

(Published in *Learner Autonomy in Language Learning* (<http://ailarenla.org/lall>), January 2011)

## **A Tribute to Sergio Valdivia Navarro**



I am really sorry to have to share the news that our friend Sergio Valdivia Navarro sadly passed away on Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> September 2010 after a long illness. I feel privileged to have known him and honoured that I have the opportunity to write a short tribute for *LALL*.

I knew Sergio for several years – initially online and later in person. We met through the AUTO-L list. I have never been much of an active participant on AUTO-L, but I always enjoy reading the discussions. I admired the way Sergio (in his role as moderator) constantly challenged us. His enthusiasm for the field of autonomy in language learning was certainly contagious. I later learned from his colleagues at the Universidad Veracruzana in Mexico that he was a constant source of inspiration to them too. One of Sergio's co-workers, David Ryan, wrote: "He inspired so many of us here at the U.V. to keep motivated and to continue the never-ending process of learning."

### **AILA ReNLA Connections**

Sergio and I visited each other's institutions. Sergio attended the Independent Learning Association conference at my university in Japan in 2007, and I visited Sergio's institution in Mexico for a month, earlier in 2010. When I was in Mexico, Sergio and I were working on an article together about connections made through listserves like AUTO-L. The article was Sergio's idea and through our discussions I came to realise how much being part of the AILA ReNLA had enriched Sergio's life. The visit to Japan for the ILA conference in 2007, for example, was one of the highlights of his professional life. I take it for granted that academics can travel and attend conferences, but when I visited Mexico, I realised that it was a really big deal

that Sergio (and his wife Lolis) were able to come to Japan. Three years after the conference, colleagues were still talking about “Sergio's visit to Japan” and the ideas and enthusiasm he brought back. We never did finish our article, which is probably all the more reason to make sure I write this piece for *LALL*.

### **Enthusiasm**

The word that people use in connection with Sergio time and time again is “enthusiasm”. One of the conference conveners, Lucy Cooker, writes: “It was lovely to meet both Sergio and Lolis when they came to Japan for the 2007 ILA conference. Sergio was always so enthusiastic and energetic and it was lovely to see his smiling face every day. He and Lolis gave me a beautiful coloured scarf that they had brought from Mexico. I still wear it regularly and each time I think of Sergio. Now I will do so with particular poignancy.” Fellow AUTO-L moderator, Xuesong (Andy) Gao, writes: “I remember my meeting with Sergio in Japan well and have always been deeply impressed by his enthusiasm for people and his work. I am sure that all autonomy ReN members will be saddened by the loss of Sergio as I am”

### **Adventure**

Sergio was also very passionate about food and cooking. While we were in Mexico, he introduced us to many delights of regional Mexican cuisine. He even started his own food blog in 2010. His visit to Japan seemed an opportunity to be adventurous and to try Japanese food. Debbie Corder (co-presenter at ILA) writes: “I have fond memories of discussions on our wiki, and exploring Tokyo with him and Lolis – they delighted in running the gauntlet of shops between Kaminarimon and Senso-ji in Akasusa, going through the rituals at Senso-ji with all the Japanese, the contrast of the Ginza, the fun of eating at a mawari-zushi restaurant, and the anticipation of venturing out of Tokyo on their own. The visit to Japan was a very special time for them both.”

### **Friendships**

He was also a very welcoming host to me and my husband when we visited Mexico and I know others who feel the same. For example, former AILA ReNLA convenor, Terry Lamb, who visited the previous year, writes: “When I was planning to take my wife and daughter to Mexico a few years ago, Sergio gave me lots of advice about where to go and what to do. My family and I travelled by bus from Mexico City to Jalapa, where he was meeting us at the bus station. As we got off the bus we had a big hug and started chatting away. It was only later that my family realised that we had never actually met face to face before! We spent some beautiful days in Jalapa and Veracruz with him and his family.”

### **Sergio’s Story**

I wondered where this enthusiasm for learner autonomy originated from. There were some insights from the beginning of our article about ReNLA connections. I suggested that this section be called “Sergio’s Story”. We will never finish the article, but I leave you with Sergio’s own initial writing for this section:

*When I started teaching English, long ago, my first approach to that new academic activity was to replicate the actions from my former teachers: 'open your books', 'read', 'repeat after me', 'write', 'answer the questions', etc. In a way I was not analytical in the 'how' or even the 'why' things happened this way or another. I imagined that an English lesson was conducted in this way, no matter what the circumstances. There was not much to 're-invent'. The book was our guide. Not much later, I got hold of the teacher's book for the course I was teaching. I only learned that I had to have more structure in my classes and drilling was the basis for learning (audio-lingual methodology). So, I started to follow these new guidelines from the course book authors and kept on 'teaching' my classes.*

*As an English teacher, I was more worried of my language competence in class: my pronunciation, my knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. My skills for teaching were 'more or less' under control: the replication of my previous languages lessons + the guidelines in the teacher's book + my 'personal' touch in working with the group. This went on for two or three years, my teaching was only that and my main concern was on my command of the language. I [think I] had the notion that teaching was learning a set of actions to perform in class [and] that a teacher was [a] person with a full command of the target language. Also, I [think] I pictured teaching as practical, technical and more 'doing' than 'thinking'.*

*Later, when I started doing workshops, I had the chance to meet the authors of our textbooks. This was a great leap because up to that point I felt in one extreme of the teaching methodology chain and felt I was more of a technician than an academician. I [suppose] many language teachers have felt this, especially when your target language is not your mother tongue, and being a language teacher in Mexico where the English language is not a second language but a foreign language poses a certain notion of what your roles are in this teaching task. One of the facts of life is that textbooks and methods are proposed by English native academicians who live mostly far away from Mexico. Here, I had the experience that we always got to know new textbooks and courses through editorial employees who travel round the country talking about a new methodology and its virtues. So attending lectures by the very same authors opened a new avenue of possibilities in discovering my identity in this new discipline.*

*Meeting the authors was very helpful in the sense that I could listen to the insights [at the origin of] the rationale behind textbooks from their very authors. I found this very encouraging because it brought my views closer to those of the authors somehow. But my personal work came back to working and reflecting alone because it always seemed that my colleagues were too busy to deal with academic aspects of mutual interest at some point. I followed my readings also in isolation and could not share my reflections with my close colleagues. They were interested in other academic matters.*

Unfortunately, the story in Sergio's words ends here, but this was meant to be a lead-in to how he discovered the international network of people interested in learner autonomy. He finally found a community with which he could discuss his ideas.

I am certain that many other ReNLA members have felt academically isolated at one time or another and Sergio's story for me really emphasizes the power and importance of our small community.

Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan