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Talking of Breaking With the Third-party Academic Paradigm in Writing About Inclusive Practitioner Research

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Setting the Scene

In August this year we took part in a symposium on Fully Inclusive Practitioner Research at the 2021 AILA World Congress hosted online by the University of Groningen, Netherlands. The focus of our two sessions in the symposium was on breaking with conventional modes of academic writing about learner development and learner autonomy issues —and on researching and writing about learner development and learner autonomy issues in ways that are more inclusive and personal, especially for new writers, than traditional genres of published research. In this dialogue we trace our thinking around key issues to do with trying to produce an alternative approach with *The Learner Development Journal*, particularly Issue 5 (LDJ5).

Dialogue

Alison: In the nearly 30 years since the Learner Development SIG was founded, there has been an enduring focus on seeking to understand our practices through discussion and sharing at get-togethers, mini-conferences, and conferences, and through writing. The SIG's newsletter, *Learning Learning*, published biannually, has been a lively forum for many different kinds of contributions, including learner and teacher voices, reflective writing, dialogic pieces, short research articles, stories of practices, as well as experimental forms of writing about learner development and learner autonomy. In addition, the SIG has over the years brought together groups of practitioner-researchers to publish different books of anthologies of research and reflection (see https://ld-sig.org/publications/). As one of the editors of two of these collections, I can attest to the fact that these projects were hugely rewarding and enjoyable collaborations, involving large numbers of contributors, and also a great deal of time and energy from the team of editors working on each project. In setting up the Learner Development Journal in 2015, we wanted to create a sustainable way for LD SIG members (and others interested in learner development), particularly people new to writing about their practices, or new to writing in English, to work together over time in investigating and writing about a particular area of learner development that interested them.

Tim: The original concept for the *Learner Development Journal* appears on the journal website under "Aims and objectives":

Rooted in a commitment to community, collaboration, and praxis, each issue of the learner development journal publishes work on a particular learner development theme that the contributors to that issue explore together under the leadership of the issue co-editors.

Each year, one or two people, usually LD SIG members, put themselves forward as co-editors of a new issue with a particular theme in mind. These people formulate a call for proposals which aims to attract both SIG and non-SIG members to join them to discuss the theme with a view to publishing the issue two years down the line.

The LDJ is an annual online, open-access journal that presents practitioner-driven research on LD-related issues. This does not necessarily mean, however, that every contributor has to write an academic paper. In fact, one of the strongest underlying principles of the LDJ is that people are encouraged to move away from writing in a traditional academic genre. From the outset, editors were urged to accept book reviews, interviews, and written conversations as well as more conventional academic texts.

Perhaps even more than a collection of writing, each issue of the LDJ involves a form of group-based professional learner development—a process of shared exploration. The process is an intensely collaborative one and the desire is to create an environment which encourages novice writers and editors to step forward knowing that they will receive the support of other special interest group members.

Andy: And, in that interactive, collaborative environment, one question that comes up is who the contributors are writing for. In the first place it's for themselves and the other practitioners involved in a particular issue of the LDJ—for the immediate community that they are part of, and with whom they discuss their inquiries and writing as they develop. From a broader perspective, they are writing for members of the Learner Development SIG and other like-minded groups in other parts of the world, so the imagined readership for the *Learner Development Journal* are aficionados of learner development and learner autonomy—people who have a strong interest and enthusiasm in exploring through research, practice, dialogue, and writing learner development and autonomy puzzles and issues that interest them.

At AILA2021 we talked of "breaking with the third-party academic paradigm." For us, "third-party academic paradigm" suggests a strong distancing effect. In much academic writing writers adopt an objectivist stance and try to take up a universalising position, which not only removes the author from "practitioner" readers, but also positions the author as practitioner at a distance from their learners. In such writing, the convention is to reproduce general realities of learning and then, through lengthy literature reviews, to situate practice within the global field, rather than raising particular questions and puzzles that writers themselves have within their own local contexts. With the *Learner Development Journal*, and especially with Issue 5, we have been trying to encourage writers to move away from this paradigm and develop more personalised ways of writing.

For LDJ5 we have called these alternative genres, **narrative accounts** and **practice-related reviews**. In **narrative accounts**, contributors have been aiming to ground their writing in concerns and questions that they have about engaging with the multilingual turn for learner development to, and write their inquiry as an unfolding story, in which they include different voices, relate their inquiry to arguments and debates in the field where appropriate, and write questioningly to take up critical positions to do with multilingualism and learner development (the theme of LDJ5).

Some examples of openings from near-final drafts in the slide below illustrate such ways of writing. The opening on the left is from two teachers, Jussi Jussila and Riitta Kelly, at a university In Finland; the opening in the middle is by Lorraine de Beaufort, who teaches French in Hong Kong, while the one on the right was created by Vasumathi Badrinathan (University of Mumbai, India), who has been exploring multilingual issues with a group of French teachers in Mumbai. In each case the writers take a strongly personalised position.

More personalised ways of writing ...

Introduction

It is my first day co-teaching in a multilingual classroom. I feel a little nervous, since I am not sure I remember very well when it is my turn to speak or how the whole situation is going to work with three teachers. The speech communication teacher starts the session in Finnish. I introduce myself briefly in English, and the course continues again in Finnish. When it's my turn, I use English again to talk about academic literacies. The studen changes, and they present thei written communication teacher through the whole session. Oth add and I do the same for them

This initial episode describes our feelin communication and language course, a by reflecting on our experiences of this communication and language courses Jyväskylä, Finland. We both work at th (Movi), which arranges discipline-spec of all faculties, as well as exchange stu all students. Riitta has been working in English courses for students of all facu Jussi started as a Japanese teacher in more recently has been teaching Engli teaching, where teachers of different la course, occasionally co-teaching in the

IC was one of the four participants in my doctoral study on the topic of French learning in Hong Kong. This study used the approach of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin, 2013) to produce an account of IC's experiences. What I intend to do in this paper is to focus on one participant, IC, and firstly to reconstruct IC's narrative, drawing on the additional perspectives of two readers from our LDJ5 group, and secondly to reflect on the insights gained from this process of reconstruction. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) present readers as the third pillar of narrative inquiry, the two others being the inquiree (IC) and the inquirer (me). I am wondering what can be learned from taking such an approach, especially with readers who know nothing about her and little about the Hong Kong context.

What I also wish to do is to take some distance from a process I have been deeply involved with for several years. What I also wish to do is to take some distance from a process I have been deeply involved with for several years. The process of data collection and inquiry had lasted from the spring of 2014 to the summer of 2018 with IC, and formally ended in May 2019 when I presented the completed version. My participation in the LDJ5 project is thus also a way for me to deal with a frustration I experienced during my doctoral study, namely that I did not have the opportunity to discuss with others the connections between IC's life and her engagement with learning French. (...)

Introduction

In this narrative account, I study the narratives of six French language teachers of Mumbai city. Thereby I hope to gain an insight into the understanding of the concept of multilingualism by these teachers, their classroom pedagogy involving French and the other languages. At the outset I would like to briefly retrace my own personal experience with languages, with learning French and with multilingualism. ... nettes relating to language in the educational study. Further I shall proceed to the teacher

three Indian languages, apart from English and speaking Tamil. English was always a part of my ion, so in other words it was a "second first ak, read, write Hindi and Marathi with ease, the state of Maharashtra where Mumbai is situated. t Gujarati (language of the neighbouring state d Malayalam (language of the Southern state of my early years). I later studied Spanish and n learning French in school, was fascinated by acquire my degrees of specialization in this guage Tamil at school, I learnt to read and write esides teaching, I seriously engage with Indian constantly handling a wide lyrical repertoire in ltilingual self that I am as an individual and as a

The other genre that LDJ5 writers have been focusing on is *practice-related reviews* of books to do with multilingualism in language(s) education. Here contributors have been aiming to connect their reviews to particular local learner development practices and concerns that they have. So, whereas a conventional "third-party academic" review might well aim to provide objective, "clinical" summaries of a specific work, the authors of the practice-related reviews in LDJ5 have created a range of personalised writing (including critical dialogues, autobiographical reflections, and explorations with students) about different questions that the book(s) under review raise(s) for them.

Alison: So having introduced the two "new" genres, narrative accounts and practice-related reviews, that were intended to replace the more traditional third-party paradigm, we asked our audience to think about the issues that the journal, and particularly all the people involved in creating Issue 5, have faced.

For the contributors to the issue, and to the editors as well, the new genres were unfamiliar. How did the writers and the editors envisage this kind of alternative writing? Did they see this in the same way? Were there conflicts or misunderstandings?

Since the aim was not just to work together for mutual benefit, but also to publish something that would be of interest and value to other teacher-practitioners, what role did the editors play in shaping or influencing the writing that was done? What brokering structures and processes were created to enable the contributors to produce high-quality writing?

In asking these questions, we wanted to encourage the audience to share the critical, puzzling perspective that we are trying to bring to our own reflection on the writing and publishing practices of the LDJ, and particularly the current issue.

So how were the alternative genres realised in practice? To begin with, the editors set up "response communities," groups of contributors and editors (who were also writers), who shared drafts and discussed their ideas, both in writing and in online meetings. The purpose of these groups has been to forefront the drafting process and to enable writers to develop their thinking through this collaborative dialogue. Another important aspect of this is that the editors have been closely involved with the writing process from the outset, rather than seeing writing only once the authors have completed a final draft, as is more usual. The assumption was that, in addition to levelling the perceived hierarchy between editors and writers and ensuring friendly and constructive communication, these groups would also facilitate shared understanding and expectations about the kind of writing that LDJ aspires to publish.

Tim: One of the other things that has been introduced for the current Issue, Issue 5, is the idea that contributors should write in a cumulative way. They have been asked to first put down their thoughts in personal, experiential pieces of writing. They have then shared those ideas with other contributors before trying to build on that initial piece of writing to extend it and to push themselves further.

In LDJ Issues 1 to 4, different editors either leaned towards a traditional academic approach to the production of a journal issue or have been veering towards a more exploratory mode of working which is reflected in the kind of writing that is produced. LDJ Issue 5 contributors have been encouraged to move away from evidence-based writing that includes an extensive literature review. Instead, writers have been encouraged to see writing as a means of exploration or reflection. Writing therefore inevitably becomes an interactive drafting and responding process which is an integral part of the exploration and reflection.

Through reflecting on the assumptions and processes surrounding LDJ, we have realised that a formal academic style is not necessarily appropriate for the kind of practitioner research which fits in with learner development. A reflective personalised mode of writing is probably more in tune with exploring how people experience classrooms and how they can grow and develop as learners. Writing which starts from a personal perspective can help teachers to forefront their own professional experience and break with some of the usual tropes that encourage writers to disguise their own agency and presence.

Andy: Another key factor in the collaborative development that LDJ aims to foster has been the dialogic review process with different parties at various stages. In the first place this involves members of the same response community sharing and discussing their writing and ideas with each other as they take shape and unfold. For example, the response community that I was in met in Zoom six times over 14 months or so for 1½ to 2 hours, in which we discussed with each other our doubts and uncertainties about writing, as well as incomplete fragments, stories, and drafts. Feedback also came from two reviewers in the LDJ Review Network, who were asked to respond reflectively to contributors' writing in progress—to puzzle over the writing, reflect on what they wished to understand better, and focus on the quality of learning-teaching-researching that the writer(s) were trying to nurture through their inquiry and writing. Our hope was that reviewers would stand alongside the writer(s) in the quest for quality of understanding and share questions and puzzles with them. Writers also received extensive feedback from a member of the Learner Development Journal steering group (currently Tim Ashwell, Dominic Edsall, Tanya McCarthy) on their incomplete second drafts.

Later, comments and questions came from two of the LDJ5 editors (Oana Cusen, Riitta Kelly, Yuri Imamura, and myself). We believed that writers needed plenty of space and interaction with different parties along the way before they started getting feedback from editors as things moved towards a final draft for publication. Our comments were written as well as videoed. In order to demystify and make our feedback transparent, we recorded a video-discussion of each complete draft, shared the video with the respective contributor(s), and then arranged to talk together in Zoom about the further development of their writing. This let us personalise our editorial stance; at the same time, it created some kind of distancing effect in responding to different writers, both novice and experienced.

Alison: I'd like to add to what Andy has written about feedback in the form of video-discussions. This innovation came about after one of the editors was unable to join a meeting and asked for a recording of what was discussed. Unlike written feedback, which can seem somewhat authoritative and conclusive, the recorded discussions allowed the writers to witness the editors' initial and evolving views as they talked through what they had read. As a contributor who received video feedback on my practice-related review, this was a fascinating, if somewhat disconcerting experience. I'm not sure I particularly enjoyed viewing a discussion about what I had written at that stage—as the writer, it felt like I was eavesdropping on a conversation about my writing, even though the editors were addressing their comments to the camera and a future me. Nevertheless, this use of technology helped me to think about my writing again from the perspective of readers who were also invested in the experience and ideas I was trying to convey.

Tim: Through two questionnaires, a series of interviews, and reviewing the email correspondence we have had with LDJ editors, contributors, reviewers and others, we began to identify a number of "knots"—recurring issues and themes that intrigued us and for which we had no ready-made answers or solutions. These included the following:

Discourse

We noticed how by using certain vocabulary, we and LDJ contributors trap ourselves into thinking in particular ways about the LDJ. The very fact that we (stupidly?) called it a "journal" has set up many expectations and possibly many misconceptions about the project. Similarly, terms such as "steering group," "editor," "reviewer," and "article/paper" have led sometimes to assumptions about roles and modes of work which can be unhelpful. It might be better for us to use new vocabulary to describe new practices.

Miscommunication

With contributors/writers, editors, reviewers, and members of the steering group part of the LDJ structure, it is obviously crucial that these different people and groups communicate effectively with one another. Things can be misconstrued, and things may get miscommunicated. For example, writers and reviewers may see the feedback process differently and can be disappointed with the feedback they receive, or may feel the other person does not want to enter into a collaborative discussion about the writing.

Feelings

Feelings can be hurt in this kind of endeavour just as they can in traditional academic publishing. Writers can feel misunderstood when they want to write in a particular way which may not fit with what the editors are hoping for. Some writers have dropped out at a late stage in the process because they do not seem to want to commit themselves to this exploratory, collaborative way of working.

Quality and standards

This is interesting because one might assume that in the LDJ, in terms of the writing, anything goes! But, of course, ultimately when the editors move towards publishing an issue of the LDJ they want it to be good and they want to feel that people will read it and enjoy it and learn from it. So, this is something that we've been struggling with: how you can encourage people to write in a very original, creative, exploratory way but still ensure that it turns into a decent product which will be judged by how coherent it is, how easy it is to read, how relevant it seems to the topic under discussion, and how well the writer makes the context easy for the reader to understand. This raises questions about what sorts of standards we are wishing to adhere to or what we regard as good quality writing when it comes to writing about practitioner research and when we are trying to make learner development issues come alive for readers.

Alison: We end this written dialogue as we ended our presentation at AILA: with knots, intractable puzzles that we hope to unravel and understand better. Reflecting on these knots together is, we hope, something that is not only enjoyable in itself, but a practice that might also lead to more sustainable processes of collaborative writing for publication. In the poster video that we prepared for our second session in the symposium, we identified a number of knots: accepting new genres, power dynamics and issues, writing quality, (mis) communication, collaboration and commitment, novice and experienced writers, different expectations and assumptions, and emotions around the review process. As with our poster, we invite readers of *Learning Learning* to take some time to view the comments of writers, editors, reviewers, and steering group members—and to add your own reflections in turn.

To view the knots that emerged, go here and follow the links.

(Laura, 2011)

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