. So…

Aiko & Andy: … Together, we'd like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the writers who have contributed to this anthology, as well as to Rob Moreau for the innovative book cover design. It just remains for us to welcome you, the reader, to *Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests*. We hope that you will enjoy taking the explorations further.

Tokyo, October 2014

References

Barfield, A.W., & Delgado Alvarado, N. (Eds.). (2013). *Autonomy in language learning: Stories of practices.* Canterbury, Kent: IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG.

Barfield, A.W., & Nix, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Autonomy you ask!* Tokyo: JALT Learner Development SIG. Retrieved 7 October 2014 from http://c-faculty.chuo-u.ac.jp/~mikenix1/ldsig/AYA.html