Announcer

In this episode Jayme is joined by Dave Coleman, professional development and technical assistance specialist for the LAUSD Division of Adult and Career Education, to discuss the value of promoting learner autonomy in the Adult ESL classroom.

Jayme Adelson-Goldstein
Hi Dave. It’s great to welcome you to Oxford Adult ESL Conversations. How are you doing today?

Dave Coleman
I’m good thanks. I’m really happy to be here and talk with you, Jayme.

Jayme
I’m hoping that our conversation can center on autonomy, which has an element of irony since there are two of us discussing it, but I feel quite passionate about the importance of learner autonomy in the English learning classroom. I know that I’ve heard you speak beautifully about that in the past. I wonder if you’d like to expound a little bit on why learner autonomy is so important in English language instruction?

Dave
I think it’s important in all instruction, in all learning. In fact, you know, autonomy means moving the focus from teaching to learning, right? And we know in what’s happening in the global economy, in the US economy, and we hear it in reports from the Feds and from our state leaders, mostly from business, that they don’t have the kind of people they need. We are not the kind of people that we need to be really successful individually, but also economically. And so businesses are asking for people who are more autonomous, who take initiative, who are resourceful and persistent. I love this actually because it’s really tied to Malcom Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory: if students are working on personally relevant topics and skills, well then for sure there’s going to be a much higher chance that they’re going to persist. This is what we need, especially when we’re being forced many times to change jobs. We’ve been talking a lot about career pathways in education, especially adult education. We might have several pathways, so we definitely need to be persistent, and we need to be autonomous and take initiative in our own lives because the world is changing so quickly.

Jayme
And I think that the whole concept of adult learning being an important part of adult English language instruction... I think we were always looking at relevance, but we maybe weren’t quite as respectful of the challenge the adult learner could take on because we were so concerned about the challenge that English language learning provided. What I love about the conversations we’ve had about autonomy and self-direction is that we’ve spoken to how respectful it is of the adult learner.

Dave
Yes, it’s easy, it has been easy for me to have this mindset, this perspective that I am the holder of knowledge because I’m the native English teacher and the expert. But it’s bigger than that. We’re working with adults who bring amazing life experiences from different countries, and many of them
Jayme
I agree. And something that has come to the fore again and again is language in the service of content, or language in the service of having our learners express what they know, and build their knowledge so they can express even more. So I think that both of us have been in the field a while, not saying the number of years, but I know that we’re both evolving, which is a very good thing. How did autonomy come to the fore for you as an instructor?

Dave
Well, it kind of came out of survival. I was teaching a multi-level class of adult learners from intermediate low through advanced, and that had its own challenges, but I felt like I was able to be high-control Dave and differentiate, yes, and run my class very smartly and with great management. And then, when Adult Education died in California in 2012 and came back, I had all levels of students. I had seven levels of students, 60 students from literacy to advanced.

Jayme
Ah, that is so special.

Dave
Yeah, so I kind of was freaking out because I’d had some of the advanced learners for some time already, so it was like I had to juice it up again for them, and meanwhile, we know what the needs of literacy level students are, right? So I kind of went from high control to feeling out of control. And, I will say within a couple of weeks there were two other teachers who joined the team, but I realized I couldn’t do this the way I had been doing it. And I needed to let go of the reins, and I needed the students to take the reins. I just came clean with them and said “You’re going to be really responsible here folks.” And so I had to do some very specific management things and student empowerment things. Some of those look like what really good elementary teachers do, where they color-coat things and have stations, and everybody knows where things are and how to use them.

Jayme
I was just going to ask you—would it have to be that in order to have an autonomous set up a teacher would really be working with learning stations, or could it be done in maybe a more traditional classroom setting?

Dave
Oh for sure. It’s bigger than what I was just talking about. It’s a whole perspective. It’s about students knowing they’re responsible and being empowered to be responsible. It’s really clear expectations and everyone sharing those. It can be as simple as a traditional lesson sequence where students have some skills and objectives they are trying to learn, and they are empowered to do that on their own while the teacher is doing something else with other people. And students, if they’re working with documents, they can have answer keys. I don’t need to be the keeper of those. I’m not worried about cheating. It’s like ‘Really?’ That’s not the issue, especially with adults, right? So it can be your very traditional learning, or if you’re doing project-based learning. So it happens in lots of different ways. But students want to feel like they’re improving and they need to know, especially adults, how they’re doing it. So check lists,
rubrics, self-progress charts, all of these things are just really practical. Having “I can” statements before and after, pre-tests and post-tests, being empowered to work in groups... And I don’t have to be there. I create the parameters and structure. They weigh in on that, and then go.

Jayme
What is the challenge for the teacher, and what is the role of the teacher in an autonomous learning environment?

Dave
The challenge and the role is to... Well there’s got to be good communication about what’s happening here because we have students frequently from more traditional learning approaches where teacher knows best, teacher runs everything, so we need to talk about that and say “Here’s another way of thinking about it, and here’s why it’s helpful.”

Jayme
So they sort of have to be an ambassador for autonomy first?

Dave
Yeah, yeah, that’s a great way of saying it. So there’s that culture you’re creating first. Otherwise you start doing something and students from traditional backgrounds are like “What are you doing? What’s happening?” And there can be some anger and frustration and annoyance. So we really want to understand the why of it and communicate that to students in level appropriate ways. But I think transparency about what objectives and skills are happening is really important.

Jayme
So you mentioned that you don’t have to be there. What does that mean to a teacher who is feeling a little bit unbalanced with the idea of a classroom where learners are taking so much responsibility?

Dave
What I think you’re pointing to Jayme is that there’s that tension between—the teacher is in some ways and expert, and the students want that teacher with them to be a language model, to help point out errors, to encourage, all of those things that a leader does. And yet the teacher knows that there are other groups of students and other individuals who want that same things as well. So if I have beginners or intermediates or even advanced students in the same class, I can’t always have them together. We get that. So I’ll want to have some small groups. So when I say I’m not there, I may not be there with my intermediate or advanced students because I am working with the beginners, and vice versa. So I think that’s the tension: wanting to be all things to all students but knowing that’s not a reality. And ultimately that’s not helpful to students. We want people to be like we’re all talking about—autonomous.

Jayme
Well, and certainly that’s what employers are asking for that, aren’t they? They want employees who can work independently, or with a team but independently of a manager or supervisor to accomplish the task.

Dave
Yeah, I was just looking at Forbes list of 10 things that businesses want: like you just said, ability to work
in a team; ability to make decisions and solve problems; to plan, organize and prioritize work. All of these things are not something that someone directs you to do; they’re something that you do because you have a job and you have a task that needs to be done.

**Jayme**

So the autonomy is autonomy from the teacher, to a degree, but the team can be autonomous as well. The students can work with each other, rely on each other to support each other in the process.

**Dave**

And I’m seeing a parallel between what you’re saying about the class with the jobsite, the workplace. You know that the employer, the owner, the leader doesn’t want that person always having to come to them and ask questions like “Now what do I do?” and “How do I do it?” And if we’re showing that in the classroom, then students will be empowered and have the skills to be that kind of employee in the workplace.

**Jayme**

I think that that’s such an important element of relevance. And of course you and I have come up against this a number of times, but then you have the teacher who says “Well my learners are not really looking at the workplace.” And I know that we both have the answer that these are skills that serve them well as parents, as community members, as students. These are 21st century life skills.

**Dave**

Exactly. I couldn’t say it any better.

**Jayme**

But you were touching earlier on the idea of the cultural component for learners—of teachers as the center and the source of all knowledge, and helping the learners adjust to the new culture of the learner-centered classroom. What other challenges do you think students come up against?

**Dave**

I think it’s not just their eyes are not always on the teacher because we are directing them to be more reflective and look in the mirror, but also on their peers. And in a lot of language learning classes and in society in general, they’re looking to others. And sometimes that can be challenging in really diverse cultural groups. And teachers need to help create understanding and respect. They need to help build a community of learners, and then that will translate into the workplace as well.

**Jayme**

How about the complexity of working on tasks that are a challenge to learners? How would you recommend that a teacher set up a task so that learners can work autonomously in pairs, or in teams, or individually?

**Dave**

We know from, going back to Adult Learning Theory, that people want to know what they’re doing clearly and why it’s important to them. So that’s a super important place to start, especially if we’re going to be having groups of people or individuals working on their own. So clarity of instructions, clarity of that desired outcome is super important. We provide resources, whether it’s, you know, your basics
like dictionaries or computers, even smart phones— if they’re going to be helpful we allow students to use those. We give them frames. We have posters on our wall of helpful sentence structures. We practice what it means to have collaborative discourse that’s effective: how to initiate a comment, how to interrupt politely, how to listen carefully, how to paraphrase, how to encourage other people to speak. Those are all really helpful and necessary for those harder tasks.

Jayme
And as a part of the task, how would you help students guide themselves when they’re actually working to complete the task?

Dave
Sure, I think checklists, step-by-step what’s going to happen so that people can follow that process, also knowing what the expectations are clearly through a rubric, and something we talked about the other day that I wanted to bring up again were these KWL charts. ‘K’ stands for what I know now, already. ‘W’ stands for what I want to learn. And then ‘L’ is what I did learn. So the first two pieces of that ‘What I know now’ and ‘What I want to learn’ can be done, once we’ve trained students as a whole group, in their small group. Especially those higher level students. But students say “Well, what do I know now?” and that’s based on Learning Theory. We can only learn or add on new learning or negotiate new learning based on what we start with. So students do a few bullet points individually, or talk about it and create a brainstorm as a group, what we know now, and what do we want to learn just based on the topic or the title of the passage or a video or some kind of content they’re going to be discussing. They can be doing that and that’s going to take some time. And it’s important, well-used time while the teacher is working with another individual or small group. And then the teacher can give those students the full content if they don’t have it after they address it, they work through it, they process it, they finish the KWL chart by writing what they learned. I just find that is a strategy that can be used time and time again. I don’t think students get bored with it. And it creates in them this approach to learning that is very positive and helpful for other things.

Jayme
So Dave you mentioned that it was a process for you to come to autonomy. Was there any moment that really helped you involved into accepting autonomy as a really valuable element of the classroom?

Dave
Yes, I had the amazing experience of meeting a woman who was one of my students, and she was such a motivated learner and mother, doing everything in her power to advance herself in this new country, and her three children. She was determined to find resources for her kids in terms of tutoring opportunities. And by her persistence and her autonomous desire to help her students, she became a class leader in terms of parent empowerment. And I just was able to step back and let her lead. And other people became empowered to become leaders as well because of what she was doing and the role model that she was providing. It just kind of made it more concrete for me how I am a part of creating a place, and people show up, and if they feel empowered, magical things can happen. And it just really brought it home for me that I need to run hard with this learner autonomy thing.

Jayme
And that magic can happen as part of our facilitation, but it can’t happen without the learners.

Dave
Yeah, for sure.
Jayme
That’s, I think, very moving.

Dave
And it ties into what you always say Jamye—we respect our learners. And, I think it’s wonderful, and it’s important. And that’s how we need to be in life.

Jayme
For me the fact that we can get so passionate about this issue is one of the reasons I love our field. Because we deeply care about making sure that our adults are served and that their skills are highlighted. And that it is not a hierarchy, it’s an exchange of the skills and knowledge that we have to support the skills and knowledge that they have.

Dave
Nicely said.

Jayme
I like to ask if there’s anything that you would particularly want a listener to take away from our free-flowing conversation today?

Dave
Well first of all, in a big picture way, don’t be afraid of learner autonomy. I think it’s exciting. Magic things can happen. And important things can happen for our students, and for our excitement about our job. So that’s a big picture thing. On the more practical side, I think we mentioned, you know, setting up the room so that students feel empowered and that they have access, creating classroom community and creating teams that are trusting and solid and effective, and giving students tool, whether they’re checklists, or rubrics, or charts or graphic organizers, that are really going to help them do the work on their own.

Jayme
So for yourself, in the process of doing this conversation, was there anything that you had a personal ah-ha about, or said “Oh I haven’t thought about that in a while”?

Dave
I’m not in the classroom now, so what I’m thinking about and being reminded of as I work with teachers, and as I work with school groups and instructional leadership groups, the same rules apply. How am I empowering them to be autonomous? We’re doing a lot of complex, difficult, demanding work, and we need tools to do this work. But we need to tap into the things that excite us, the things that are relevant to us, and we need each other. So, applying all of those same things to the work that we do as teachers and instructional leaders.

Jayme
Well, thank you Dave, because that’s how I feel talking about this with you. I feel like we get an opportunity to really step up to what we need to be doing and draw on our own resources and each other, and I wouldn’t want to be doing it alone. So thank you for spending time on Oxford Adult ESL conversations.
Dave
Thank you Jayme.

Announcer
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