Developing learner and teacher autonomy through student journalling

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ABOUT AMANDA

Inspired by the interaction in my mother's multicultural junior high school class, I became a language teacher in 1968. I have since taught French, Spanish, Catalan, and English to learners of all ages and levels. I have been on the faculty of Miyazaki International College as a Fellow of Comparative Culture since 2000.

私は、母の多文化中学校クラスにおける相互作用に影響を受け、1968年に語学教師になりました。以来、全ての年齢とレベルの人達に、フランス語、スペイン語、カタロニア語、及び英語を教えてきました。2000年以後、宮崎国際大学教養学部、比較文化学科教員を務めています。

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how student journals can be used to foster autonomy. To illustrate this, I have selected journal entries that feature documenting (recording facts), student reflections, and my own responses to their writings. Throughout this recursive process, the learners co-construct themselves through a dialogic engagement of text and meta-text: Autonomy, then, is concretized through reflexivity and critical engagement with written discourses.

本章の目的は、ジャーナルを使って学生のオートノミーを育成するためにはどうすればいいか、説明することである。これを明らかにするため、文書化(事実の記録)、学生の考察、学生のジャーナルに対する私自身の返答の中から、特徴的なジャーナル・エントリーを選んだ。この繰り返しのプロセスを通して、学習者はテキストとメタテキストの対話形式で、自己を再構築した。つまり、オートノミーは、熟考と文書のディスコースの批判的関係によって、定着するのである。

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports a student journaling project at Miyazaki International College. It begins with an explanation of the teaching and learning environment of the school. Next, the theory behind learning journals is explained, and data from the students' journals, including my own feedback, is used to demonstrate the ways in which theory can inform classroom practice.

MIC features an English immersion, team-taught, content-based, liberal arts curriculum. Lower division classes – for first and second year students – are team-taught by a discipline specialist in tandem with a language teacher. However, lower division English classes are solo-taught by English teachers, and upper division classes – for third and fourth year students - are solo-taught by discipline specialists.

The majority of our students are from Kyushu, many from rural areas, and in any class there is likely to be a wide range of English proficiencies: to illustrate this, the entry-level TOEIC score would typically range from around 200 to 500, with an approximate mean score of 330.

A DEEP APPROACH TO STUDENT LEARNING

Ian Hart (2000) describes the framework for student learning developed by Ramsden in which a "deep approach" is "…based on an intrinsic motivation or curiosity and a strategy which is aimed at seeking meaning. There is a personal commitment to learning, which means that the student relates the content to personally meaningful contexts or to existing prior knowledge" (p.2).

By using a deep approach, the learner's perspective is valued. I feel that it is particularly important that students adopt a deep approach to learning so that they can move beyond the constraints of the Japanese high school system that, inevitably, focuses on memorization and repetition, towards a different approach that encourages critical thinking skills. In particular, I believe that teachers are able, through their pedagogic practices, to set an example that the students will follow in order to develop their own deep approach to learning.

A deep approach embraces a holistic view of learning, a view inspired by two humanistic educators, Caleb Gattegno and Jennybelle Rardin. Their philosophies of life and education concurred with those of Kolb (1984) who states that holistic learning is "a process of adaptation to the world, involving integrated functioning of the total organism, thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving" (p.30).

Earl Stevick (1990), who worked at length with both Gattegno and Curran, perceives common strains in their respective approaches:

- Each emphasizes some uniquely human attributes
- Each affirms and promotes human freedom
- Each contributes in some way to the human dignity of the learner (p.131).

Journals are in keeping with this philosophy of holistic, student-centered learning. Moon (1999) posits that journals facilitate:

- Metacognitive awareness
- Critical review
- Development of theory from practice
- Self-development
- Learning to resolve uncertainty or to reach decisions
- Learning that brings about empowerment or emancipation (p.23).

Ultimately, as Wilson-Medhurst (2005) writes, "[Reflective writing] allows students to develop an understanding of descriptive approaches to writing...and to provide evidence of a 'deep approach' to learning" (p. 91). Given the "inner silence" of the non-judgmental roles that journal writing allows, the reflection process empowers learners, and grants them time and space.

The roles played by MIC learner journals

One of my goals was to have student journals support content-based instruction, as well as language and critical thinking skills. My intention was for students to see the journal as a tutorial, with a supportive teacher there to help. My aim was to encourage the students to engage in their writing and to express themselves freely. Having said this, there were occasionally individuals who lacked study skills and motivation. Under such circumstances, the structured cycle of journal assignments, and response to teacher feedback, was aimed at strengthening their participation.

Journal assessment

Some researchers argue that journals and reflective writing should not be assessed on the grounds that, "[it] is intrusive on personal development or too difficult" (Moon, 1999, p.92). However, there are arguments for why we need to develop a means of assessment. In fact, Moon continues:

> But assessment does not always mean marking. It can mean 'sitting beside,' a collaborative rather than inspectorial system. Such a system, is a helpful process to learners and it can bring structure and discipline to the work that might not come about in completely unassessed work" (p.93).

As for this project, it was a requirement that journals were submitted within deadlines; they were then read, commented on, and returned to the students. Also, the journals were part of the students' overall coursework requirements for the classes. General issues raised by the journals were later addressed in a forum-style class discussion.

TO PRAISE OR NOT TO PRAISE?

There is little consensus as to how, when, or even whether to give praise. Caleb Gattegno withheld praise on the grounds that the learner's awareness of his learning process made teachers' praise superfluous. Shakti Gattegno (2000) cautions us as teachers against systematically praising students without criteria. However, I believe that when used effectively, praise encourages self-esteem and learner development. Brophy (1981) specifies examples of such praise (See MAYA! website for Appendix A).

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNALS

There are a variety of models of double-entry journals. Essentially, a double-entry journal requires journaling from two perspectives. In the case of this project, journal entries were divided into an objective section (the facts/content of the class/lecture), and a subjective section (the student's interpretation, opinion, personal experience and associations, etc.). The students kept the front of their journals for subjective comments, and the back for objective comments. Students also had the option of writing more after class.

HOW THE JOURNALS WERE INTRODUCED TO STUDENTS:

1. An explanation of the learning journal project was given:
   "You are going to keep your class notes and your comments about them in a notebook."
2. Students were invited to share their experience of keeping journals.
3. The notion of objective and subjective was explained, including definitions, at the level of each group.
4. Student and teacher samples were distributed.
5. An activity sheet was provided for students to identify and distinguish between objective and subjective comments, and to justify their classification.

HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT

Assessment was in accordance with the approach described earlier. For the sake of this study, holistic writing assessment is defined as follows:

> In considering a sample of writing from a holistic perspective, readers do not judge separately the singular factors--treatment of topic, selection of rhetorical methods, word choice, grammar and mechanics--that constitute a piece of writing. It is this total impression that is sought in holistic scoring (Elliot, Plata & Zelhart, 1990, p.17).

Furthermore, the following criteria were included:
- Punctual submission
- The quality of discourse, in terms of complete sentences, cohesion, coherence, paragraphing, length, and detail.
- Appropriateness of register
- English fluency and accuracy
- Accuracy of content
- Critical thinking skills

- Creativity and originality
- Response to the teacher's previous feedback or questions
- The balance between objectivity and subjectivity

Journal data

I have included data from three journals.

1- Masa wrote:

You said that I should change the words 'will , "can" etc. into "would', and "could when I used 'the future in the past". I knew this rule, but I forgot that I used the past, so I made a mistake, I would like to check what I write at next time not to make mistakes any more. I think mistake is very shameful because this is one of bases of English. And you rewrote and added some words. I found out that most of what you wrote or added are articles and prepeositions. These are my weak points. So I would like to continue studying them and try to reduce mistakes.

My comment to Masa:

Masa, the question of shame, because of your mistakes, is not really relevant to learning, because we learn THROUGH our mistakes. In other words, if we didn't make mistakes, we wouldn't learn at all. Learning is not about "knowing," it's about being able to use and using (the language) without thinking. Also, it's probably impossible to "learn" articles and prepositions, but if you NOTICE them, you'll improve your use of them. Your English is excellent for an English One student. Please continue to improve on it and make it more excellent! ^-^!

My comments on Masa's entry:

Masa showed a regular pattern of self-deprecation, into which he put considerable energy. By sharing Gattegno's beliefs about language learning (Gattegno, 2000), I offered him the chance to redirect his energy, and to interact with me on a deeper level through our dialogue (Ramsden, 1992). I praised Masa, since, as I previously explained, it was expected, but I ensured that it was truthful, specific, and therefore meaningful.

5- Jun wrote:

Today we, first we discussed Indian money. I understood * many things of Indian money . And I studied that the prices of India is very cheap. For example, watching movie is that Japanese case is 1500 yen , but Indian case is 30 yen.* / *I was envious Indian prices.

My comments to Jun:

*Jun, this >** is a detail. Can you give some details here*(such as size, colour, symbols, languages, etc)?

My comments on Jun's entry:

Jun only engaged minimally with the content. So, I encouraged him to change that habit by giving details, so that he might better see what he was describing and deepen his approach to learning (Ramsden, 1992). In general, I believe that students like Jun are likely to suffer from low self-esteem and to be unaware that learning in school can energize them. They may be afraid to pay attention out of fear of not being able to grasp or create meaning. I felt that my job here was to aid Jun in overcoming this fear. In doing so, I was careful to do so in an appropriate manner, not appearing, in his case, too motherly. For that reason my choice of words, length of sentences and discourse were crucial. However, if the student is unwilling to engage, all I can do is to accept it, although I would keep trying.

7- Chi wrote:

I learned that if we born in Middle Ages, and farmer, we must be a farmer all our life. I hate this system. I want to choice my job by myself.

My comment to Chi:

Chi, "hate" is an emotional word. You need to be factual, not emotional in academic writing. You could say for example, "I do not think the feudal system was a fair system because people could not change their status even if they wanted to." Please ask about this next class.

My comments on Chi's entry:

Although I explained the notion of subjective opinions related to the content, I wanted Chi to grasp the fine distinction that opinions need to be rooted in fact rather than emotion. As a follow up activity, I asked Chi to read her sentence out loud so that my content teaching partner, Dr. J. could also assist. Dr. J said students need to analyse content, and in order to do so should refrain from getting emotional. With his help, Chi analysed the feudal system. As she did so, her need to express hatred dissolved. Instead, she concluded with a more factual comment, "If I had been born in feudal times, I would not have liked it because I would not have had any choice about my work."

The students' trust

In my comments to the students, I was both literally silent, since journaling is written, not spoken, and also non-judgmentally "silent" in the sense that characterizes the approaches of Curran and Gattegno. In other words, I did not rank or classify their work hierarchically or comparatively. Student feedback showed that this was appreciated and contributed to their sense of self-esteem, since they saw their work as having deserved to be read and commented on by a teacher. They were able to develop a trusting relationship, as they showed through their willingness to communicate with me in their journals.

Feedback, as I have shown, focused on specifics, both in terms of what the learner had written, and what he or she needed to do to improve. I was vigilant about ensuring that my language level and what I said were appropriate. Language appropriateness was guided by my teaching experience, my observations, and my awareness of the learners as individuals. As a result, I used simpler language with certain students, and more challenging language with others.

As for praise, empirical observation of tertiary students in Japan over 15 years has revealed that it was expected by students and widely given by teachers, although often in a mindless way. Yet, my students frequently mentioned the positive influence praise had on them. For this reason, I included praise in my comments to them. However, to unmotivated students who were not worthy of praise, I made a descriptive statement such as, "What you have written is clear." There was a tendency for such students to at the very least pay more attention in class.

PARTICIPATION

It was occasionally necessary to chase up the odd or remiss student, although participation in the project was almost total, with every student completing entries for practically every class. Some students barely described their lectures and needed regular coaxing to write in complete sentences. Occasionally others complained that journal writing took time, or made negative comparisons with classes without homework. The majority, however, highlighted the opportunity for extra practice and characterized the interaction with the teacher as helpful for their language skills, critical thinking and overall learner development. There was a considerable difference along gender lines, with females, generally, though not exclusively, producing more extensive and complex journal entries. There were, however, many students who, regardless of gender, wrote in depth and detail and applied their critical thinking to interpreting the content of their respective course.

CONCLUSIONS

In terms of the holistic assessment previously referred to, final class grades (of which the journals were a part) indicated a range of abilities. By that token, the journals allowed even weak students who "failed" in other courses to find their voices in English and at the very least recycle, in their own way, the content they were presented with. In the best of cases, students mentioned that they were able to apply what they had learned through the journaling to their other classes "on the coattails of our class."

The journaling project helped me to understand and grant autonomy to my students. At the same time, it provided me with the basis for a reflective journey, whereby my thought processes about learning and teaching developed and led to this project. In that respect, I believe I also became more of an autonomous teacher.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSER 1
DARAGH HAYES

Amanda Bradley's chapter considers the many benefits associated with using classroom journal writing projects. Improvements in writing fluency and accuracy, metacognitive awareness and critical thinking skills are all evident in the writing samples provided, as are the opportunities for the high degree of collective involvement, increased student-teacher scaffolding, rapport building and trust that the process allows. The notion of "sitting beside" (Moon, 1999, as quoted in Bradley) student writing and responding in a non-critical manner was also refreshing. That the author was able to provide corrective feedback while exhibiting care for students' affective well-being speaks volumes for the student-teacher relationships she was able to build.

This project was clearly undertaken with a high degree of democratic validity (Burns, 1999) in mind, driven as it was by a desire that the outcomes should result in tangible benefits to all parties concerned. Like Marlen Harrison, I was curious whether individual comments were shared amongst the cohort and what implications this may have had for the journal writing process and classroom engagement at other levels. My own experience tells me that providing learners with access to a plurality of classroom views can have a transformative effect on their language learning beliefs, goal setting, strategy use, and classroom behavior. Reading the chapter I could not help but wonder how the process may have helped individuals "grow from the group's expectations" (Murphey, 2003, p. 4).

What intrigued me most about the chapter were the pockets of resistance that the author describes. Bradley notes that some learners had to be pressured to complete journal entries on time or that met the expected quality and length. Although the "deep approach" to learning Bradley advocates is, "…based on an intrinsic motivation or curiosity" (Hart, 2000, as quoted in Bradley), this intrinsic interest and commitment to study English is not always a given in Japanese tertiary settings. In the case of one student quoted in the appendices, Jun, a lack of investment in the process was taken as evidence of a lack of learner autonomy. While undoubtedly not of the type sanctioned by most teachers, it would be remiss not to acknowledge learner non-compliance or disinterest as a form of choice and self-regulation. In light of the learners' awareness that the instructor was the primary audience for their writing, that some used journal entries to challenge classroom norms or expectations was quite profound. As such, it is worth considering not only how journal writing could be used to address the pedagogical mismatch that can often exist between the competing views and expectations of learners and teachers, but also serve to bridge the gap between opposing visions of how an autonomous learner "should" behave. As such, I am curious what changes learners may have suggested to the process and how their ideas were accommodated. If a follow-up study were pursued, it would be interesting to see how the process might evolve were learners granted more control over both the content and format of their journal writing contributions.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2
MARLEN HARRISON

"As for myself, by not assessing my students' autonomy as a discreet factor, I freed myself from being a teacher-centered teacher. I did not have to judge the students' work in a strict or prescriptive way or manipulate figures that arbitrarily reflected an abstract quality. Since I did not need to subordinate myself to such teacher-focused issues, I was able to notice the creative examples of autonomy that even students with minimal experience with English achieved through the journaling." Amanda Bradley

Amanda Bradley's exploration of journaling projects at Miyazaki International College (MIC) effectively illustrates how the language learner can use creative expression as a tool for development and perhaps more importantly, how the language teacher can effectively explore his or her role as facilitator of student autonomy. At MIC, Amanda employs a journaling project in which the teacher takes on a more personalized counseling approach to facilitate learner awareness and development. This connection between instructor and counselor is quite profound: Having transitioned from a career in mental health counseling to foreign language teaching, I can most definitely see how the two roles can overlap. Partnering this concept with a holistic, deep approach to learning mirrors the concept of client-centered counseling and effectively asks the learner to take responsibility for his or her own development.

Amanda discusses that journals are read and written as a kind of conversation or discourse between student and instructor. This lead me to wonder if students ever exchanged journals with their peers and if so, how this activity fits in with the current model and what benefits or drawbacks might arise. Moreover, I'd be interested in learning how much time is involved in reviewing the journals and how the project has been developed or repeated over time: If the project is to be repeated, what kinds of changes would she make, and why?

As an instructor who assigns email exchange projects in the language classroom, I found Amanda's description of typical instructor responses (in journals) to be very motivating. I can see how I could use a similar process to help students with email composition and self-expression. Whereas in the past I undertook very little reading of student emails, I would feel comfortable using Amanda's model to help student's reflect on their skills and ideas. Using the journal to deepen the relationship between student and instructor, while emphasizing original thought, skill review, and expression, is a concept I'd like to further explore in my own teaching.

For students in Japan, specifically, journaling can provide a safer, less judgmental approach to classroom participation, albeit only written. It honors skills that are perhaps considered secondary to oral communication, but that may be a necessary stepping stone to building confidence in otherwise apprehensive students. When used in a multi-disciplinary approach to skill development, I have no doubt that the journals not only facilitate the learning process as they're being written, but also serve as a tangible record of progress and exploration of language skills that students can re-visit for future review.