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Reflections on JALT2020:

Professional development through the pinhole of learner development

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JALT2020 was my second JALT International Conference and was different from JALT2019 for two main reasons. One, it successfully brought together "communities of teachers and learners" from around Japan in times of a pandemic that continues to affect our living and working. Two, it was unique as it was online, which created a special call for collaboration and joint sessions. Originally, JALT2020 was scheduled to be held in Tsukuba, Ibaraki, which is a long way from Hiroshima city where I live and work. Going totally online saved me from planning for a long trip, and I could appropriate the grant money to research and prepare for my own talks. As a part-time university teacher without any access to research funding or monetary support to cover the registration fee and other expenses involved, I was fortunate to participate and present as well as co-present at JALT2020 Online with the support of a LD SIG International Conference Grant. In this essay, I would like to tell you a little about my own teaching story and learner development interests, and share with you what I enjoyed learning about at the conference.

From 2007 I was a beginning teacher as a Canadian participant on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. I am a Pakistan-born Canadian. I grew up in Pakistan, and my family moved to Montreal, Canada in 1998. By that time, I had come through English-medium schooling and had finished my BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) in Pakistan. This single handedly helped me the most to continue my studies in economics with an intensive one-year masters in 2005. Encouraged by a graduate teaching assistantship but feeling fatigued by the pace of all the studying I had done for the masters in economics, I took a couple of gap years to focus on volunteering as an adult literacy instructor at the Reading Council for Literacy Advance in Montreal (RECLAIM; see https://www.reclaimliteracy.ca/) to tutor adult literacy students with individual learners' needs. It was here that I found my calling for teaching English.

English is not my second language: I speak Punjabi (my maternal language and a language of my ethnicity), Urdu (Pakistan's official language), Hindi (roughly speaking, the spoken equivalent of Urdu, but different in its written form), and English (de facto my "langue du jour" or daily language for my career as a teacher and researcher). On the JET program, I felt I was not only a cultural ambassador of Canada, or for that matter Quebec, but also a Punjabi and a Pakistani. In the classroom, the thing that excited me the most, and filled me with the most pride, was that I was a face of Canada as well as Pakistan. This looping of multiple identities through languages helped me establish a deep connection with my learners in the early days, as their struggles and development reminded me of my own early schooling experiences with a mixed sense of confusion as well as clarity: confusion as to why English, and clarity as to why not English. For me, like the young learners I was now teaching, in my early schooling English had little use in everyday life. Yet, as schooling progressed, the use of English in higher education clearly singularly influenced me and motivated me to succeed.

I worked as an Assistant Language Teacher for the Hiroshima City Board of Education (BoE) for five years. The collaborative teaching experience, specifically team-teaching practices in English language instruction at junior and senior high schools, helped me grow as a teacher from feeling that I was on my own to developing a sense that we were

working with the students and learning together. The collaborative classrooms singularly shifted my teaching to excite, engage, and empower young learners with practical everyday English. The JET experience was a breakthrough period in my own development as a teacher and became the springboard for my university teaching career in 2015. Currently, I am an adjunct lecturer at a private city university in Hiroshima. I am also pursuing my second master's degree in Applied Linguistics, and my main interests as a teacher are collaborative classrooms, learner development, and pragmatics.

In planning and developing my courses collaboratively, one of my goals is to help prepare a greater number of students to graduate as capable, confident users of social English. Learner development is an integral part of my approach to collaborative learning as I want my students to make shared decisions in socially interactive situations of role play and teamwork. To that end, three key components of my classes have been: (a) task-based "learning-by doing", (b) measurement of performance against outlined targets, and (c) self-assessment for reflection. Practically speaking, I look to orient the students with a warm-up activity, review relevant past lesson content, pre-view the current lesson and its focus, move into a combination of teacher-led instruction and student-centered activities, with reflection on achievement or movement toward the goals and things to be working on independently or in dyads or in small groups. In a collaborative classroom we together create a learning environment that demonstrates the relevance of English to our learners' social lives. Coming back to JALT2020, I was looking forward to learning more about these kinds of issues at the conference. I focused in particular on presentations and workshops that covered the aforementioned three components, specifically in terms of collaborative practices and learner development in online classes.

The LD Forum offered a range of interactive presentations that focused on distinct groups of learners (high school students, university students, teachers, teacher trainees, and practitioner-researchers). In terms of creating social language learning communities in face of social distancing restrictions, I listened to a presentation by Jim Ronald, titled *Learner Community Development with Google Docs*, on how to use these for sharing some personal news (good news, bad news, any news), preparing for activities together, and fixing problems together with students. Jim showed how our online classes and online presence could be all about students caring for each other in these times of feeling lonely and nervous, not to mention confused and discouraged. I appreciated the idea of turning *Google Docs* into a shared daily class journal that could teach the students how to respond in courteous and friendly ways while learning about each other personally.

One crucial element in the LD forum discussion was self-assessment and reflection. I also focused on this in my presentation on using *End-of-Class Feedback*. In face-to-face lessons, feedback opportunities always were and still are important; now they are arguably essential. It might be more necessary than ever for the learners in our online/hybrid classes to have a voice, and to know that they are heard. In my presentation I showed how to turn a *Google Forms* into an "end-of-class feedback" form that included free-response questions as well as scaled questions. The data collected through completed forms was helpful in establishing rapport with my students and shifting their focus towards shared reflections.

Overall, for planning online classes, a critically central concern is how teachers present materials and information to learners. At JALT2020 I later attended a practical workshop by Bob Aschcroft, *How to Teach Online Classes Using PowerPoint*, to learn about PowerPoint as a tool for lesson presentation and as a whiteboard for online classes. I was thrilled and excited to learn how to mesh seamlessly easy-to-use, easy-to-read PowerPoint slides with other digital class applications such as Zoom. I got to see some creative ways of organizing teaching materials on screen with the presenter sharing useful tips and tricks on creating with Powerpoint engaging, interactive online educational experiences for students. I found this workshop useful and instructive as an integral part of the courses I teach is active learning and participation through project presentation(s).

Speaking of active learning, I presented together with Cooper Howland in a research-oriented session, *Student Poster Sessions to Promote Learner Agency*. We showed how students conducted their research to make and complete posters using a rubric for assessment of poster design, poster language and public speaking skills. In our talk, we focused on how posters on a variety of topics and issues can help students experiment with the basics of critical thinking, media literacy, and public speaking. The use of Google Slides/Powerpoint here also enabled them to communicate and collaborate with each other in the absence of any face-to-face contact.

In connection with class work and project presentation, I joined a practice-oriented workshop, *Benefits of Online Group Projects*, by Kazumi Kato. The workshop was effective for learning how to set up an online group project using the free version of Zoom. I found this workshop particularly helpful for switching from teacher-centered lessons to student-centered group discussions. In another practice-oriented workshop, *Productive Activities in an Online Classroom* by Kirsten Waechter, I could learn how to teach better online with technology. This workshop showed participants how to plan and prepare for writing and speaking activities that could be easily transferred to an online interactive classroom. For example, it was encouraging to see how using Flipgrid could benefit students in their speaking and listening activities.

Another major part of JALT2020 Online featured presentations and workshops on the benefits of being a JALT member and professional development opportunities for teachers who are interested in sharing and publishing their research activities. One presentation, *Writers' PSG: Improving Writing for Publication*, by Dawn Jin Lucovich and Paul Beaufait, talked about the training support available to JALT members through the Writers' Peer Support Group (PSG). The PSG are a group of teachers who work collaboratively with interested JALT members to help them see their writing through to publication (see https://jalt-publications.org/psg for more details). Through shared educational or research interests, I hope to become involved in working together on research activities and publishing projects.

In conclusion, I am glad I could join the JALT2020 Online conference as a participant, presenter, and member of the LD SIG. On the whole I was pleasantly surprised at the openness of the presenters. The presenters were friendly, approachable, and ready to share their contact information. They encouraged discussion and readily welcomed questions and comments. There were plenty of feedback opportunities. It was easy for me to share my opinions and thoughts. The presenters were kind to provide access to useful materials, including outlines, activities, examples, and rubrics, for a variety of teaching contexts. I felt encouraged, socially as well as professionally, to collaborate with like-minded people for research activities. I could furthermore learn by engaging with their work, joining discussions, and asking questions. My one regret was that I was unable to attend a few presentations that I was keen on learning from, due to schedule conflicts with other presentations and with my on-line university teaching assignments.

Last but not least, my conference experience was greater than that of simply receiving the financial support the grant provided. The LD committee warmly welcomed me when I attended their Annual General Meeting and received the grant. I could feel and appreciate the committee's open and frank atmosphere. Most importantly, this very openness helped me through the developmental process of writing this report. The *Learning Learning* editors were willing to address any of my concerns, and gave me helpful suggestions to complete this short essay. Thank you again, everyone.