

Learning from an extraordinary community of educators: doing teacher education in Myanmar

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In March 2015 we spent a week in Yangon leading 30 hours of teacher education workshops with trainers of trainers working in non-state education (aka non-formal education). The 16 workshop participants work in education and development NGOs and in monastic schools, doing training across the curriculum (and not just in English education). The workshops were held in the Training Centre of Thone Htat Kyaung Monastery in Yangon. This was the third time for Andrew to do such teacher education in Yangon (twice before with Joe Tomei from Teachers Helping Teachers SIG) and the first time for Jenny. It was also the first time for Jenny and Andrew to work together, although we knew each other from various Learner Development events and have shared interests in reflective learner development, reflective participatory teacher learning, and learners doing global issues projects and research.

We confirmed the dates and focus of the workshops in early January 2015:

- life skills
- critical thinking
- personal English development
- producing low-cost materials

and then started to plan 30 hours of workshops on these themes in February. We met several times to build on previous work, create materials and go over possible sequences of activities. This process challenged both of us to move away from teacher-led (outsider-led) ways of facilitating workshops to developing a creative, planning process. We puzzled our way through critical pedagogy in action and 'critical literacy in global citizenship education'. We also learnt about education in Myanmar and about the socio-political context we would be working in. Over time the two of us began to see more and more how effective, empowering and sustainable the teacher learning processes would be if they were participant-centred, dialogic, and collaborative.

The Burmese teacher trainers we would be working with all would all be bringing a wealth of knowledge/expertise from their lived experiences. They are the experts for their contexts, communities, and the society they live and work in. Any materials that we offered needed to reflect local Myanmar contexts, individuals, communities, and society. We hoped too that the participants themselves would generate relevant and appropriate materials for their educational/training needs.

In Yangon, from the beginning, the trainer-participants set goals, established ground rules. Together we all co-constructed a community of learning, negotiating the daily plan and the weekly schedule components. Each evening two of us spent several hours revising, fine-tuning, and creating a map for the following day's 6 hours of workshop activities. This made us constantly adjust the tentative plans that we had set in Japan, change which activity sequences to follow, and what materials to use. More and more we found ourselves creating a minimum but complex scaffold. We then step back to create spaces for the participants to interact together, to listen and respond to each other, and for us *all* to listen and respond to one another. These extraordinary experiences had profound effects on both of us and enriched our own teacher learning for our university teaching and teacher education in Japan.

Changes in My Teacher Learning in Japan (Jenny)

Thinking now about what I bring back for my own continued teacher learning in Japan, I focus on my current teaching-learning puzzle in Japan: *ways of bringing content-based learning and critical issues into low-proficiency classes*. There are four strands which we drew from in the Myanmar workshops which I am employing more consciously in my *compulsory English* classes with multi-major learners and *International Communication* major courses: 1) **using images** about global issues; 2) **creating more space** for 3) **participant-centred collaboration** and communication about content; 4) allowing myself to be **more spontaneous** during the class 'flow'.

1) **using images** in lessons to introduce topics, particularly 'hard' topics of social and global issues works well with my learners. This might mean I collate pictures from the Internet onto reusable sheets; pairs or groups discuss images first in L1 if they need to, then in L2 answering question prompts to get them thinking about what they see. Since the Yangon workshops, I have used the '3 levels of thinking/seeing/questioning' approach- to help learners start to engage more critically with images and the issues they express. Even low proficiency learners appear to respond to these tasks creatively using a mix of L1 and L2. For projects or mini-presentations (assessed tasks) learners are asked to bring in 1-2 pictures of their topic from the Internet or other sources, which they then use to stimulate peer discussion or reflect on in their presentations.

2) **creating space** - I am now remembering to step back more during the lesson and have students go through content/topics in pairs first, after which they might then share with another pair, or peer teach different aspects to another group. Then, we might finish with a class plenary to share and pool all ideas/opinions/knowledge. Multiple opportunities for language recycling and peer-to-peer opinion-making seem to lead to deeper engagement with content, learner confidence in dealing with 'hard' topics in L2, and a higher degree of critical thinking.

3) **participant-centredness** - While I had always strived to design lesson flow to be student-centred, I now more consciously create more space (time, tasks) where students generate the content knowledge with each other (and not the teacher) from their own lived experiences, interests or research. Participant-centredness also entails students making even small choices about activity partners more often, about topics to cover, activity sequences, and also ways of assessment through self-evaluation and peer evaluations.

4) **spontaneity** - I have always had a strong tendency to create a syllabus/ lesson plan and move through it fairly closely throughout a teaching-learning cycle. Structure seems to provide scaffolding for low proficiency learners getting used to perhaps a different/ more participatory learning-teaching environment. However, from what I experienced in Yangon with the trainers and Andrew, I realise how crucial it is to also follow the students' pace and learner engagement rather than the lesson plan/syllabus at all costs. Recently, I saw in my very mixed-level *Public Speaking* class that some students felt 'rushed' to produce in a scheduled presentation class. The following week, students shared self-evaluation comments with each other, and received their assessment and feedback from me. Then, as a whole class we discussed openly whether the class pace had been too fast up to now, and whether the class would prefer to change the syllabus, to deal with fewer topics with more time to prepare, plan, and collaborate. The majority voted on this and so we have revised the semester plan and also the assessment breakdown accordingly- relief and increased learning positivity all round.

Since Yangon I am more likely to stay in the moment, instead of always 'looking/racing ahead' and time-keeping to meet my lesson plan's goals. I'm reminded again of the importance and value of the learning *process* and not always learner *production*. Providing learners with enough space to use their language with each other while engaging creatively and critically with content allows us all to respond more spontaneously to what happens in the class 'flow' and ultimately co-create the learning as we go.

Changes of My Teacher Learning in Japan (Andrew)

It is tremendously challenging to imagine and prepare 30 hours of workshops, without having worked in the society or contexts that the workshop participants devote their lives to. Doing some interviews and observations with Bill Mboutsiadis of trainer of trainer (TOT) workshops in Yangon in August

2012 had initially helped me understand and appreciate the inspiring commitment and expertise of trainers in non-state education in Burma/Myanmar. Jenny and I also talked several times about the workshops I'd done with Joe Tomei in March 2013 and March 2014 in Yangon. As we ourselves started focusing on the workshops for March 2015, Jenny and I took as our foundation a relationship of equality with the trainers in Yangon and of respect for them as the experts in their work in non-state education in Burma/Myanmar. In February 2015, as we started preparing materials together, we talked through our experiences and educational idea(s), built trust with each other, and developed a collaborative sense of working with each other. We wanted to work with the trainers' experiences and priorities, and with materials and activities that focused on issues in society that directly affect their communities and their work. We also wanted to start from images and stories and move towards **a questioning, creative and critical sense of learning**. We were not fully sure how to do this, but we had the strong sense that this would be worth doing. In the end I learnt so much from working with Jenny and the trainers: our work in Yangon had a deep effect on my teacher learning back in Japan for the 2015 school year.

The first impact that I notice comes from **working with images and pictures around critical social issues** in Burma/Myanmar. The ideas that Jenny and I tried had come from a critical literacy project in the UK that we had read about (Andreotti & Warwick, 2007; Andreotti, Barker, & Newell-Jones, 2007), which, among others, can be traced further back to Freire's work with **generative themes**. In Yangon we used pictures to do with water issues and women's rights; back in Japan with my students, this year I have been asking them to search for images to do with global issues as a first stage in generating interest and engagement (and learning how to use search words to refine Google searches). I have also come to appreciate how asking students to see how they can incorporate images in different types of writing about global issues that they research can help them find new ways of engaging with such issues in both critical and creative ways.

The second area of impact for me has been on structuring interaction more between students when they are engaged in content-based learning and explaining their research into different issues to each other - and of stepping back. The workshops in Yangon let me look more closely at questions of space for student learning this year - of moving back to understand the **spaces that students step into in their dialogic engagement with each other about the development of their critical understanding of the world**. This has also involved me in listening to my students more, and appreciating how they develop their knowledge and understanding in talking with each other about issues that they research. This in turn has led me to re-configure **possibilities for practitioner research into a more dialogic mode with my students**, so the workshops in Yangon let me shift my sense of praxis in a fundamental way.

Despite all the planning that Jenny and I did in Japan, we were also ready to make decisions in the moment and adjust our plans during the workshops. I have known for a long time how important this is for my own work as a teacher and learner, but I am forever falling into routines and keep needing to 'notice now'. Doing the workshops in Yangon and **working spontaneously**, on the basis of a huge amount of planning and preparation, made me appreciate again **the value of listening and responding in the moment in my own teaching/teacher learning**.

The other major impact that I notice is my renewed engagement with following students' engagement with global issues and guiding them to express their **critical understanding in creative ways**. For me this is deeply connected with **participant-centredness/learner-centredness**. This tension between learner development, creativity and criticality in self-directed student projects is **the key puzzle** that I keep returning to in my teacher learning. I hope we have a chance to talk about this during the LD Forum

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References

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