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Autonomy, Culture and Training

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Adrian Holliday's story about Kayvan and John (in *Independence* 42) opens a new can of worms in the discussion of learner autonomy. It highlights a host of complex and often intangible – yet strongly felt – issues related to culture. Its power lies in our recognition of ourselves in the two characters and their relationship. In this brief response, I will start by telling another story, which I hope will add another perspective to this discussion. It is the story of Alinka, a scholar from a developing country, and Liz, a scholar from the developed West.

Liz and Alinka met at an international conference. They liked each other's talk and, although not working in the same field, found many interests in common. Among others, they had both had the experience of being "academic migrants", the difference being that Alinka moved from a developing country to the West, while Liz moved from one Western country to another. Nevertheless, they saw interesting parallels in their endeavours to mediate between their native and their adopted academic communities.

Their friendship continued through emails and occasional encounters at conferences. One day Liz received an invitation to give a lecture at a university in Alinka's country. She accepted, mostly because of her friendship with Alinka. It was her first trip to that part of the world and she was slightly apprehensive, as the country did not have a reputation of being safe. Alinka reassured her that she would not be in danger but was herself unsure about what exactly to tell her to help her prepare for the trip. The situation in her country and the impact it had on the way people saw foreigners was so complicated to explain that she did not quite know where to start. In the end she decided to leave it to Liz to form her own impressions.

Shortly after Liz's visit, they met at another conference. Naturally, Liz's trip was the main topic of the conversation. Liz had a very good time in Alinka's country. Things were not as bad as she had

expected. The people were very friendly and so eager to listen and learn from her. In some ways, they were almost like children asking for guidance. It was a very moving experience.

Listening to Liz, Alinka suddenly realised that Liz did not see her as one of "them". "They" were clearly very different. She saw her as a cultural peer, one of "us". But it also became clear to Alinka why: because, from Liz's perspective,

Alinka had been exposed to the West. She had absorbed Western values. She had been *trained*.

Some types of student behaviour in the classroom and their responses to learning situations are interpreted as students' lack of autonomy. This is often explained by reference to students' cultural frameworks, in which, it is assumed, autonomy and individualism are not highly valued (if at all present). Many scholars have challenged such views (e.g., Kubota, 2001). There are at least two further steps in this faulty reasoning, whose cultural chauvinist basis (to use Holliday's terms) needs to be exposed. The first is that understanding undesirable learner behaviour as a cultural trait leads to the assumption that "culturally other" students need to be trained to become better learners. That is, to become the kind of learners that will respond to our teaching methodologies. And the final consequence of this logic is that when students do behave in ways considered to be indicative of learner independence, it is assumed that autonomy must have emerged precisely because *we* have trained them. It is these assumptions that need to be critically examined.

References

Kubota, R. (2001). Discursive construction of the images of U.S. classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly* 35 (1), 9-38.



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