

# OF 'TRAMAS', SPACES AND CREATIVITY

## Towards an Integrated Model of Autonomous Learning

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This article summarizes some of the concepts developed in my closing plenary lecture in the 6th Conference on Learner Autonomy (Barcelona 1997). Through the auto-ethnographic approach and the first-hand narratives of theory-building processes, it relies heavily on personal and local experience and, at the same time, it intentionally keeps some of the colloquial and direct style of the original public address. Using self-narrative techniques as a starting point it attempts to describe as a unified model aspects of learner autonomy and some complex forms of experiential learning ('tramas').

### Introduction: Stories and Maps

Potser el secret és que no hi ha secret  
i aquest camí l'hem fet tantes vegades  
que ja ningú no se'n sorprèn; [...]  
Potser, també, del poc que tenim ara  
no sabem fer-ne l'ús que cal; qui sap!  
(Martí i Pol, 1981 *L'Àmbit de tots els  
Àmbits*, p. 22)

Maybe the secret is that there is no secret  
And we have walked this path so many times  
That we have ceased to wonder; [...]  
Yet, who knows? Maybe even of the little we now have  
We are not making proper use; who knows?  
(Martí i Pol, 1981 *The Space of all Spaces*)<sup>1</sup>

'Autonomy' as a catch-all tag for a variety of self-regulated situations and self-directed approaches to language learning has been slowly gaining prestige and recognition and finally emerged as a trendy academic issue within some of the more progressive circles. Reports, questionnaires, dissecting tools of different kinds are continually discussed and tested in hopes of new and illuminating discoveries. A few enlightened curricula already give 'autonomy' the status of a well-referenced topic, usually in the hands of aware researchers and

trainers who, because of institutional teaching constraints, can rarely go beyond description and *transmission* of principles and models.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to express my concern that these research and training instruments are not sufficient to expose the core of something that goes much beyond an observable pattern of behaviour. Autonomy and learning forms based on attitude and experience are closely related to personal stance and attitude to life, growth and development. Does formal description of classroom institutionalized tools and practices account for the roots of individual learner autonomy and lead to its understanding? Can the meaning of 'autonomy' be an object of transmission?<sup>3</sup>

I am not trying to answer any of these questions directly. My purpose here is much more modest and limited —simply to provide a first-hand account of personal experiences and of local practices of which over the years I have been a privileged witness. I believe in the theory<sup>4</sup> that one of the best paths towards personal growth and truth lies with auto-ethnographic approaches —with the telling and sharing of stories ('narratives of self') and with the maps and discoveries that derive from these narratives.

In this belief, I am here, like the poet, without any secrets to communicate but ready to share some personal experiences and the modest reflections that these have inspired me throughout years of work first, as a high-school teacher, later as a teacher-trainer and a researcher at this university. I do so in the belief that the deeper you go into the world of your private and local experience, the more you may be dealing with layers of universally shared understanding and practice.

One of my concerns has always been the analysis of practical implementations of autonomy and the search for constructs that starting from practice link theory and practice together. Allow me now to take you on a trip to the world of spaces and 'tramas'. The trip begins with a story, a very old one, and forgive me if I blush a lot in the telling.

## The Love Boat

Freedom for the student in class, you say?  
(Eugeni D'Ors)

It happened a long time ago. I was a teacher at a well-known Barcelona state highschool. A fairly experienced one, I believed, with a well-deserved reputation among my colleagues, proud of my abilities and of my relationship with the students. I had this class of lively 14-year olds. It was a wonderful year. We experimented with the textbook, played variations on it, chanted, memorized and, above all, had a tremendous sense of achievement. The teacher loved his

students. They looked up at the teacher with pleasure and admiration. It showed in their eyes.

I had the same students on the following year. But love was there no longer. All of a sudden they were bored to death. October was bad, November full of conflict, December a prelude to disaster. I pushed them to get passing grades, which had fallen apallingly low. It was the wrong move. We had reached a stalemate in the battle that had begun in September and I felt bad and, above all, guilty. Democracy was those days only recently regained in the country as well as in the schools, and almost all issues affecting a group were put to the class vote. In this constructive spirit, the students asked me to step out of class one day, which I did, so that they could hold an assembly without teacher interference. A decision was reached in the meeting which they promptly and dutifully passed on to me: no more work along the current class lines; no more lessons with Ramon, their teacher. That was of course utopian and totally unacceptable. I stood my ground and tried to react calmly and sensibly: "You're students. You are *supposed* to work". They found this reasonable. So, a second meeting was called for the following day to decide on a course of action. Eventually they came up with a negotiated plan: they would produce a play. My courage returned. "Good, I have several..." This was as far as I could go. They had already decided on writing, rehearsing and producing the play themselves.

What could I do? My only requirement was to see the final script once finished. And, of course, to negotiate certain rules of behaviour to prevent interference with the rest of school activities. After that I confined myself to a very quiet classroom in the company of three kind souls who, probably feeling insecure, shaken by the course of events, or just sympathetic, had decided they needed remedial grammar work with the teacher.

From January to April several things happened: the flow of students from the library to their meeting points (watering holes, some jokingly called them, because the school canteen was included in them) was constant. The Headmaster admonished me officially for the unlawful traffic. Word of the rebellion spread among my kind colleagues and some of them tried to console me with huge smiles on their faces. I began to avoid the teachers' room and the staff coffee room. From time to time word of the rebels came to me through messengers with questions mostly concerning vocabulary issues. Otherwise I was left in the dark.

May came and one day we woke up to a school with walls papered up with posters announcing the big opening. The play was called "The Love Boat" after a TV series popular in those days. I was appalled. Even more so when, at my firm request, they reluctantly showed me the script. Syntax was notably absent from it, the characters—the boat crew, Charlie's Angels and an assorted collection of people from popular TV series those days—were colourful but had probably never been in the list of educational prototypes in any sane school.

The day came. At noon the theatre room was packed. Everybody was there: Students, school authorities, colleague teachers, even some parents. I did not dare lend a hand but sat with the public, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. The curtain went up, the music started and the Captain said his first line. I have to admit that the sets, the make-up and the acting were surprisingly good. The language was not. None of us could hear, much less understand, a word of what was said. From the very first moment the audience started cheering and laughing. For almost one hour the Captain, the waiters, the cabaret dancers, the detectives, the spies, performed on the stage to the constant enthusiastic applause of the audience, who, familiar with the TV series, were able to follow the action without problems. The final applause went on for a very long time. To the eyes of the public and of the actors and actresses the play had been a huge success and some of my more sincere colleagues came to me in a hurry asking for advice: "How did you manage this, Ramon? My students do not even open the textbook these days. Yours did all this fantastic work." To which my modest reply was: "Well... you see...". My prestige soared among the teachers and... surprisingly among my own students who, for reasons that totally escaped me, seemed to feel proud of their teacher, whom they treated as an equal now.

Well. I had most of them again the following year and the year after that until eventually they left to study at a university or get a job. But this is another story. What I think is important is that out of those 37 students, 10 (27 %), that I know of, decided to graduate in language-related studies and have become teachers of foreign languages. The Captain of the ship —Ricart<sup>5</sup>— is the Headmaster of a local highschool, one of the actresses —Marta<sup>6</sup>— got a PhD in German linguistics and is a colleague of mine in the same department of this university.

The Love Boat experience was a time of crisis. 'Crisis' understood as the apparent inability of a teacher to cope with a situation. A time when one's mental schema do not apply and the teacher feels lost. Also a chance to look for new hypotheses and formulate new syntheses. I believe I grew as a result of this and of other crises that inevitably followed, but I would have saved myself a lot of trouble if I had read then what Eugeni D'Ors, a Catalan philosopher and writer, had written in 1916:

Freedom for the student in class, you say?

Not only freedom, but also authority, whenever he **LEADS, CREATES, INVENTS, PRODUCES**. When this happens, the teacher must not only *respect* the child, he must follow him, obey him. The teacher's duty is then to observe discipline. When he fails to do so, he behaves in an *unruly, undisciplined* way. (Eugeni D'Ors, 1916: 272)<sup>7</sup>

D'Ors was a conservative thinker. Nobody in Spain would accuse him of subversive thinking or activities. But, in the words of the locals, he had 'seny'. Now this is an interesting word that is really hard to translate to another language. It denotes a mixture of common sense, a feeling for the practical but also for the deeper truth of things as well as a mode of quiet orderly behaviour in times of crisis. I believe D'Ors spoke with 'seny' when he wrote this.

I must have told The Love Boat story a dozen times. For several reasons:

- First, because my students love listening to stories in class, especially about their teacher's failures, instead of having to cope with hard theory.
- Then, because the older I get, the more I believe in Pat Diamond's theory that the key to our development lies with the retelling and recycling of the stories of our own life. I have described a time of crisis. In due time, some reflections grew out of this and other failures, as I tried to understand them.
- Finally, because truth is usually to be found in the very simple facts of daily life and we need to examine these very carefully.

## 'De la anécdota a la categoría' (Eugeni D'Ors) —The theoretical construct—

What had happened?

### Spaces

First, willingly, I had provided my students with a *negative* space—a misdirected classroom practice—which they were healthy enough to attempt to escape from. Unavoidably, deprivation of a necessary space leads healthy motivated individuals to rebellion and attempts to bring walls down, as well as to remap their environment. But for this rebuilding, a *positive* space is necessary, an arena of freedom for them to act on.

Unwillingly perhaps, I had also provided this positive space, plus a second motivational factor—the challenge—. The challenge was in questioning their capacity to manage their own rebellion. All youngsters (and adults, perhaps) dream of the rebellious trip to the unknown island—Utopia—or, since we live on the Mediterranean shores, of Ulysses' trip to Ithaca.

A third empowering factor was in the fact that The Love Boat provided all the excitement of a trip on uncharted waters—a sense of adventure—. These students were able to construct a new reality. Again it was in their eyes.

Ramon Ribé

They had recovered the light I had seen there the year before. Years later I read Kavafis, the Greek poet.<sup>8</sup> A pity I did not have his words to bid farewell to my students then.

As you set out for Ithaca  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery<sup>9</sup>  
(C.P. Kavafis, *Ithaca*)

Years later, a more formal construct—a theory of macro and microspaces—grew out of this and similar experiences.<sup>10</sup>

'Space' is both a common everyday term and a technical designation. We use it in countless idioms from daily life and is a recurrent ontological metaphor most languages and cultures share, and is tied to 'a string of related metaphorical concepts in a systematic way'.<sup>11</sup> It is also a technical term in physical and psychological sciences.

My use of the term in the area of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning was not original. Stevick had used it and some of the attached concepts before:

In exercising "control" then, the teacher is giving some kind of order, or structure to the learning space of the student. In encouraging him to take "initiative", she is allowing him to work, and to grow, within that space.  
(Stevick 1980:20)

And so a language class is one arena in which a certain number of private universes intersect one another. Each person is at the center of his or her own universe or perceptions and values, and each is affected by what the others do.  
(*op.cit.*:7-8)

Physical<sup>12</sup> and psychological spaces are similar in a few aspects and differ in many others.

<p>□ 3-4 dimensions</p> <p>Physical spaces are definable through a finite number of time-space parameters</p>	<p>■ n-dimensions:</p> <p>Psychological spaces exist through 'perception' of them and usually 'shared' dimensions</p> <table> <tr> <td>Individual</td><td>Cognitive Metacognitive Affective</td></tr> <tr> <td>Shared</td><td>Social (class interaction) Linguistic (code) Cultural Procedural</td></tr> </table>	Individual	Cognitive Metacognitive Affective	Shared	Social (class interaction) Linguistic (code) Cultural Procedural
Individual	Cognitive Metacognitive Affective				
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Table 1. Physical vs. Psychological spaces

We do not want to go into the full theoretical construct now, but a few reminders may be useful before examining a few practical implementations of autonomy.

- FL learning spaces,<sup>13</sup> though formally definable, are always implemented through contextually specific variables — making each interactive encounter unique and different.
- In the same way as a space is measurable, its dimensions and our perception of it can be optimised so that it allows for the interaction of all the variables of that context.
- A learning space is often perceived top-down by both student and teacher as just "one" positive or negative macro-space. However, it can be analyzed into sub-spaces, each definable by and accounting for a context or individual variable or a set of them.
- In computers you change a bit in a byte and the whole message changes. You alter a sub-space in the macro-composition and the qualitative perception of the whole changes.

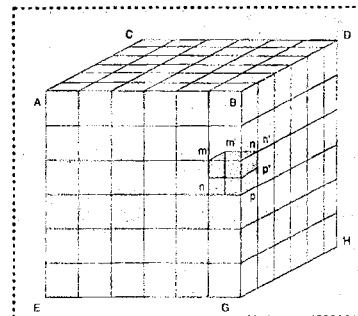


Fig. 1 Macro & micro spaces

The premise is that every small, precise change we make affects the entire set of arrangements we are immersed in [...] not only alters each response, thus affecting the teacher's knowledge of each student, but also alters the perceptions some will have of the teacher [...] and might alter in some way the relationships between some students. (Fanselow 1987:5)

- A FL teaching-learning space is at the same time interactive, transactive, and transformative (s. Fig. 2).<sup>14</sup>
- Some spaces (like autonomy and motivation) affect and control others and can be defined as meta-spaces.
- Autonomy means exercising control over the learning space. It implies action upon the medium of learning.

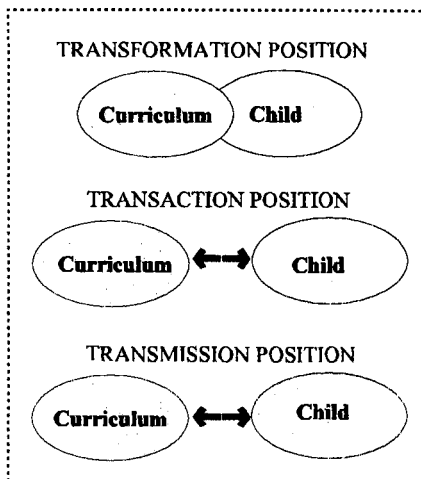


Fig. 2 Adapted from Miller et al. 1990:4-5

The trick, for the teacher, is not only to preserve this distinction; it is also to provide the right amount of learning space. If there is too little, the student will be stifled. If there is too much, the student will feel that the teacher has abandoned him. (Stevick, *op.cit*:20)

- Spaces are created through attitudinal stance and strategical action. Processes do not exist in a vacuum. It is interactive teaching-learning action that open spaces for strategical thinking and autonomous learning.
- Space composition is context-specific. There is a correlation between learning-task type and context variables.

## In search of learner autonomy: From task to 'trama'

For a long time I have made use of a distinction between three categories—3 Generations—of tasks (s. below) to describe the type of “action-based” teaching-learning activities ideally suited to open the FL learning spaces necessary in different classroom contexts<sup>15</sup>. Teachers still find this 3-step model useful, as the gradient and continuum it describes fairly well represents not only an increasingly complex model of student-generated action but it also corresponds fairly accurately to the process teachers go through in their search for learner independence and confidence building.



While using it to clarify concepts in teacher training events, I have discovered that in non-local circles it introduces confusion. I am particularly grateful to those colleagues who have pointed out that some of the more developed forms of experiential learning (2nd or 3rd Generation Tasks) fall beyond the boundaries of what has become the standard definition of task in current literature.<sup>16</sup>

Though I still use it for simplification, I also eventually dropped my first alternative label SGF or 'student-generated frameworks' ('research frameworks' and 'creative frameworks'), in favour of the much richer Spanish word 'trama'.<sup>17</sup>

'Trama' is one of those polysemous terms which connotes lots of related meanings and denotes an exceptionally rich world of culturally-related concepts and fields.

As a noun, 'trama' means in the first place 'fabric' and 'texture', 'weft' and 'woof', intercrossing threads and cooperative patterns and structures, with cultural connotations for 'canvas' ('canemàs' in Catalan, 'cañamazo' in Castilian Spanish), and for tapestry, as well as the process of making them. 'Trama' is the 'plot' in a novel, a play or a film —a continuous pattern of developing and absorbing action— and also a 'conspiracy' or a 'spy net' —a scheme or co-planned series of action events (closely related to the English 'plot' and 'scheme'). It is also a 'sketch' or 'outline', the 'screen' in photoengraving and the 'blossom' of olive trees.<sup>18</sup>

As a verb, 'tramar' means 'crossing threads', 'weaving', producing a framework; 'hatching', 'plotting' and 'scheming'; 'blossoming' (when of an olive tree), as well as 'to be up to something' (colloquially). It has connotations of 'skill', of 'cooperative planning and thinking', and of 'acting imaginatively' and 'playfully' (not necessarily but also 'deviously').

The model describes a continuum (gradient) from FL tasks to 'tramas' and, within these, a distinction between 'research tramas' (2nd G. Tasks) and 'creative tramas' (3rd G. Tasks).

## **Tasks and 'Tramas'**

My rebel students in the Love Boat adventure had come up with a creative 'trama' or framework. It had begun as a kernel idea —producing a play— which had opened spaces and sub-spaces when, like a novel or a tree, it started developing structural —procedural and content— episodes with ever-growing branches and sub-branches. Spaces for memorization, for pleasure, for output processing, for negotiation, for resonance processes, for risk-taking processes, for aggressiveness, for critical thinking, and for a hundred others.

Whereas the way the term task is increasingly used today is to describe essentially mono-nuclear focus-on-form units 'within the frame of an external

‘syllabus’ (a ‘constellation of tasks’, in Candlin and Murphy’s words)<sup>19</sup>, a ‘trama’ describes a multi-episodic and multi-nuclear tapestry of language action around a student-generated algorithm. The framework generates its own internal syllabus, its own internal task constellation. It is a macro-space itself, what Cole describes as a “culturally organized medium of learning.”

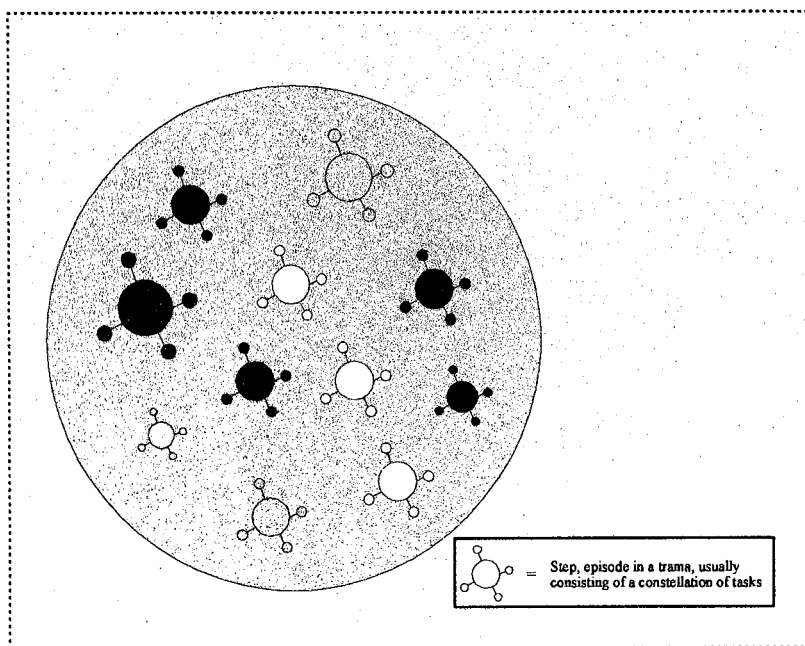


Fig. 3 A trama is a culturally organised medium of learning

Whether research project-work, creative project-work, global simulation, class-generated drama play, network-based cooperative ventures, film-dubbing, classroom magazines, on-line writing, portfolios, and other forms of autonomous organization of individual or team learning,<sup>20</sup> a framework is multinuclear and, therefore, hyperordinate to the task. It consists of not just one scenario but of a number of them. Like a novel or a play, it may have different characters, and it unfolds in chapters, scenes, and episodes. It is by its very nature time-independent. It generates its own internal time frame and its own syllabus. It is no longer problem-solving, but also problem-posing. And so it involves the learner cognitively and creatively in a continuous problem-solving and decision-making process. It can be real—if it takes the class out into the world (a trip, practice periods in the workplace)—or virtual if it takes external reality into the classroom by means of re-creation.

When I needed to make colleagues reflect on their own experiences ten years ago, I used a model that established three stages within a continuum of autonomous learning through action:

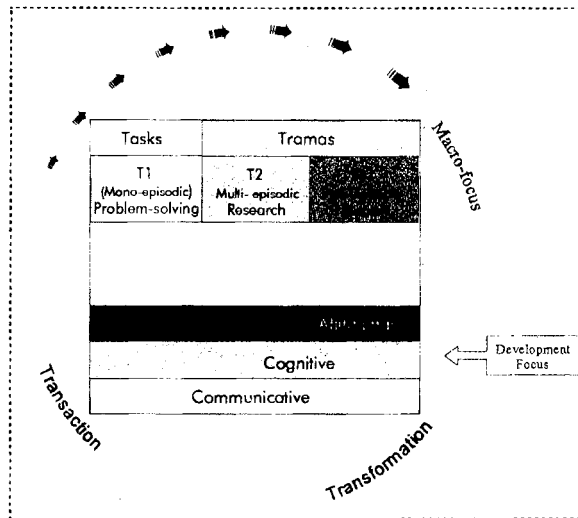


Fig. 4. From task to 'trama' (Ribé 1998:34)

Research frameworks (or 2nd Generation tasks in the first version of the model) aim mainly at the cognitive development of the student and are based on an organized pattern of problem-solving, research structures and cognitive strategies. Contents and procedure are usually negotiated. Creative frameworks (3rd Generation tasks) aim at attitudinal change or transformation, by means of 'whole-person' involvement through the experience of creative work.

The metaphor of the three generations made sense. An interesting fact is that a good percentage of teachers engaged in this kind of practice have often evolved through the 3 stages described above in an uninterrupted process of self-discovery. This perception of a continuum of personal development and of classroom experience which teachers immediately recognize and where they can easily place themselves is possibly one of the reasons why the model is well accepted in teacher-training events.<sup>21</sup>

Numerous descriptions of actual class-generated 'tramas', mostly creative projects, can be found in Vidal and Ribé 1997:47-61.<sup>22</sup> Because of its dual structure —it contains a research project and a creative one— and its clarity, I would like to quote an example from a class with young teenagers led by my dear colleague Núria Vidal.<sup>23</sup>

A. Research 'trama'.

A mixed-ability class of 14-year-olds from a state secondary school are going on a school exchange to an English-speaking country. Teacher and students decide to organize their visit around a project. They discuss themes and discover they are curious to find out what stories their English counterparts read. Finding this, of course, requires a big research structure. So, they produce a step-by-step blueprint of the whole process. The survey involves library searches, questionnaires and interviews with librarians, parents and grandparents, children and teachers. They draft questions, prepare forms and tapes and put their shoulders to the task. It is a long job. They collate the information into hit-parade grids and analyze the results. Then, they organize the reading of the stories in groups. The results are shared. Stories are retold to the class, the best ones selected and their summaries written down. A big volume of shared produce emerges.

This was in itself a huge volume of work, but they decided to go further. In order to give unity to their product, they resolved to create a second structure: a fairy-tale that linked all the sections together. (s. B →)

B. Creative trama

The students brainstorm endlessly in an effort to negotiate a sensible and imaginative 'thread', a link that weaves all the products into a unified 'trama'. One of them suggests this:

A student (one of them) is reading a fairy-tale book in the library. One of the tales is about a little gnome who lives in a tiny hamlet. One day his village burns and he escapes by the skin of his teeth. In his flight he jumps off the book onto the library table. The adolescent who is reading the book is startled. "I need help", the dwarf pleads. "How?", the student manages to react. She asks for her colleagues' cooperation. A search is organized by the whole class to find a story where the little gnome will fit and live happily. They revisit all the stories read so far. None will do. So, they write a new one, a heart-rending story where the little creature finds a new home and a new love.

The final product is a bound volume which is collectively celebrated and evaluated, after all its parts have been individually or group-presented in the class. Its index, a carefully elaborate revision of the process, is like a finely-spun web reflecting the planning and collaborative organisation of the class, the research tasks, and the unifying story. Individual and collective accomplishments are recorded, extracts from group and class diaries included, observations annotated. It provides a general retrospective for a final evaluation of both process and product.

Although the nuclear focus of two tramas is different, the algorithms behind them are similar. These algorithms, or typical sequences, are probably best described dually —the 'surface or visible structure' of the trama and its "hidden or deep learning structure".<sup>24</sup>

## THE SURFACE STRUCTURE

A framework is a student-generated interface between the curriculum and his/her own mental and affective organization.

This interface can be described in terms of surface structure —the sequence of typical steps— and of deep or hidden acquisitional and motivational structure. Algorithms for surface organization of individual or

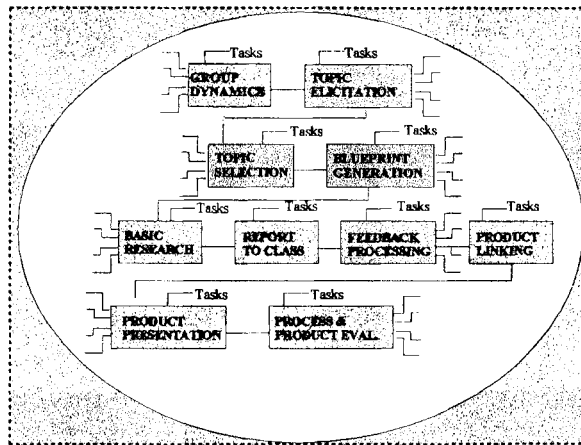


Fig. 5 A sequence of steps

group activity are almost entirely procedural and fairly closely represent the steps of a general management project. Research conducted with a group of colleagues on multiple implementations of tramas<sup>25</sup> suggests that both surface algorithms and deep structures are fairly identical through learning contexts and cultures and that they respond to basic cognitive patterns of behavioural structure common to all human projects.

## THE HIDDEN LEARNING STRUCTURE

Let us have a look at two aspects of the underlying structure.

### *Affective variables*

A trama, whether research or creative, is a contract. The affective spaces it opens are powerful, delicate to manage, and shared by students and teacher alike, though in different ways. With The Love Boat my students experienced at least four different things:

- The pleasure of creativity. Creativity is a 'peak experience'.<sup>26</sup>
- Risk. In the words of a colleague, when you create ('When you think out loud, when you deliver (or just release) your concerns in a public place', his words) 'you are engaging in a dangerous exercise, perhaps even a foolish gamble: you are inviting others to consciously amble upon the paths of your thoughts—at times taking turns, at times shortcuts—and you are inviting them to join you in the construction of something which, at present, is just a temporary canvas [sketch, trama<sup>27</sup>], and as such, constantly modifiable itself' (Tusón, 1986: introduction).<sup>28</sup> It is true that risk implies fear, but also the enjoyment of adventure. If done collectively it has all the emotion of being one of the pack, one of the brothers.
- Personal success through the expression of their own individuality. Achievement motivation derives from recognition of success.<sup>29</sup>
- They acquired a perspective of the steps of a project as a contingent path towards a final goal—the final product and objectives they had set for themselves—. Raynor's theory describes any process motivationally as a series of linked steps each with positive and negative valences according to different variables: some derived from previous experience of success and failure, some inherent to the task in hand, others derived from future perspective—expectation of success, relevance of present task towards the final stage.
- Power. The pleasure of transforming, commanding one's environment. As D'Ors said 80 years ago:

Power belongs rightly to the person who creates. Only to him who authors something does legitimate authority belong.  
(D'Ors 1916, *op.cit.*:272)<sup>30</sup>

The effect of these factors on the self are well-described in the literature and contribute to the building of the learner's personality. It relates to Hunt and Miller's acronym CREATE on which they base their theory of holistic autonomous learning 'Concern, Reflect, Analyze, Try out, Experience'.<sup>31</sup> D. Little 1991:56 uses slightly different words to express a similar concept: "Exploration, challenge, and change".

#### *Language learning variables.*

My students had turned from a collection of individuals into a unit, a communication system which, as such, obeyed the rules of all communicative systems. Allow me to borrow the General Systems Model (GSM)<sup>32</sup> to explain this:

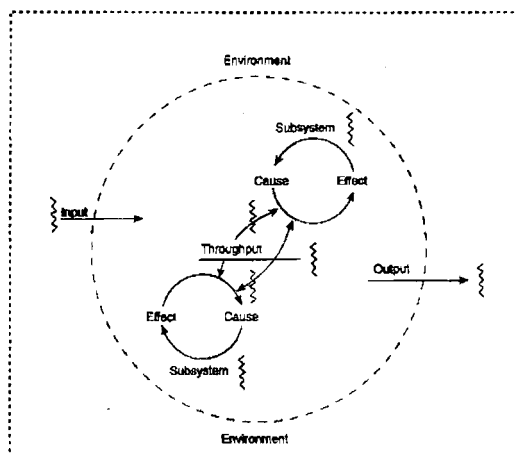


Fig. 6 The General Systems Model

A system is a macrospace created by a common ontogenetic purpose—the implementation of a framework—. Communication with external elements and in the inside—between the sub-systems within— flows through three different channels: input, output, and throughput. Whereas *input* of a trama (model language—reading or listening texts teacher or student initiated) and *output* (interim or final product usually negotiated by the learners) are current terms in acquisitional literature, the third term—throughput—is one have borrowed from music (Midi systems), computers and AI. *Throughput* is processed input which is transmitted as output by a sub-system—be it an individual or a group (as in class reports, negotiations, etc.)— and received as input by the next one. It is a constant feature in a trama and a fertile area in the area of interlanguage development.

In the case of The Love Boat and of Vidal's tramas quoted above, this is the way language flowed and language processing went for four months. Both groups of students had unconsciously created a natural and optimal medium of language learning.

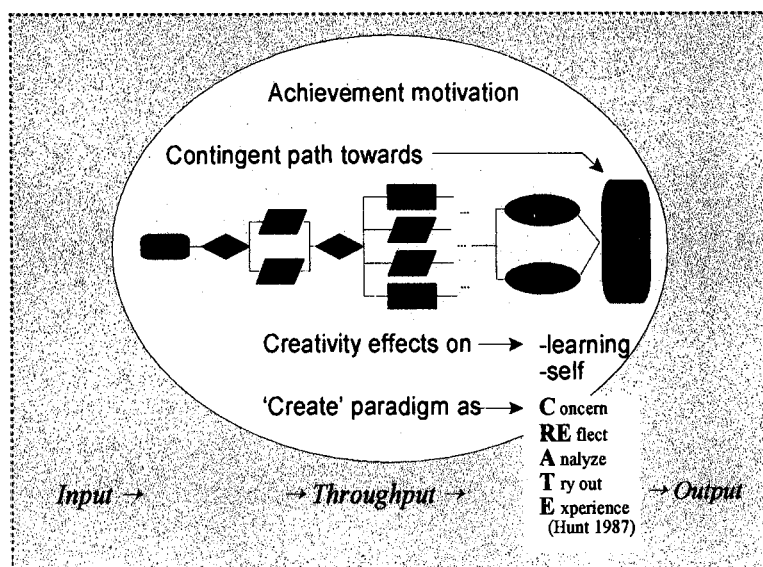


Fig. 7 Learning and development structure of a trama (Ribé1988)

In a trama, language is implied. Needs for input, output and throughput are dictated by the developing structure which is mostly learner-regulated. It is a similar phenomenon to the one Halliday describes when he says that stories generate their own experiential and linguistic context.

The management of a system, in our case the management of a trama and the spaces it generates, is a top-down process.<sup>33</sup> We will not analyze this in detail now, but I would like to mention top-down processing as closely related with many other scientific fields. If we wanted to relate context,<sup>34</sup> type of task and language and process regulation, we could use something like the diagram in fig 9,<sup>35</sup> where the four vertical axes —'1' (task-trama), '2' (learning-development focus and its regulation), '3' (learning context), and '4' (mode of processing— run parallel and show usual links.

With these descriptions we have stepped from atomistic organization of the class based on bottom-up code description to return to the whole person as the generator of code through whole person involvement. The resulting interactive environment, the class-generated and group-regulated framework, seems to be particularly apt at catering for different rhythms and styles of learning. It is also consistent with what we know about motivation and affective intelligence —Atkinson's achievement motivation, Raynor's contingent path motivation, Maslow's self-actualization and peak experiences regulated by creativity, Gardner's and Atkinson's effects of succesful learning both on



knowledge and on the self, Goldman's theory of multiple intelligences—. <sup>36</sup> It is the transformation position and parallels the central thesis of the holistic school of education, a branch of which has adopted the acrostic CREATE to describe their model (Hunt *op.cit.*). It is also consistent with what we know of the roles of input, output and throughput.

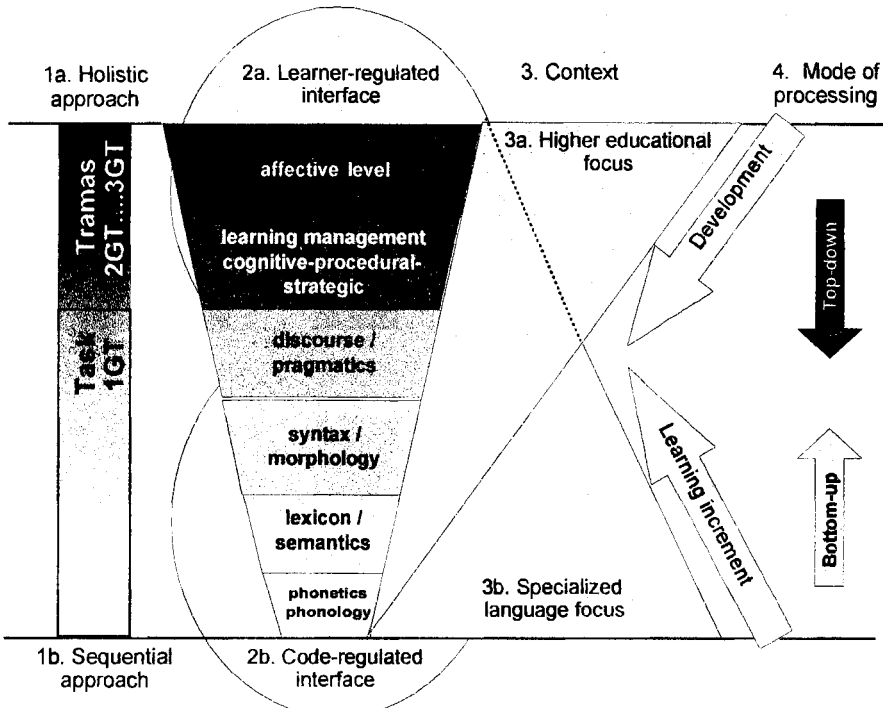


Fig. 8. Trama, focus, conext, learning-development, approach (Ribé 1998)

It is not within the scope and the time span of this paper today to analyze experimental data. Recent comparative analyses of a number of creative-tramas instruction groups vs control groups<sup>37</sup> reveal significantly higher indexes of

- positive attitudinal change
- input and output processing
- lexis use in written output, prompted by creative production needs (more words, less redundancy);
- similar indexes of collocational use
- similar measures of syntax accuracy
- higher capacities of text processing

## Tramas and autonomy

When I read about autonomy, I feel not only the excitement of a powerful philosophical and anthropological issue. I also feel the need to link it to the world of practical experience.

Different models exist. Here I wanted to offer a first-hand account of one and the reflections and theory associated to it.

Over the years, I have come to like the spaces theory and the tramas model, because

- It explains many aspects of autonomy in a single framework. It relates theory to practice.
- It is a good instrument for teacher training. Surface structures are similar across platforms (contexts) and can be described through a series of steps, like objects in a computing program. These objects and the techniques attached to them are observable and trainable.<sup>38</sup> They create spaces for teachers to experience all the "letting go" and "taking hold" principles that Leni Dam describes.<sup>39</sup>
- It allows for an object-oriented organization of the curriculum.
- It is a comprehensive model and provides a rationale for experiences and practices from many places and contexts.
- Mike Breen reminded us in Copenhagen two years ago<sup>40</sup> that if autonomy is an issue today, it is because society creates the conditions for it, allows it, maybe even supports it. One of the most pressing concerns today is maintaining individual's autonomy and control in the era of communication.

Each time a student opens an internet page s/he is facing a system composed of subsystems, all of them interlinked or part of bigger systems. Unless this student develops strategies for unravelling hidden structures and imposing personal patterns on them, s/he is not likely to be able to handle his own mental and affective independence.

Creative tramas are a good educational instrument for developing these attitudes and strategies of personal autonomy.

- It opens a macro-space for autonomous learning  
Autonomy is not only space for autonomy. It is also autonomous *action* by the learner and the teacher. These spaces need to be created. Action needs to be triggered, prompted. Tramas open spaces for action and critical thinking. Borrowing D. Little's words (Little 1991:4), a trama would be an instrument that provides the learner with 'a capacity for detachment, critical reflection decision-making, and independent action.'

## Final remarks

Round the corner. [...]  
Into our first world.  
They were there, dignified, invisible,  
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves [...]  
(Eliot, T.S., *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton*)

Some people say that we spend all our lives reliving the same experiences in a kind of spiral model, widening the circle, growing all the time. Well, all these years I have been trying to recreate the Love Boat experience of autonomous learning in my classes. I must confess that I have never managed to artificially create a second rebellion. These days the tramas in my classes are more in the way of portfolios and research and creative projects, but the students' pride in their accomplishments, their sense of achievement and the light in their eyes is still there. Just a few weeks ago, I received a marvellous portfolio from a student in my translation classes with the title "Sophia's World", after the famous novel. It consisted of a large collection of daily letters to the teacher describing her process of translating and of learning, the ideas it triggered, the work she was doing, suggesting, brainstorming, organizing. It was a wonderful individual trama. Visible or perhaps hidden, success is always there. About the same dates another student handed me his portfolio on creative frameworks, under the title "You can take a horse to the water, but cannot make him drink". But his work, however critical it intended to be, was again excellent.<sup>41</sup>

Almost twenty years ago my Love Boat students and I started a voyage of learning, of experiencing. For a while at least, they rediscovered their capacity for pleasure in learning. As a teacher I discovered a route to professional autonomy and freedom and this is an orientation I have tried to maintain. After all, Erasmus in his *Utopia* said it all:

Nothing could be more humane, or more natural for a human being, than to relieve other people's sufferings, put an end to their miseries, and restore their joie de vivre, that is, their capacity for pleasure. So why shouldn't it be equally natural to do the same thing for oneself".<sup>42</sup>

Of course, none of us will ever reach Utopia, nor Ithaca, but I am sure we are all still searching.

Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.<sup>43</sup>  
(Kavafis)

All over this meeting and also in my contribution today, the words holistic, top-down, post-modernism, AI, have been recurrent to describe autonomous modes of behaviour, approaches to learning and teaching. The future in communication and the new technologies point at the macro-structure, web, tapestry, framework and trama as the new environment for human endeavour in general. It seems proper to make it the environment for education. Teachers evolve in that direction, but slowly. Models derive from classroom practice, but inspiration is multidisciplinary. I would like to link this with Sarah Mann and Mike Breen's words on Postmodernism, by quoting Roy Scott in his paper on Art and education in the Post-biological Era (1996), which I believe summarizes it well:

In order to touch the right buttons in navigating our hyperstack of ideas and options for art education in the post biological age, we should perhaps start by identifying the right icon. But the icon for turn-of-the-century art education is not yet defined. A hundred years ago it would have been the canvas on its easel, with the artist and his model as the standard *mis-en-scene*. Now we are dealing essentially with the invisible, with transformative systems, with interactivity. The icon must speak of collaboration, the integration of minds, of media and of skills, as well as the almost chaotic proliferation of variable meaning and transient identity. That's some icon. Most likely it will be found among the metaphors of artificial life and the cognitive sciences. I think it will be found there because the narratives these sciences offer are more likely to illuminate our practices in art and its associated field of education, than anything the culture crunchers, the theorists and art analysts, are likely to throw up. Looking back now, in this century, it perhaps was always so.

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## Notes

1. My translation.
2. Quite often, and as a result of their simultaneous need for objectiveness and model comprehensiveness, they limit themselves to describing and *transmitting* it as 'a mode of independent learning behaviour allowed or promoted in learning contexts' (Negotiated definition in a recent panel on autonomous language learning -Barcelona 1996). S. Also Johnson and Johnson 1998, pp. 25, 308.
3. s. Breen, Candlin, Dam and Gabrielsen 1989:111-135.
4. s. Diamond 1991, 1992, 1995.
5. Ricart García
6. Dr. Marta Fernández
7. I apologize for the exclusive use of masculine reference throughout. D'Ors wrote this 80 years ago. The capitals are mine, the italics are his.
8. I would like to thank N. Vidal, who used the English translation of this poem with her students and introduced me to it.
9. Σὰ βγεῖς σὸν πηγαῖμό γιὰ τὴν Ἰθάκη,  
νὰ εὐχέσαι νᾶναι μακρὺς ὁ δρόμος,  
γεμᾶτος περιπέτειες, γεμᾶτος γνώσεις.  
For the original text I am using the bilingual Greek-Catalan edition (Curial 1977).
10. Ribé 1988, 1994.
11. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*.
12. Space, a boundless, three dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction (British Encyclopedia)

13. Ribé *op.cit.* describes about 80 of them (space for external time, for internal time, for risk taking, for developing motivation, for creativity, memorization, input processing, age-specific group activity, ... ) for English language learning in the Spanish secondary-high school.

14. The *transmission position* focusses on traditional school subjects taught through traditional teaching methods. [...]

In the *transaction position*, the individual is seen as rational and capable of intelligent problem-solving. [...]

The *transformation position* concentrates on personal and social change. (Miller *et al.*, *ibid.*)

15. Ribé *op.cit.*

16. I am particularly grateful to Merrill Swain, who first pointed this out to me in 1993 (s. Ribé *et al.* 1997) and to Jane Willis, with whom I exchanged views during long conversations in 1998.

17. For this I want to thank both Jane and Dave Willis who kindly encouraged me to depart from the English label and bold use the more descriptive Spanish coinage.

18. Real Academia Española. 1992. *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (21st edition). Madrid: Espasa Calpe.

19. Candlin, C.N. and Murphy, D.F. in Candlin, C.N. and D.F. Murphy, (eds) 1987:2.

20. For a fuller description s. Ribé *et al.* 1997, esp. ch. 4 (p. 63-82).

21. The full-model graph used for training events goes from pre-task categories of teaching-learning practice to the more complex forms of experiential and autonomous learning.

22. Vidal and Ribé, 'Tareas de 3º Generación: La realidad del aula', in Ribé *et al.* 1997 (chapter 3). Detailed analyses by different authors can also be found in chapters 7 to 12.

23. Quoted also in Ribé 1996 and 1998. I am particularly fond of this example, for its clear structure and beauty of construction.

24. Ribé 1988, 1994 (ch.9) describes them into three levels, the third one being the pedagogical or tactical one.

25. Ribé *et al.* 1997.

26. Maslow 1962.

27. My words [in brackets].

28. 'Quan hom pensa en veu alta, o lliura (o deslliura) les seves dèries en plaça pública, fa un exercici temerari, tal volta forassenyat: invita els altres a passejar



volgudament pels camins del pensament —de vegades revolts, de vegades dreces— i els convida a prendre part en una construcció que, ara com ara, només és un canemàs, fins i tot modificable ell mateix.' (Original in Catalan) My translation.

29. s. 'The role of succesful experience in shaping motivational thinking' in Ushioda 1996, p. 31 ff.

30. 'El poder pertoca de dret a aquell qui realment crea. A aquell a qui és autor correspon —l'estructura del mot és ja prou eloqüent— la legítima autoritat.' (Original in Catalan) My translation

31. Hunt 1987:157-160. Also Hunt 1992:71-89.

32. Quoted in Forsdale 1987:38.

33. S. Ribé 1998.

34. Little 1991 (ch.5, 'Autonomy in two kinds of learning environment.'), makes a parallel distinction between two basic kinds of learning environment —the full time ducational context and the adult learning in a language school or similar.

35. *ibid.*

36. Ribé 1988, 1994.

37. Celaya & Tragant, 1997. Vidal 1997.

38. S. Ribé R. and Vidal, 1993. *Project Work Step by Step*. Oxford: Heinemann.

39. Dam, 1995:78.

40. 5th Northern Conference on Autonomous Learning. Copenhagen 1995. Opening Plenary.

41. In my in-service teacher training activities I have also learnt that it is those teachers who go through the liberating process themselves and who risk embarking into student-centered trama's of some kind, the ones who really develop into efficient agents of learner-autonomy development processes. As Gjørven 1999:153 reminds us, fostering autonomy 'implies the creation of new learning situations and the acceptance of situations "out of control." It implies failures and successes. The process never ends. "There is no success like failure, and failure's no success at all." Bob Dylan'. I could not have found a better way of summarizing my narrative and memories of the Love Boat adventure.

42. Erasmus, *Utopia*. Penguin Classics edition. p. 92

43. Καλλίτερα χρόνια πολλά νὰ διαρκέσει·  
καὶ γέρος πιά ν' ἀραξεις στὸ νησί,  
πλούσιος μὲ ὅσα κέρδιες στὸν δρόμο,  
μὴ προσδοκῶντας πλούτη νὰ σὲ δώσει ἡ Ἰθάκη.