

Expanding Space for Reflection and Collaboration



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This chapter is meant to be an inverted map of this anthology for the readers in which I try to suggest possible future developments of Learner Development anthologies in some less conventional ways. My ideas include research into diversity of perception of learner autonomy by teachers and learners, use of narrative in research writing, teachers' collaboration with learners in research, the issue of reactive and proactive learner autonomies, and teacher-friendly schemes for teacher development.

この章は、この本の内容を読者に紹介する逆さまの地図のようなものである。ここでは、将来また学習者ディベロプメント研究部会のアンソロジーを作る時にどんな形での展開が可能か、あまり常識的でない方向性を提案した。トピックとしては、教師と学習者の学習者オートノミーに関する認識の多様性、ナラティブを使った研究報告、研究活動における教師と学習者の協力、反応性オートノミー (reactive autonomy) と主体的オートノミー (proactive autonomy) 問題、教師にやさしい教師研修の方法について論じた。

INTRODUCTION

You may wonder what this chapter is doing here in the middle of this anthology. No, I'm not going to present the result of my research. This is meant to be, rather, an interlude. The editors wanted me to write about "spaces for collaborative genres." I wondered what that might mean. I read a near final draft of each chapter of *Autonomy You Ask!* and jotted down my thoughts evoked by them. Then I tried to organize them in a way that wouldn't make my chapter resemble either the introduction or conclusion because Tim Murphey and Phil Benson were working on these. It wasn't an easy task. I almost regretted having agreed to do this. Why should I get the most difficult bit? Then came a moment of 'aha.' My notes were mostly about what was absent or not very salient in this volume. The contributors have covered quite a large terrain, but there seemed to be more to explore. Why don't I write about what I would like to see in a second Learner Development anthology? Placed as it is in the middle of the volume, the chapter may also be able to offer an alternative reading. If Tim's introduction is a map for this volume, I wanted to turn it upside-down so that the readers might see the land differently. I hope I have been successful...

MULTIPLE VIEWS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

There is no single authoritative definition of learner autonomy. Reading the chapters in this volume, you will find many different perceptions of learner autonomy. You may agree with some and disagree with others. But I don't think we should see this as a problem. This is the very nature of teaching practice. A teacher's knowledge is embedded in their personal experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1983). As no one has a completely identical set of experiences to yours, your knowledge is inevitably unique in its content and structure and defies any stereotyping. And because you continue to accumulate more experiences as long as you live, your knowledge or understanding of learner autonomy is always tentative and in flux as Tim Stewart (Chapter 4) points out. This also applies to learners (Benson, 2002a). A learner's perception of learner autonomy is most likely influenced by her past experiences, both of language learning and of other aspects of her life. But we, both teachers and learners alike, are not just creatures of our past. We have aspirations for the future too. Lampert (1985) observes that teachers manage dilemmas they face in their classroom according to the image of teacher they would like to be. Norton (2001) borrows the concept of imagined community from Wenger (1998) and claims that a learner's investment in learning is largely determined by how relevant she feels her classroom is to the community she aspires to belong to. So what happens in a classroom is a complex interplay of different perceptions of learner autonomy, or different sets of experiences and aspirations, as many as the number of people involved. To understand even a small event in a classroom, you need to go backward into the histories of people there, yourself included, and forward into their future. I was fascinated by the stories of "Jijis, Babas, & Sempais" (Skier & Vye, Chapter 3) in this respect. I would like to see more learner stories like them and teacher stories in future research in learner and teacher autonomy.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN THREE DIMENSIONS

Yes, narrative.¹ Most contributors to *Autonomy You Ask!* tell stories of evolution of a course, a curriculum or their research process. But it seems to me that the potential of narrative could be more fully exploited. My pet subject these days is *Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This Canadian pair of long-time collaborators claim that teachers' knowledge is narrative and that it must be understood as we would understand stories and represented in research text as narrative. Their space of inquiry stretches in three dimensions. The first is

the personal-social dimension. We are social beings who interact with others. But we also have our inner world where our thoughts and feelings dwell. Narrative inquiry tries to explore both “inward” and “outward.” The second dimension is the past-present-future continuum. Situated in the present a narrative inquirer goes “backward” and “forward” in time. The third dimension is place. We are bodies (hooks, 1994), and we live in a specific physical environment. What we do, say, feel, and think is not unrelated with where we are. Trying to understand someone and tell a story or stories of this person involves describing the place that she inhabits.

So teachers writing on their learner autonomy practice actually have three possible dimensions to expand their inquiry. A generic set of questions to kick-start an inquiry might be something like this:

- *Where did this learner come from?*
- *Where is she heading?*
- *Where did I come from?*
- *Where am I heading?*
- *How do we interact?*
- *How does she think and feel about her classroom experience with me?*
- *How do I think and feel about my classroom experience with her?*
- *What kind of place do we work in?*
- *How does the physical setting affect us and how is it affected by us?*

Cath’s (Malone, Chapter 16) vivid description of a junior high school classroom enables me to feel her urge to make her course relevant to the classroom reality and to develop in the student teachers she works with the capacity to engage 12 year-olds in learning. Uncomfortableness of wooden chairs, PE kits hanging at the side of each desk making the already packed classroom feel even more so, sticky air of June full of chalk dust, the hum of fidgeting children. I need this sort of detail in order to understand other teachers’ practice. Perhaps we need to bring such details to our consciousness too in order to come up with a new insight into our own practice.

THREE KINDS OF STORIES

But the place and people that are to be described and explored are not limited to classrooms and teachers and learners as the time frame extends beyond one term/school year/curriculum cycle. Teachers work not only with learners in a classroom but also with colleagues, administrators, parents, sponsors, and other stake holders outside. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) metaphorically call these factors teacher’s professional knowledge landscape. In this landscape, according to Clandinin and Connelly (ibid), teachers tell three kinds of stories: sacred, cover, and secret. Sacred stories have their basis in theories which are unquestioningly thought to lead practice. They are “elusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told, because they ... lie too deep in the consciousness of the people to be directly told” (Crites, 1971, p. 294, cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 8). One of the most pervasive sacred stories concerning learner autonomy is, I would say, the one about quiet shy students. Why can’t they be autonomous? What’s taken for granted in equating quietness and shyness to lack of capacity for learner autonomy? Isn’t it, among other things, the picture of ideal

classroom interaction which theories of second language acquisition paint for teachers? Emika challenges the sacred story by her practice (Abe, Chapter 7). Whether the solo activity which Emika has devised helps her students' developing autonomy must be judged by the students' perception, not by any theories.

Cover stories are told by teachers outside their classroom in order to prove their competence and hide any uncertainties. They are often affected by new prescriptions, new mandates, and new policies that "are dropping from the conduit to litter the professional knowledge landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 32). Uncertainty is, however, a part and parcel of any professional practice. Schön (1983) actually advocates the notion of reflective practice as an antithesis to positivist epistemology. Positivism believes that what counts as knowledge must be obtained in an objective and value-neutral way and that it is generalizable and can predict and control future events of practice. Yet, such an approach is unable to deal with the uncertainty, complexity, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict which professionals face in their daily practice. Practice for learner autonomy involves all the more uncertainties. Breen and Mann (1997) state that one of the teacher's roles to support learner autonomy is managing the risks to mediate between individual learners' learning agenda and the group process, and "to go through the disorienting but developmental phase of 'anarchy'" (p. 147). We need to create a space where we do not have to pretend that everything is under control and where we can honestly admit our uncertainties. The Learner Development SIG has been a fairly good nurturing bed for collegial working relationships. But how can we create such a space in our workplace where our colleagues may or may not believe in the value of learner autonomy? I think that this is a valuable research topic to explore in future LD anthology volumes.

Secret stories are the stories teachers live out behind the closed door of their classroom. Although Clandinin and Connelly (1995) are aware of the danger of unscrutinized practice, they also recognize that the privacy makes the classroom a safe place for teachers' storied practical knowledge. Here is one such story told by a beginning Japanese as a second language (JSL) teacher who participated in a teacher conversation group where teachers told stories of their practice (Aoki, 2002, in press).

Yukiyo: That was why I started taking English lessons. But becoming a language learner again put me in a dilemma. ... I don't know what to say to my students any more. There are so many things I would do if I were a learner, but I don't want my students to do. I confessed to my students on an examination day I'd cheated in exams. Perhaps it was because I talked about my learning experience in the conversation group. It was my favourite class too. Anyway the students were very surprised and said 'You're a nice person. You're OK.'

Naoko: *What was OK?*

Yukiyo: I told them I'd thought teachers wouldn't know if I only moved my eyes. All we had to do was to collaborate and not to tell the teacher. But when I became a teacher I found out a teacher could see the movement of students' eyes. So I knew I'd failed in cheating. I spent part of the time for calling the roll to tell the story. No one cheated on that day. Seating arrangement was certainly a contributing factor, but I felt my story had sunk deep in the students. I felt good about having talked about my experience honestly. ... I would have told my students what they shouldn't do instead of telling them about my personal feelings if I hadn't talked about my learning experiences in the conversation group. So that was probably a change in my teaching.

In this short story you will see many features common among secret stories: dilemma, uncertainty, honesty, personal feelings, moral, care, trust, hopes for the future... Secret stories are only told in secret safe places, most often outside school. But those stories are the cream of teachers' professional knowledge. Teacher autonomy as freedom would remain an unattainable goal unless those secrets are shared and recognized in public without threatening teachers' sense of security.

We can look into sacred stories and cover stories we ourselves and our colleagues tell. Or we can tell our secret stories and reflect on them. What would we see then?

DOES THE STORY HAVE TO BE TRUE?

An assumption behind the recognition of the narrative mode of knowing is that there is no single absolute truth. Human beings configure otherwise separate events into a believable story in order to understand their experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). So representation of our experience is always subjective. One event may be interpreted differently by different people or by the same person at different times. The evaluation criterion of research presented in the form of narrative is not whether it is true, but whether it is verisimilar (Bruner, 1986). If a story resonates with your experience, it does not matter if it is a fiction as long as it is based on data collected from relevant sources.² Back in 1990 Eliot Eisner and Alan Peshkin wrote that "there is no reason, at least in our minds, why in the future the academy might not accept Ph.D. dissertations in education that are written in the form of novels" (p. 365). They claim that "novels have helped people more sensitively and insightfully understand the world in which they and others live" (ibid). Other media which have also played the same function, films, drama, and poetry to name a few, may also be possible alternatives in reporting teacher research (Eisner, 1997).³ Steve Davies should not have worried when he decided to write his sci-fi story for this volume (Davies, Chapter 17).

COLLABORATION

Then comes collaboration.⁴ This volume has ample examples of teachers working together; as protagonist and understander in cooperative development, as colleagues collaboratively teaching different classes with the same curriculum, writing a curriculum, or exploring a specific issue. The value of collaboration among teachers is evident in the contributors' enthusiastic accounts of collaborative experience. But what if we included learners in our list of possible collaborators? Of course many students mentioned in those pages, the dream team in Joyce's (Cunningham & Carlton, Chapter 9) class for example, seem to have been very good collaborators with their teacher in carrying out their classroom practice. But wouldn't it be possible to go a step further and involve them in research process as co-researchers? I have seen only a few such studies (e.g., Coyle, 2000). But it is an area worth exploring.

In fact, some versions of action research are concerned with the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place and all parties involved are seen to be responsible for their own emancipation (e.g., McTaggart, 1997). Autonomy, for me, is participation in decision-making concerning my own fate. If action research is to contribute to the development of learner autonomy, it may be a good idea to conceive it as something that allows teachers' and learners' collaborative effort to change the situation. As Andy (Barfield, Chapter 5) realizes, defining ourselves as (teacher) researchers and learners as objects of research could create distance. Viewing learners as active agents in the research process will hopefully prevent teachers' othering of learners.

Research in collaboration with learners will have to have a new set of requirements. For example, it will have to address learners' concerns and acknowledge their contributions by

making them co-authors, sharing drafts with them, and/or giving them a say about what is to be written and how.

PROBLEMATIZING REACTIVE AUTONOMY

Littlewood (1999) has offered us a very useful set of concepts: reactive and proactive autonomies. A general argument among practitioners since then is, as far as I understand, that working on Asian students' reactive autonomy is culturally appropriate because they tend to respond well to the call for autonomy once the direction is set by a teacher. But is reactive autonomy really doing a service to learners themselves? Some of the female JSL teachers whom I interviewed to study how they developed a positive attitude towards learner autonomy experienced what I would call a turn from reactive autonomy to proactive autonomy (Aoki, 2003). They had wanted to be a good child, daughter or student and consciously or unconsciously tried to live up to the parents' and teachers' expectations, but when they started questioning the way women were treated in the family and in the wider society, those women decided to have their own way if it meant going against expectations of their significant others. Reactively autonomous students are angels for a teacher. But perhaps we should not make it our goal to produce a classroomful of such students. Our job may, rather, be to challenge them and support the development of proactive autonomy. I do not have an answer to this question. I am aware that teachers could not and should not step into all aspects of students' lives. But it seems to me that jumping on to the idea of reactive autonomy is too easy a solution. We need more dialogues among ourselves as teachers and with our learners on this issue.

BUT TEACHERS ARE BUSY

Research is a time-consuming activity. The beginning of Mike's chapter (Nix, Chapter 15) conveys with a convincing intensity the sense of panic which many teachers juggling their teaching, research, and administrative commitments in their busy schedule are likely to experience. And he is in a relatively privileged position. Many teachers are not as lucky as Mike. Some may teach an enormous number of hours part-time to make ends meet. Some of them may even be expected to do some administrative work for very little or no pay. Others may be discouraged to do research by their institution's administration: "Your job is to teach, not to research." Still others may be primary care givers at home. It is quite understandable that doing research seems to be an impossible task to them. It may actually be so. Reluctance to engage in teacher research or failure to produce research reports should not be interpreted as lack of motivation or capacity for teacher development. We should think of less time-consuming ways to stimulate and support teacher development. One possibility I could think of off-hand is a teachers' conversation group (Clark, 2001). This requires no formal data collection or analysis. All you have to do is get together with like-minded teachers, preferably regularly but not necessarily so, and talk about each other's experience in an empathic and reflective way. Of course we will need to report on such activities in order to claim their legitimacy. Participants in a teacher conversation, for example, could write up a story they told in the meeting or reflection on a story heard there. The LD Anthology could be a precious rare outlet for such writings.

FINALLY

Space has been a very useful keyword for me in writing this piece. Having sorted out my thoughts by writing, I realize it means many things. It is physical space where teachers can meet and talk. It is also physical space in academic journals and books which accept unconventional

research methods and writings. At the same time the term space has metaphorical meanings. It is space free from academic hegemony of the positivist paradigm for teachers to develop their practice. It is space in our mind which we pay a visit to in our reflection. It is also space in our mind for our colleagues with differing views of learner autonomy and space we give them for their teacher autonomy. Collaboration, if it is at all possible, has to start by respecting and trying to understand each other. And, above anything else, it is space in our heart and mind for individual learners. Fostering learner autonomy involves letting learners make choices. Letting learners make choices involves being responsive to each learner's history, concern, and aspiration (Webb & Blond, 1995). Without personal care for each learner our job would not be possible. Teaching is after all a caring profession.

NOTES

1. Some theorists distinguish narrative and story whereas others use them interchangeably. I shall follow the latter in this paper.
2. I am in a dilemma here. I would say this to my students who are working on an MA or PhD thesis. But, as I will argue later in this chapter, I do not necessarily think teachers' stories have to be based on any data as long as they are based on their own experience and memory. I obviously differentiate these two types of writing, but I still have to figure out what that means.
3. Andy Barfield pointed out that Freeman (1998, pp. 154-156) reports on an experimental session at an annual meeting of The American Educational Research Association in which the same set of data was represented in 10 different alternative ways. Freeman refers to Eisner (1997).
4. Steve Brown commented at my presentation at the 2001 JALT conference that two people doing things together is not necessarily collaboration. I have tried to come up with my own definition of collaboration since then. My favourite at the moment is that collaboration is working together with a common goal or goals, shared cognition, and affective involvement. This is a summary of Crook (2000) in my own words.

