

AUTONOMY AND CONTROL IN EFL PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This article argues that issues of autonomy and control – who has autonomy and who has control over which decisions – are endemic in programme design, implementation and evaluation, and seriously impact programme success. This argument is illustrated using data from an evaluation of an EFL Mentoring Programme designed to train local EFL teachers to supplement and eventually replace expatriate teachers. It is concluded that ownership and commitment on EFL programmes are directly related to issues of autonomy and control, and that striking a balance between autonomy and control is a very difficult aspect of programme management.

Keywords: EFL, management, mentor programme design, autonomy, control, ownership,

INTRODUCTION

The dichotomy between autonomy and control is one I first came across in the writings of Argyris (1993) and Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978). This dichotomy has been debated at a national level, for example in Smyth (1996), and Bell and Bush (2002). This discussion often concerns the balance of autonomy and control between the central governments and schools, especially in light of the perception that central governments like the UK government, while conceding autonomy in some areas, for example, funding, has actually increased central control over others, such as the curriculum. The argument here is that issues of autonomy and control apply not just at government level, but at organizational and programme level as well. This article discusses one Mentoring Programme in one EFL school. In evaluating this programme issues of autonomy and control, ownership, responsibility and authority were raised at every stage in the evaluation. The simplistic understanding of these issues adopted by programme coordinators at the beginning of the programme was, by the end, replaced with a more complex view. ‘Autonomy is a complex notion’ (Bell & Bush

2002, p. 12), and there are degrees of autonomy and degrees of control. This complexity raises issues about the exercise of power in programme design, management and implementation, and implicates the context, the culture and the history of the organization in which the programme is located. One major purpose of this paper is to make explicit the autonomy/control elements which were relevant at programme level in this mentor programme.

THE CONTEXT

The Mentoring Programme referred to in this article was a short formal intensive programme conducted as part of a larger Quality Saudisation Programme (QSP) in a large military EFL school in Saudi Arabia. The QSP was designed to train Saudi EFL teachers to supplement and eventually replace expatriate teachers in the school. Newly qualified Saudi teachers (NQTs) arrived in the school in groups of seven to eleven at six-monthly intervals between 1998 and 2001. They had completed a six month basic TEFL course which included English language improvement. For each group a mentor programme – as distinct from the Mentoring Programme, the overall programme started in 1998 – was arranged. The programme for group 1 is referred to as Mentor Programme 1, for group 2 as Mentor Programme 2 and so on. Each mentor programme involved NQTs, mentees, being paired up with an experienced teacher, a mentor, for about four weeks full time when they first arrived in the School. It was hoped, though, that the mentoring would continue for a further six months after the formal programme ended. The data produced here refers to Mentor Programme 5 – the programme conducted for the NQTs who arrived in the school in June 2001.

PLANNING PROGRAMME 5

Based on an evaluation of Programmes 1 to 4 conducted by the author, two planning meetings were held in May 2001. Those present were the Head Teacher (HT), Senior Teachers (STs), and two teachers at the school appointed as programme coordinators by the Head Teacher (the author was one of these). Programme structure and design including the reporting structure were decided at these meetings. This included the goals, broad objectives and content of the programme, approximate numbers of meetings of mentors and coordinators, ST and coordinator roles, the methods of selection of mentors and their matching to mentees. Programme 5 was to be managed by the two coordinators and two STs (part of the

school's senior management team). The coordinators were given responsibility for day-to-day programme management.

Before the NQTs arrived in the school, four one-hour mentor training meetings / workshops were held for prospective mentors. The content of these meetings was decided largely by the coordinators, although they responded to mentor demands. These meetings discussed the detailed programme content, such as the minimum numbers of mentor observations of mentee teaching, and observation tasks to be used by mentors and mentees. Date, time, place, frequency and content of meetings between mentors and mentees were left up to the mentors to decide within agreed minimums.

DECISION-MAKING DURING PROGRAMME 5

Every week during Programme 5, meetings of mentors coordinators and STs were held. At these meetings minimum teaching duties for mentees, both by themselves and with the mentor present, were decided, and day-to-day issues such as mentee punctuality were discussed.

Throughout the programme informal discussions between the coordinators and the Head Teacher took place. Issues discussed included the levels and kinds of support provided by the school, e.g., cover lessons to allow mentors to attend meetings. .

Throughout the programme the coordinators held frequent informal discussions. Occasionally, mentors and coordinators also held informal discussions.

A FRAMEWORK FOR VIEWING AUTONOMY AND CONTROL ON PROGRAMME 5

The discussion in this section is adapted from Bell and Bush (2002), who, in citing Caldwell and Spinks (1988, p. 5) and Thomas and Martin (1996), discuss issues of autonomy and control in relation to central governments and schools rather than individual programmes. Although the elements presented below are separated for convenience they obviously interact, e.g., assessment of mentees implicates micro politics (*power*) and *information*.

Table 1 Elements of Control on Programme 5

	Element	Decisions	Typical questions raised
1	<i>Planning</i>	decisions relating to the planning of the programme	Who plans the programme? How are planning decisions made?
2	<i>Goals</i>	decisions relating to the goals of the programme	Who decides the objectives?
3	<i>Content</i>	decisions relating to the content of the programme	Who decides the content of the programme?
4	<i>Technology</i>	decisions concerning the means used to achieve programme objectives	Who decides what techniques and methods are to be used to 'deliver' the content of the programme?
5	<i>Power</i>	authority to make decisions	Who decides who is involved in the planning of the programme? Who manages day-to-day? How much authority do they have? What is the reporting structure? How much responsibility do programme participants have and who gets blamed if it all goes wrong? Who takes the credit? With whom? What is negotiable, what isn't?
6	<i>Material</i>	decisions relating to the provision of material resources	Who decides who provides the materials and resources used on the programme? Who actually provides the materials?
7	<i>People</i>	decisions relating to allocation of personnel to programmes and projects, decisions relating to roles and responsibilities, chains of command, etc.	Who decides the roles of participants? Who allocates people to programmes, projects, etc.? What responsibilities do people have and assume? Who reports to whom?
8	<i>Time</i>	decisions concerning when	Who decides when programme activities are to be done, and how frequently they are to be done?
9	<i>Finance</i>	decisions concerning finance and accountability for expenditure	Who controls the purse strings?
10	<i>Assessment and Evaluation</i>	decisions concerning assessment and evaluation	Who and what are assessed and how?
11	<i>Information</i>	decisions concerning provision of information	Who disseminates information about the programme, to whom, when? What kinds of information are disseminated?

WHAT HAPPENED ON PROGRAMME 5

Planning

A lot of Programme 5 decisions were decided before some key personnel were in place, for example before mentors and mentees were appointed. They therefore had no real involvement in the planning, although the programme was modified as the programme evolved, especially in terms of expected frequency of contact between mentor and mentee.

Goals

The goals of the programme were also decided before key personnel were in place. Again mentors and mentees had little real involvement in goal setting.

Content

Broad decisions only concerning programme content were made before the mentors and mentees were appointed. Decisions concerning the content of mentor-mentee meetings were made by mentors.

Technology

Decisions concerning the structure of the programme, for example the number of workshops and the way mentors and mentees were matched to each other, were made at the planning meetings. Again mentors and mentees had little say in these.

Power

The divorce between responsibility and authority on the programme was an ever present problem, felt by both mentors and coordinators. Some mentors felt awkward dealing with mentee lateness to class and leaving the School early. As one mentor said to a coordinator *I'm dealing with a colleague, not with a trainee*. Coordinators were given responsibility but had very little authority, as co-teachers and work colleagues of both the mentors and the mentees. Neither mentors nor coordinators had authority within the hierarchical structure of the School, only the STs had this.

Material

Most of the material resources, including the room and the computers the coordinators used were provided by the school. The printed sheets used in workshops and for observation tasks were created by the coordinators.

People

Many of the early decisions concerning personnel on Programme 5 were made by the Head Teacher, sometimes in consultation with the coordinators

and/or STs. Thus decisions concerning the appointment of coordinators and the allocation of STs to the programme were made by the HT. Mentors were volunteers from one 'area' of the school, the area that the two STs allocated to the programme were responsible for. Thus mentors volunteered from a group of 25 teachers at the school rather than all 160 teachers. I found it impossible to find out when and where this decision was made and by whom. This decision had far reaching consequences on mentor quality and meant that two teachers who had never been mentors before acted as mentors. Coordinator and mentor roles were discussed and agreed at the planning meetings discussed above. Mentor roles were also discussed at these meetings and then finalized at the mentor meetings before the mentees arrived. The decision to match mentors to mentees randomly was made informally between the coordinators and the STs.

Time

Decisions concerning the timing of the programme were dependent on decisions outside the school. Decisions concerning the length of the programme were made by coordinators and the HT. It was decided to run a four-week programme since three weeks was the longest of Programmes 1-4, and it was felt, by the Head Teacher particularly that the school could not spare the staff for longer. Date, time, place, frequency and content of meetings between mentors and mentees were left up to the mentors to decide.

Finance

There were very few financial aspects to the programme since finances were outside the control of even the Head Teacher. Of course, the allocation of staff to the programme could have financial implications, but in this case the costs were borne outside the school.

Assessment and Evaluation

STs retained control over the assessment of mentees while they were on the four-week programme. Mentees were assessed by 'lesson checks' – formal assessment of a mentee lesson – by both an ST, and by the 'lesson checker' – a teacher whose duty was to check all the teachers in the school. Coordinators did not know of these plans until after the lesson checks had taken place – they were never discussed at any meetings the coordinators attended. As a result of these lesson checks two mentees 'failed' the programme, and had to be reassessed a few weeks later. (They both 'passed' these subsequent reassessments.) The Mentoring Programme as a whole was evaluated by the researcher in detail. The decision to do this was made in agreement with the Head Teacher.

Information

The discussion above under Assessment and Evaluation implicates sharing of information. Information concerning the checks was not shared by the STs with the coordinators. The researcher, in consultation with the Head Teacher, provided both interim reports and a final report on the Mentoring Programme as a whole and on Programme 5 in particular. Sharing of information was made difficult because of the need to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of informants (Arnold, 1999).

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMME MANAGERS

Management Thinking about Autonomy and Control

The way that the programme managers, coordinators and STs, thought about control and support on the programme seriously affected programme outcomes. The coordinators thought deeply about the programme but unfortunately they thought to some extent 'in polar terms', either control or autonomy, either mentors own the programme or they don't. One coordinator said:

One school of thought is that everything should be controlled down to tasks that are done, the lessons that are seen and the people who are seen, and that ought to be part of the programme, before anybody arrives. And the opposing school of thought is that you give your mentors some sensitivity in what they're doing and you send them out to involve themselves in a conversation, a dialogue with the mentee in order to achieve the programme's goals.

The other thing of note with this quote is the (hidden?) assumption that the programme's goals stand outside any autonomy granted to mentors.

One result of this kind of 'polar' view of autonomy and control was that, once objectives were agreed with the mentors, mentors were left to support the mentee without any interference from the coordinators. *I mean we basically left them to it, apart from what was discussed at our meeting,* said one coordinator. In practice this meant that the mentors received too little support from the coordinators. This was felt particularly strongly by the first-time mentors.

All programme 5 managers tended to view programme planning as a linear progression, for example first design the programme, then appoint implementers, then implement the programme and finally evaluate it. Viewing decisions in terms of autonomy and control as presented here

allows for wider thinking. From the perspective adopted here it would make sense to appoint at least some of the 'implementers', e.g., mentors, very early in the programme design. Both coordinators thought they had given some real autonomy to mentors to decide programme content and structure by allowing mentors to decide when and where to meet mentees and what to discuss, and by adopting a 'hands off' management style, i.e., not observing lessons or meetings. Self-deception is an ever present issue for managers (Griseri, 1998). One mentor, when asked whether he thought he was involved enough in decisions about the design of the programme replied *Well, the programme had already been designed before I agreed to become a mentor. Surely.* I was shocked by this at the time, not understanding how anyone could think this when, in my view, the coordinators had involved the mentors in a lot of the decisions. Analyzing Programme 5 after the event using the framework presented here it became clear to me that programme design and structure, participant roles and responsibilities, and most programme content, were actually decided very early on. One way to avoid self-deception is to run through a checklist such as the elements here and decide how much autonomy is given over what rather than, as we tended to, presuming that autonomy is given *and received*. Lack of mentor involvement in these decisions could account for the lack of ownership evidenced by some of them and discussed below.

PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT AND OWNERSHIP ON EFL PROGRAMMES

Frameworks such as the one presented here are very useful tools for viewing issues such as participation, collaboration, ownership, and 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1991). There is a massive difference between implementing someone else's plan and actually helping create the plan in the first place. It is 'important that all participants feel that they have contributed towards the formulation of the innovation, that they are part of it and it is part of them' White (1987, p. 213) Decisions about how much and what participants are prepared to invest (Palmer, 1993) in a programme depend on what kinds of decisions they have been involved in, and what they are given control over.

What happens if some participants do not want to 'own' the programme or parts of it, for example for reasons of organizational culture, or because of a history of failed innovations and recriminations? This is a serious issue in organizations (and countries?) where personnel are used to being told exactly what to do and how to do it. As is the case with all management, managing mentor programmes implicates the structure, culture and micro politics of the school.

Another issue is striking a balance between expertise and ownership. The coordinators' attempts to involve the mentors in observation task design were unfruitful with one mentor suggesting that the coordinators were the appropriate people to design the tasks, since they were the experts. The coordinators probably did know more about designing such tasks, but the coordinators were attempting to give the mentors some ownership of the tasks, and through this, to encourage their use. In the event, the tasks were not used nearly as much as was hoped by the coordinators, and not at all by some mentor-mentee pairs.

CONCLUSION

This article is addressed primarily to those involved in programme management, whether TT programmes or other programmes. It would be interesting to hear from other managers to what extent this framework applies to their situation, which types of decisions are retained by those formally designated as managers, which are delegated, how this relates to the culture of the organization, and the context and structure of the programme, and how this affects the results in terms of ownership, involvement and outcomes.

Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) propose two models of management. Model One, involves 'unilateral control over others' and has four underlying values, achieving the purposes as defined by the actor, winning, suppressing negative feelings, and being rational. They state that this results in defensiveness and inhibited or limited 'single-loop' learning. In Model Two people can exchange valid information about complex and sensitive issues, there is joint control and enquiry, and 'double-loop' learning. The analysis presented here shows that the situation is much more complex than this. In some areas of Programme 5 (e.g., some parts of the content and the timing) there were exchanges of information and joint decision making between mentors and coordinators, in some areas on the same programme, there was unilateral control and a lack of information sharing, e.g., between STs and coordinators over assessment. Programmes are full of contradictions and fragmentation rather than being the unitary beast assumed by Argyris and Schon.

One thing strikes me when looking again at the issues raised here – how the same kinds of issues echo up and down throughout the system, probably because all the actors in a mentor programme, students, teachers, mentors, coordinators, managers, Head Teachers, are change agents involved in changing both their own and others' perceptions, beliefs, ways of behaving, systems, at the same time. The same kind of issues over autonomy, control, responsibility and roles were raised by the new teachers,

the mentors, the coordinators, and the STs. The very nature of hierarchical systems is that they are vulnerable to conflicting demands.

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