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A MODEL OF A STUDENT-GENERATED LEARNING GROUP[1]

ABSTRACT. This paper examines an autonomous student-generated English learning group, called the "*Eiken tomo no kai*", or ETNK, and the key elements that make it successful, through using a modified version of a modeling tool called the Experiential Array (EA) (Gordon & Dawes, 2005). Five group members, or exemplars in modeling terms, were interviewed using the EA in order to uncover the core factors that have led to their ability to continue participating within their group. Results from coding these interviews showed that beliefs, cognitive strategies, emotional states, and external behaviours all played a significant role in the success of this autonomous learning group.
Keywords: Autonomy, Modeling, NLP, Professional development.

Introduction

This exploratory research focuses on a group of students in Japan who have

created and sustained their own self-generated learning community known as

the "*Eiken tomo no kai*", loosely translated as the 'Eiken (which is a Japanese

English language test) friendship study group', or ETNK for short. The research

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is primarily concerned with understanding the ways that these students construct meaning through participating, mainly as students and occasionally as teachers, in ETNK. To that end, five ETNK members volunteered to be interviewed using a modified version of a modeling tool called the Experiential Array, or EA (Gordon & Dawes, 2005). The aim of using the EA as a modeling tool with these five participants was to uncover the common beliefs, cognitive strategies, emotional states, and external behaviours that serve to keep them collectively participating in ETNK. In a more general sense, the paper also serves as an example and introduction to modeling as a helpful way to pursue professional development through gaining insight into students' ways of engaging in autonomous learning.

The paper begins with a background to the study which provides a contextualised introduction to the ETNK group in general, and then relevant research to frame the study in particular. This is followed by the methodology specific to the participants and the EA modeling tool used in the interviewing

process. Next, the results from modeling are shown, which include the common themes, or commonalities in modeling terms, that emerged through coding the interviews. Finally, the main findings and various interpretations therein are provided in the discussion and conclusion.

Background

Originally, there were four members who formed ETNK in the spring of 2004. Abby (a self-chosen pseudonym), who is the founder and one of the interviewees in this project, recalls that the original members belonged to two Community College classes that ran on Saturdays at a private university in Nagoya, Japan. These classes, according to Abby, were considered to be "attractive" by the students because the teacher provided both interesting and challenging lessons, and built a caring classroom learning community. However, this contrasted with a new teacher who took over the classes when the former teacher left to return to his home country. The students commented that "*the*

new teacher neither provided stimulating and motivating lessons nor built

rapport within the learning community." In Abby's words, these classes were

perceived as being "terrible" by the students. Consequently, a core group of the

students decided to take a completely new Community College class instead

with a more inspiring teacher who offered more engaging lessons. As before, the

group members wanted to participate in two Saturday classes. However, no

other classes at their advanced English level were available, so they chose

instead to create their own autonomously run class.

The name ETNK arose from the original members' goal to all pass the top

level of the Eiken test, which is also known as STEP (Standard Test of English

Proficiency). The original members achieved this standard a number of years

ago. Thus, the focus of the class now includes a wider variety of content-focused

learning with vocabulary and grammar-focused activities, and myriad topics for

developing their listening, reading, and discussion skills. New members are

periodically invited to join the group by current members, but must satisfy

informal screening criteria that include the right combination of L2 level relative to current members (at least upper-intermediate, but preferably advanced), commitment (through actively participating as a learner and occasionally as a teacher), and personality (largely read as having a team-oriented, polite, and cheerful demeanor) to fit in successfully with other members.

At present, there are 13 members who, for the most part, regularly participate in the weekly meetings which are usually held at a community center near the Community College. The teacher role for each class rotates every week and each teacher is responsible for selecting and preparing materials for the group. A typical meeting ranges from between one hour to three hours depending on factors such as the materials being used, the teacher delivering the lesson, and time available due to other outside commitments for the members.

The purpose of this study was to use modeling to uncover the ways that students exercise their autonomy and conceptualize their ability to participate long-term in self-generated learning groups. To that end, learner autonomy is a

major factor underpinning the success of the ETNK group in this paper. Briefly

stated, learner autonomy is having the ability to take charge of one's learning

(see Benson & Voller 1997; Holec 1979). It has been shown that the best

learners tend to be those who have developed a degree of autonomy (see Little

1990). These kinds of learners are more motivated and find their learning

experiences to be more enjoyable. Relevant to the self-generated group in this

paper is that autonomous learners demonstrate a greater readiness to take

responsibility for their own learning through exercising their autonomy in ways

that can make them more successful both individually and collectively. Kimura

(2014) comments that "sincere, constructive, and critical student voices are

needed to explore how SAC learning helps students become independent

through experiencing interdependence" (p. 83). The present study, though not on

SAC learning as in Kimura's case, nonetheless shares the aim to bring in student

voices to more fully understand the social construction underpinning learner

autonomy. There is a gap in the research field in terms of understanding the

specific ways that learners exercise their autonomy in long-term self-generated

groups which this paper aims to partially fill.

In order to uncover relevant insights to the ETNK students' ways of

conceptualizing their learning experience, a modified version of the EA model

was used. The EA was considered to be a useful tool to achieve this purpose as

it allows for a rich description of both surface level and deeper below the

surface patterns including beliefs, thought processes, emotions, and behaviours.

Modeling has been described by the EA originators, Gordon and Dawes (2005),

as "the process of identifying and describing in a useful way those patterns that

make up a particular ability" (p. 4). To date, modeling (see Bandler & Grinder,

1975, 1976; Dilts, 1994, 1998) has typically been used for the purpose of

replication by modelers (see Cullen & Deacon, 2013; Cullen et al., 2014). In

other words, modeling can usually be seen as a two-pronged process where: 1) a

model of an exemplar, or person being modeled, is elicited, and then 2)

replicated by the modeler who is interested in emulating the exemplar on the

ability being modeled. For the purposes of this study, the researcher was

interested instead in eliciting the model in order to then notice the

commonalities, or common themes, that lead to long-term participation in

ETNK. These commonalities are shown in the results section of this paper.

Methodology

The participants in this study were five Japanese adult females (n=5) aged

between 30 to 60 who were selected from a total group of 13 members (n=13).

One member had professional teaching experience at the university level, one

was a volunteer teacher, two were working in a bank, and one was an office

worker. Their English level was advanced with all members achieving scores

ranging between 850~950 on the TOEIC (Test of English for International

Communication). They had been identified as potential interview candidates to

become exemplars from their current group because of their long-term

membership within ETNK. They had all agreed to voluntarily participate in this

project and each chose a pseudonym for purposes of anonymity. Table 1

provides descriptive information about each of the five exemplars.

Table 1. Exemplar background information

	Abby	**Akiko**	**Heidi**	**Angie**	**Kate**
Interview Date	Aug. 2, 2014	Aug. 3, 2014	Aug. 9, 2014	Aug. 9, 2014	Aug. 10, 2014
Occupation	Banker	Volunteer teacher	Banker	Office Worker	Teacher
Year Joined	2004	2006	2004	2005	2009

The five participants were modeled on their ability to continue participating

as a member of ETNK. They were interviewed on this ability using the four

questions in the simplified EA from Gordon and Dawes (2005) (see Figure 1)

corresponding to the exemplar's beliefs, cognitive strategies, emotional states,

and external behaviour, respectively. The four interview questions were framed

as follows:

1) What is **important** to you through continuing to participate as a

member of ETNK?;

2) What are you **thinking** about as you continue to participate as a

member of ETNK?;

3) What are you **feeling** as you continue to participate as a member of ETNK?; and

4) What are you **doing** in your behaviour, in terms of what is observable from the outside, as you continue to participate as a member of ETNK?
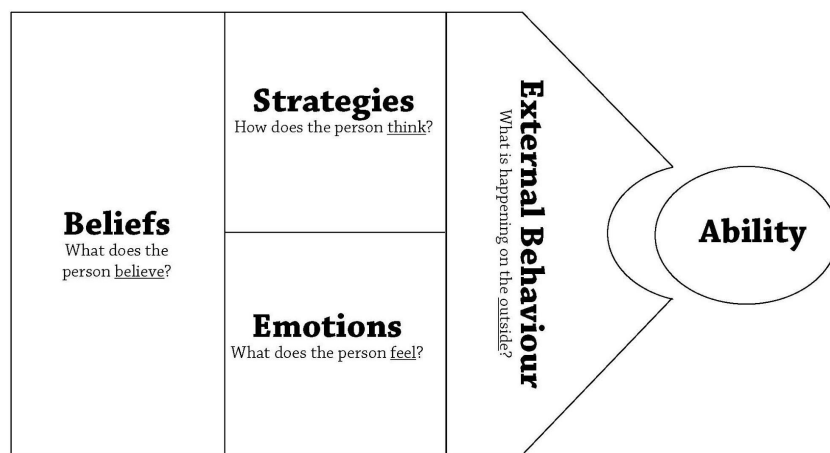

Figure 1. A simplified diagram of the Experiential Array modeling tool (Source: Gordon and Dawes, 2005).

The interviews for each participant were conducted one-to-one in a vacant classroom at a private university in the Nagoya area. They were recorded in English and took approximately 30 minutes to one hour depending on how detailed exemplar's answers were for each question. The researcher then observed several ETNK meetings and conducted follow-up interviews with each exemplar in order to gain further insights which were then added to their

original array. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed and then later coded using Grounded Theory (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990) for common themes using thematic analysis. To ensure greater intra-rater reliability, the transcriptions were coded twice with an interval of one month between each coding.

Results

The results for each exemplar, which correspond to the four modeling questions used in the EA model, are shown below. First, the commonalities that emerged from coding are presented. These are then followed by concrete examples and relevant quotes from exemplar interviews that are interwoven to illustrate each commonality in richer detail. For the sake of simplicity, the results are framed below according to each of the four modeling questions from the EA, respectively.

1) What is **important** to you through continuing to participate as a member of ETNK?

The exemplars all shared a number of common beliefs about the value of being a member of ETNK that were coded under the following headings of community, atmosphere, attitude, learning, and leadership.

Community

Being part of a motivating community of high-level learners who are focused on learning together is valued. As Abby says, "*Our first priority is studying English and we do so in a good community.*" Being able to participate in the group on a voluntary basis and which is different from other groups in their lives was stressed. To illustrate, Akiko says, "*It's enjoyable to be part of a group where the relationship is different to other groups.*" Similarly, Abby states, "*Making a situation where learning is voluntary and not mandatory is important.*" It is also important for this community to continue learning together and words used such as "family" demonstrate its strong value in their lives.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere within the community is valued for being respectful, honest, friendly, comfortable, and enjoyable to participate in for all members. Abby, for instance, talks about the importance of "*creating a comfortable atmosphere to enjoy learning in a variety of ways.*" Akiko adds to this sense of atmosphere saying, "*It is important to have group respect, share ideas frankly, and not feel pressure which makes it comfortable to be a member.*" In addition, the atmosphere is valued for being welcoming to newcomers, which Angie agrees is important: "*The atmosphere is good because they can accept new members and in the beginning this helped me to feel very welcome.*" The commonalities found in this section included a great deal of positively mentioned qualities.

Attitude

Similar to the atmosphere of the group, the attitude of each member is valued for positively mentioned qualities including open-mindedness, positivity, eagerness, respectfulness, being motivating, and reciprocity. For example, Heidi says, "*The other members motivate me a lot to learn English with their positive attitude towards learning.*" Adding to this sentiment is Kate who states, "*The main reason I like the group is because of the people and the friendships because they are very friendly and open-minded.*" The attitude of the members in general is summarized by Akiko who says that, "*All members are interested and eager to learn.*"

Other members echoed these sentiments, which again revealed a positive association through participating in ETNK.

Learning

The members value the opportunity to not only learn and use English, but

to also increase their knowledge through a variety of content, to experience

various learning and teaching methods, to develop on a personal level, and to do

so in a challenging environment with likeminded others. These points are clear

in the words of Akiko who says, "*We can spread our ideas while increasing our*

knowledge and increase our language ability through challenging experiences."

Angie adds to this when she states, "*Each person can be a student and teacher,*

so it's possible to experience more such as to be creative and learn good

strategies to increase my English ability." Furthermore, the members enjoy the

opportunity to learn with each other and enhance their relationship through

external social activities such as excursions and other social events. This point is

illustrated by Abby who says, "*We make our lives richer through social*

activities with other members such as eating lunch together and doing outings

like going to the museum." ETNK, thus, provides its members with a wide variety of opportunities to stimulate their lives.

   Leader

The group leader, who organizes the weekly meetings, is appreciated for their supportive, kind, friendly, and cheerful personal characteristics. Akiko comments that "*(h)aving a leader who offers nice support and leadership is something I really appreciate and think that our group couldn't last without it.*" Similarly, Kate adds, "*The leader of the group is very important and is friendly, kind, hospitable, always cheerful, and has strong leadership skills.*" In addition to leadership skills, as mentioned by Kate, the leader's effective management skills are found to be necessary for sustaining the group. Angie comments on the importance of strong management skills when she states, "*The leader is a kind person who takes care of managing the meetings and I wonder who would do it*

in her place." The critical importance of the leader to the ETNK group's success is worth highlighting now and will be visited in greater detail later in the paper.

2) What are you **thinking** about as you continue to participate as a member of ETNK?

This area included the cognitive thought processes that members associate with being important as a member of ETNK. The commonalities that emerged can be subdivided according to the two main roles that group members assume within the group. These roles fell under the following coded headings: 1) as students, and 2) as teachers.

As students

When members are participating as students, they consciously think about the kind of learning state they want to enter including being curious, relaxed, focused, and enjoying themselves. For instance, Abby says, "*I focus on the uncertainty and excitement of what kind of class we will have today.*" Angie

offers another window into the student role as follows: "*As a student, I am relaxed and just joining the lesson. I focus on what kinds of materials I am given. I am curious about why the teacher chose their topics and how they make connections within the lesson.*" They are also focusing on not only their own learning experience, but also contributing to that of the other group members. Akiko mentions this point as follows: "*It's important to give advice to each other to make connections between materials, and with language such as how to use words in different ways.*" The members give conscious attention to thinking about how to assist each other in various ways by offering advice, asking questions to stimulate discussion, helping the group to stay on topic, and providing equal opportunities to participate. Thought is also given to how to improve the group experience through periodic reflection on the ETNK experience. This point is made by Abby, who says, "*We talk about how to improve meetings on occasion.*"

As teachers

As a teacher they are focused on the materials and techniques used for delivering their lessons and providing interesting, useful, and challenging learning experiences in the lesson time given. To illustrate, Angie says, "*As a teacher, I have a responsibility to be prepared, keep to the time, and balance the content.*" There is attention on the learning community to also gain their interest, engagement, and to actively involve everyone. Heidi says as much in the following: "*It's enjoyable to share and introduce materials that I'm first interested in myself and I try to get the others interested in it as well. I try to get everyone involved.*" Time management is also given conscious thought during the lesson. Akiko mentions that "*I prepare challenging materials to help others and myself while taking into consideration what material is interesting and useful for the members, and also managing the time.*" The members demonstrated an ability to focus on a wide variety of factors when assuming their role as a teacher.

3) What are you **feeling** as you continue to participate as a member of ETNK?

A variety of commonalities emerged, regarding feelings, or emotional states, associated with being a part of the group. These feelings can be divided into both positively stated and negatively stated feelings. The former were far more common than the latter. Accordingly, the positively stated feelings will be offered first followed by those stated in the negative.

Positive feelings expressed

Students mention feeling happy, satisfied, excited, good, and having a sense of fun. Akiko says "*It's a special and important group and I feel happy. It's my first priority outside of other main areas of my life*." Kate adds, "*There is a sense of satisfaction with being part of this group.*" Other words used to illustrate how important the members feel about their association within the group include: comfortable, relaxed, and the ability to feel open and honest. In

addition, they expressed feeling proud, a sense of being at home, and it being the best time of the week. Abby comments as follows: "*I feel like I am home. It's comfortable and relaxing. It's the best time in my week.*" These feelings are acknowledged for being possible through participation within ETNK, and are thus influenced by others. "*It feels good to be a part of this group with similar interest in improving English and where we motivate each other and stimulate each other. I feel a sense of cooperation where we are helping each other and improving together,*" offers Angie. It became clear that a great deal of positive feelings are generated through participation in ETNK for these members.

Negative feelings expressed

Negative feelings were seldom mentioned. One member reported feeling nervous in the beginning, but that feeling disappeared soon after as she quickly became comfortable within the group. This sentiment was expressed in the following way by Akiko: "*I was nervous at first since the level was so high, but*

I'm not nervous now." Another member, Heidi, commented feeling overly tired at times, but this was more due to outside pressures from other areas in life; thus, this feeling was not seen as being directly influenced through participation within ETNK. She says, "*I like to be a member, but sometimes I don't because I'm very busy and tired. Thus, I sometimes want to spend quiet time at home. The meetings are like a measurement for me where I know my condition is good when I join.*" These comments were not commonly shared by others, however, and illustrate that negatively stated feelings were the exception rather than the norm.

4) What are you **doing** in your behaviour, in terms of what is observable from the outside, as you continue to participate as a member of ETNK?

These results are summarized almost exclusively from their role when participating as students and not very often as teachers. The commonalities are divided into behaviours that are mostly individual and, to a lesser extent, group

oriented in nature. Both individual and group-oriented behaviours demonstrate that significant attention is given to actively participating.

Individual behaviours

The students stress the importance of being active by being prepared and paying attention during the lesson through being focused and obeying the teacher. For example, Akiko says, "*I focus on the materials and am active.*" They also mention the importance of sharing comments, opinions, and questions to one another that are interesting and challenging. Abby supports this as follows: "*It is important to be active through preparing for each class and participating for each class by paying attention, sharing comments, and asking questions.*" Angie mentions, "*I try to listen to others and give my own opinions.*" It was apparent that the members are all actively engaged in their own learning through their behaviours in meetings. Student behaviours were also impacted through their interactions with others, which we will see in greater detail below.

Group-oriented behaviours

Here the comments are mostly about student's behaviour with respect to ways that are helping and influencing each other to learn more successfully. Heidi says she does so by "*ask(ing) questions that are stimulating and I try to get others involved. I also let others know my opinions, too.*" Other behaviours described include offering feedback through asking questions and giving advice. They also help each other through correcting mistakes and using repetition. Kate gives the following comment: "*It is necessary as a student to interact with the other students, and answer their questions. It's also good to offer corrections for mistakes and mix with others.*" They value listening to each other and code switching where necessary to facilitate greater comprehension. Motivating each other through showing one's own interest is offered as another behaviour that can be seen as helping others. Abby makes this point clear when she says, "*I try to repeat some things to help others to understand more when necessary and*

motivate others through showing my own interest." The results show that

students are challenging themselves and each other to learn through the various

behaviours they exhibit during their meetings.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the results from this modeling experience, it is clear that the five

exemplars in this study all highly value participating in their student-initiated

and student-sustained ETNK learning group. This is reflected in their beliefs on

the importance of ETNK in their lives, how they think and feel while

participating, and in their behaviours while learning individually and

interdependently as a community. This section will focus on understanding and

interpreting the core elements that have contributed to the group's autonomous

learning success for over ten years running.

In general, their beliefs about participating in ETNK demonstrate the

importance of both learning and community. The importance of giving adequate

attention to both learning tasks and community has been shown to be crucial for

enhanced group development (see Bolstad et al., 1992; Dornyei & Murphey,

2003) within an autonomous framework. On the one hand, the ETNK students

have clear learning goals and tasks which are anchored within the class structure

that they set up, conduct, and manage on a weekly basis. In addition, they have

also created a learning community that allows for active and enthusiastic

participation in their learning tasks. There was also a greater emphasis placed on

the importance of fostering the communal bond within the group than actual

language development or other content learning. This is not surprising as the

relationships within the group are what help to keep them together in order to

then continue developing through their weekly learning tasks. This learning and

community dynamic is further facilitated through the inclusion of the "right"

mix of members in the learning group. The relatively restrictive membership

admission prerequisites for new members which include factors spanning an

appropriate balance of English language level, motivation, and character traits tend to ensure the long-term continuity of the group.

The ETNK experience is enriched not only through English language development, but also through the various topics and methods of learning that are determined by each teacher. There seems to be a kind of facilitative pressure within the group to stimulate each other in ways that are challenging as all members have achieved a high degree of English ability and are strongly motivated to continue developing. This internal push is cooperative, though, as each member has a positive attitude towards learning for themselves and helping each other. Group cooperation is seen through the weekly teacher-role rotation system, and between each member as they help to motivate each other and provide opportunities to learn and develop in diverse ways. As mentioned before, the group is voluntary so it tends to attract members who are similar in terms of attitude, ability, and other characteristics that contribute to the collective learning experience. In other words, there are no members who might be

perceived as simply "coming along for the ride." It is evident, and in fact

expected, that all members develop not only for themselves but also for each

other.

In addition, the leader is a critical factor that keeps this group together and

is seen as someone who is willingly and enthusiastically handling the meeting

logistics through a combination of strong leadership and management skills and

positively mentioned personality characteristics. The importance of the leader in

sustaining the group long-term, through various means, was also the core factor

which was perceived to be the "glue" in the long-term success of ETNK.

Student reflections on their ways of thinking about their participation

within ETNK were divided according to their roles as either a student or a

teacher. This area on cognitive processes, or ways of thinking about

participating in ETNK, offered the greatest insight into these dual roles. In other

words, their answers to the other questions in the EA mainly offered insights

into the member's perceptions of themselves and each other as students but not

so much as teachers. It may be that the ways they conceptualize their beliefs, feelings, and their behaviours fit more neatly and easily into a student-centered mindset. Another interpretation could be that there is more emphasis on the respective cognition processes involved in being either a student or a teacher. Thus, exemplars may have found it easier to separate those processes that are involved in each role.

From the perspective of being a student, and returning to the focus on exemplar's ways of thinking about participating in ETNK in particular, many comments demonstrated the importance of state management and consciously putting self in a good learning mindset. Comments showed an awareness of the positive benefits that a resourceful learning state can have on the student's ability to be more present in class in ways that benefit themselves and each other. This is consistent with their previously mentioned strong beliefs on the importance of creating a cohesive learning community that is enhanced through having positive attitudes and creating a positive atmosphere. The students are

clearly conscious of the ways that they can create and sustain an empowering learning culture especially through their own state management.

As teachers, members are also consciously aware of the importance of entering a resourceful state in ways that can then especially allow for more focus on the other students. It was interesting to note that, while most of the members haven't had professional language teaching experience, they are nonetheless able to place most of their attention on the other students and their interactions with the materials. This insight shows that they have developed a level of confidence and comfort level not typically associated with novice teachers, who often struggle with over-focusing on their own internal states during lessons. The comfort level of the ETNK members, while in their role as teachers, can largely be attributed to their rapport with one another that has developed over time. A lot of attention is given to all lesson aspects which shows how seriously members are invested in creating worthwhile learning experiences for each other.

Not surprisingly, the group consciously reflects on their ETNK experience as a community in order to make refinements to facilitate greater learning over time.

Group members report positive feelings associated with participation in ETNK. Since membership is voluntary, it makes sense that each person would only remain an active member insofar as they are comfortable within themselves and between each other in the group. Stevick (1980) mentions this point when he says, "success or failure in a language course depends less on linguistic analysis and pedagogical techniques than on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4). It is clear from noticing the feelings 'inside and between' that were mentioned in conjunction with participating in ETNK that an overwhelmingly positive pattern emerged. While the ETNK members are extremely motivated to develop their language skills and develop in various other ways, they value more the good feelings, or states, that they enter through the process of "*motivating and stimulating each other*," as Angie describes it. It is important to remember that all members have busy lives outside of ETNK that

include work, family, and other commitments. They largely choose to continue to participate because quite simply it "feels good" to be a member. The extent to which individuals feel comfortable being themselves in a group is a major factor in determining how long they will continue to participate (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). The ETNK member's long-term participation is strongly influenced by the positive feelings felt through their membership.

Finally, through reflecting on their behaviours, or actions, while participating in ETNK it was clear that students put great energy into preparing for each meeting and being in a focused learning state during meetings. To that end, it was interesting to note that the majority of concrete behaviours offered were anchored not in individual learning, but rather in ways that contribute to each other's learning experiences. This is hardly surprising given the importance of community described by these students in many areas within this paper. They are aware of the necessity of positively contributing, through their behaviours, to each other's learning experience. Their comments also showed that students are

aware of the symbiotic effect of their behaviours to not only facilitate greater learning experiences for each other but also for themselves. The student's behaviours manifested qualities of independence and interdependence that were congruent with exercising their individual and collective autonomy within ETNK.

To conclude, the ways that students conceptualize their learning is an area that needs further research. This requires not only welcoming student voices but also focusing on what their voices have to offer. The present study aimed to partially fill this gap. It is clear from this study that the self-generated ETNK group have a strong combination of beliefs, cognitive strategies, emotional states, and external behaviours that will continue to positively direct their learning for many years to come. In Abby's words, "*I hope to continue the group forever and with good harmony.*"

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