Teachers’ conversation with partial autobiographies

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Abstract

Teachers’ life experience is known to influence their teaching and some teacher educators have claimed that teacher education should focus on student teachers’ autobiography (Knowles & Cole with Presswood, 1994). Sharing autobiographical information in a teacher education classroom is not free of problems, however. Everyone has some stories which they are not ready to tell or which they can only tell to certain people. The degree of self-disclosure one can venture without feeling uncomfortable also differs from person to person. Inviting teachers to tell or write their full autobiography is ethically questionable unless they do it on voluntary basis. In this paper I shall report on a teachers’ conversation group (Clark, 2001a) which I organized as a course in a Japanese as a second language teacher education programme. In this course students wrote a story of their teaching or learning experience and we discussed themes that were found in each story. After explaining the rationale for choosing this format, I shall quote part of the story which one student wrote and two stories told by other students in the conversation on a theme in the written story. Finally I shall situate these two stories in the history of those students’ professional development and show that voluntary telling of partial autobiographies can be a safe and powerful alternative to writing full autobiography.

Narrative and conversations: a story of evolution of a course

I had been running a weekend study group for in-service teachers in my charge and encouraging them to engage in action research with not much success for a couple of years when I came to realize that action research as described in introductory books on the topic for second language teachers was rather problematic. (Aoki, 2002). The teachers I worked with were too busy to set enough time aside for action research. I also came to recognize that teachers’ knowledge is narrative-based (Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I wanted to try something that was less time consuming and would set teachers free from the cast of paradigmatic expression of knowledge. So I designed an experimental course based on cases in the autumn-winter semester of 2000.
I chose to have students write cases. This was partly because few teacher educators had tried case-based pedagogy in the context of JSL teacher education and there were no ready-to-use cases available anywhere. But more importantly I thought that it was a way to respect the students’ “authority of experience” (Munby & Russell, 1995). I know something that has helped me in my teaching. I have the authority of experience for that portion of knowledge. There is nothing wrong in having the authority of experience, but the problem is that the moment I try to pass the knowledge on to my students, it begins to assume the authority of position: I’m your teacher and I know what you don’t, so listen. Munby & Russell (ibid: 175) put this dilemma in a beautifully simple way: “Experience cannot be taught. It must be had.” Asking the students to write their own cases, I hoped, could be a message that both their and my authority of experience were equally recognized in the course.

The instructions I gave to the students were fairly simple:

*Write a story of a memorable event in your teaching career. It could be about one lesson or lessons, one or more learners, the process of designing a course, developing a syllabus or a piece of material, or arranging a timetable. It could be about your relationship with your colleagues or bosses. It could be about anything.

*Try to be as specific as possible and describe what happened, why and with what result. Show me a draft just in case I have a request for revision like “Write a bit more about this” etc.

(From the handout originally written in Japanese)

I was prepared to offer help if the students’ drafts were unsatisfactory, but they never needed it. All the stories submitted were vividly written with detailed descriptions and moving emotional tones.

In contrast to most reported case-based practice (Lundeberg, Levin & Harrington, 1999) we did not discuss the cases themselves in class. We brainstormed themes in each story and discussed them. The discussion often involved more stories from other members of the group. The ground rules we agreed on were: do not interpret or make judgmental comments on the story; do not ask questions about the story; do not criticize other members’ views. I also suggested that the writer of the story may like to remain silent. All these rules were intended to create a psychologically secure environment for everyone, particularly the author of the story. Teachers are a vulnerable species. Comments which would pass safely in a casual conversation could unwittingly hurt someone when teachers talk about their own teaching. I also
hoped that the writer of the story might gain some new insights by remaining silent and listening to others’ talk not about, but related to, her story.

I considered my role as that of a facilitator. I tried to prevent any possibly harmful development and to keep our talk on track. I also tried to provide alternative views and frames which might broaden the students’ perspectives and facilitate reinterpretation and/or reorganization of their own experience. I did not try to “teach” any predetermined pieces of knowledge. I tried to follow the students’ thinking and feelings. This was because I shared Clark’s (1995: 134) view, who observes that teachers learn by “re-thinking, remembering, and reorganizing” their knowledge rather than adding new information to it.

After each class meeting the students wrote reflections on the discussion and those written reflections were shared at the beginning of the next class meeting. Our discussion was not always lively. The distribution of turns among the students was far from even. However, the students’ feedback at the end of the semester was surprisingly positive.

This experience convinced me of the power of narrative in teacher education and I decided to continue with my experiment in the following school year.

In September 2001, just before the second run of the course started, I discovered Christopher Clark’s (2001a) new book, Talking Shop. This book helped me theorize my practice and showed possibilities which I had not been aware of. Clark (2001b: 173) identifies seven functions of teacher-teacher conversation:

* Articulation of implicit theories and beliefs

* Perspective taking: Seeing the world through the eyes of others

* Developing a sense of personal and professional authority

* Reviving hope and relational connection: An antidote to isolation

* Reaffirmation of ideals and commitments

* Developing specific techniques and solutions to problems

* Learning how to engage with students in learning conversations
Narratives told by my students, both in this course and at other occasions, often involved their emotional experience such as conflict with or pressure from senior colleagues, unexpected ending of contracts, and difficulty in classroom management. They also often refer to dilemmas between the ideals the students hold and the reality they face. I had seen tears in the eyes of story tellers. I have also seen entangled emotions and seeming dead ends sorted out in telling a story. Clark’s claim about the functions of teacher-teacher conversations resonated with my experience very well.

Clark (ibid: 176) states that “[g]ood conversations deal with worthwhile content; they resist narrow definition; they are voluntary; they flourish on common ground, in an atmosphere of safety, trust, and care; they develop over time, drawing on a shared history and anticipating a shared future” and that they provide a social context for collective reflection which becomes “a means for organizing ourselves for future action in our classroom and schools” (ibid: 180).

In the handout I prepared for the students of the autumn-winter semester of 2001 I explained what happened in the previous year, briefly introduced Clark’s work, and declared that our objective for that semester was to have good conversations.

I had ten students in this year’s class, two males and eight females. One was an undergraduate student, five were M.A. students, three were doctoral students, and one was non-degree research student. Four had been in the previous year’s course. Their teaching experience ranged from nearly zero to over ten years. At the beginning of the course the students decided to scan the chapters in Clark (2001a) for ideas to enliven conversations. What they found can be summed up as follows: verbal and non-verbal behaviours of listeners, seating arrangements, food and drinks to accompany a conversation and the role of facilitator are all relevant to make a teacher conversation lively and fruitful. We decided to try out as many ideas as possible including taking turns to bring refreshments to the class. One student, Kiku, started making a small suggestion in each class, such as “Don’t keep staring at your copy of handout,” or “Elicit a comment from someone else (when you don’t have anything to say).” The routine of a class was the same as the previous year except that the students e-mailed their written reflection on each week’s conversation to the rest of the members before the next class meeting. We spent two class meetings for each of the four stories we read this term. In the remainder of the paper I shall present part of a story written by a student, two stories told by other students in a conversation on the written story, and the
histories and co-texts behind those two stories in the conversation which were shared with me in the interviews with the two story tellers.

**Hokuto’s story**

Hokuto was in his final year of undergraduate studies. He only had teaching experience at two teaching practica. He felt that he did not have enough experience to write a story of his teaching and decided to write about his language learning experience instead. He had been to a language school in the UK in the previous summer. That was his first time in an English speaking country and he was unable to speak a word for the first few days. Hokuto describes himself during those days as a “Silent Statue.” Although he had a bit of a sad experience because of this silent period, his memory of the summer is on the whole positive. Hokuto attributes his positive perception of the experience as well as the improvement in his English to the friends he made at the language school. Hokuto’s story, Stories from England, was originally written in Japanese and has three parts. Space only allows me to quote part of the middle and final parts here.

**An Italian family**

Another story of interest is the following. Somehow or other there were quite a few Italians in the course. In my class alone, four out of six students were from Italy. Comparing the class to a family it can be said that in addition to a 74 year-old “grandma” from Norway, there were two “mothers” and two “older sisters” from Italy (actually, the two “sisters” were real sisters) and myself. As the class “mascot”, everyone treated me really well. I was very happy.

The Italian women were really outspoken about their feelings. For example, if they didn’t like the class policies or if there was no drinking water in the classroom, they would let others know in a surprisingly explicit way. At the beginning of class, the teacher always asked things like “What did you do yesterday?” and “Did you sleep well last night?” Though these routine questions seemed to be intended to create a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, one of the Italian “mothers” often said, “I’m angry, very very angry now.” Though it seemed this was a result of the stress that comes with being in a foreign country (e.g., different food, missing one’s friends), during class she would become really upset over little things. And what’s more, since many of the people around her spoke Italian it wasn’t anything for her to switch to Italian. Over and over again, when she would revert to speaking Italian, the class would come to a halt and the teacher would say, “What is it? Please speak in English” and she would answer, “Sorry. But I’m angry...” During these times, the “grandma”
from Norway would enjoy reading the textbook on her own. I would show a gesture of having given up to the teacher while hearing Italian from all around.

During mealtimes, the four Italian women would talk in Italian even when other non-Italians and I were around. Since the teacher wasn’t present, I was the one to play the role of conversation interrupter, jokingly saying, “Please please speak English” or “Okay then, I’ll speak Japanese.” They would respond with “We’re sorry. We’ll be careful from now on” and someone from the group would summarize in English what they had been talking about, but they would eventually return to their Italian. They may be a bit capricious, but they were my great friends. We had a very good time together every day.

The reality outside of class

In contexts in which there is no means of speaking in anything except the target language, language is naturally acquired not just in the classroom but through interaction in one’s daily life. Learning English in Britain was a totally different experience from learning Chinese twice a week at a Japanese university. Having learned most of the grammar patterns of English, there wasn’t all that much that was “new” in class for me. Thus, daily life became a rich context in which language learning took place. I spent more time outside of the classroom speaking with other students who have varying levels of English. So learning occurred in dribs and drabs all the time. I was surprised at the English conversational ability of my Italian classmates, and conversely they were surprised at my knowledge of English grammar. As many of my friends were still at the beginning level, we often experienced communication problems. One of the Italian “older sisters” often said to me, “Thanks for understanding my poor English.” I myself often mixed past and present forms, making my grammar appear defective.

There must be some truth to the comments made by many students around me like “It’s a drag to have to take class” and “You learn more by speaking English in everyday life here.” For me, my “teachers” were my friends, the “classroom” was the bar, and the “class” met in the evening. When I showed the journal that I kept during my stay to a friend he said, “There isn’t one line written about the class. It looks like you just went to the bars and restaurants and played football!” It’s mostly true.

What teachers usually don’t see are the various “dramas,” some troubling and others moving, outside of their classrooms. Although teachers don’t have to grasp everything that is going on, and couldn’t even if they wanted to, for language learners daily life has a big influence on their language acquisition. For example, the Italian “mother,” who treated me like her own
son, was like me just laughing and not producing much English at the beginning of the course. During the two weeks we were together, though, she made a dramatic progress in her speaking ability. We found out that her earlier excuse that she was shy was a downright lie. I heard that she had taken another two-week course prior to ours but that she hadn’t really opened up her mouth or her heart during these weeks. I can only speculate the cause of this change, but the change of classmates may have contributed. Who can deny the possibility that meeting me helped her? In fact I might have stayed in my condition of “Silent Statue” and returned to Japan with a sullen face if I hadn’t met my classmates.

Certainly all the teachers took good care of me outside the classroom too. They gave me advice on daily life and extra lectures. At night we had drinks and talked about the most ridiculous things. The teachers, who were just like open-hearted good friends, were different from those I have known in Japan. Still it’s mostly the classroom where the teachers demonstrate their expertise while there were multiple opportunities for learning when the teachers were not present. This might cast the teachers in a bad light, but my real acquisition process took place outside of the classroom.

Our conversation

We had read Hokuto’s story before the class in which it was scheduled. Among the seven themes brainstormed were the family metaphor for a class, time outside the classroom and roles teachers may play to make that time optimal for language acquisition, and teacher’s control of classroom interaction in order to develop relationships among learners. Nguyen thi Hoai An, who happened to be visiting our class, suggested discussing the family metaphor first. Hokuto happened to be away from campus that day and we decided to record our conversation for him. In this section I shall quote two stories from our approximately 60 minute conversation.

Xiaobo’s story

A few students talked about how, in their experience as a learner, “mothers” and “sisters” among their classmates helped them or other classmates. A couple of other students expressed their preference, as a teacher,  

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1 At this point I did not intend to write a paper on this conversation. The students’ agreement to using the recording for a research purpose was sought at a later date.

2 The conversation was in Japanese. The verbatim transcript has been edited for readability and translated into English.
to be an equal of their students rather than to play a fixed senior role. I offered an observation that relationships in which teachers were not involved may be more easily compared to a family relationship. I told a story of my experience of having a big brother among my students and feeling assured that he would take care of the rest of the class although I was not informed what was going on. After a couple of students shared their experience, Xiaobo expressed her view.

Xiaobo: I think the reason students easily form close relationships with each other while teachers find it difficult to enter those relationships is that students are all in the same situation. Students can easily relate to each other’s feelings. I’m not sure if this is the right way to say this, but they’re all in the same weak position. Perhaps it’s human nature that when people find themselves in the same weak position

Everyone: (laughing)

Xiaobo: Weak people tend to group together, wouldn’t you say? Another reason is that the time teachers spend with students is limited so they don’t know much about what the students are doing every day. Also, teachers are in a stronger position than students, so students naturally feel some kind of reservation towards them. This may sound kind of strange, but maybe if a teacher made a conscious effort to appear weak, he or she would find it easy to get close to the students.

Naoko: Do you think it’s really important to be accepted as a member of the student family?

After the question above a couple of students expressed their views. Then came the second half of Xiaobo’s story.

Xiaobo: I think it’s perhaps impossible for a teacher to enter a family relationship with the students. When I was teaching in China I had a really good class. I was still young at that time.

Everyone: (laughing)

Kurie: At that time?

Xiaobo: At that time (laughing) I’d just graduated from university and was only two or three years older than the students, so they often came over to my place and took me out to eat with them and so on. But one day when I was talking to one of the students, I found out there were some places they went to together that they wouldn’t invite me to (laughing).
Everyone: Really?

Xiaobo: When I heard that I was really taken aback and realised that I wasn’t fully accepted as their friend. But as Yumei said earlier, there are times when students need help from a teacher, and I’d be happy just to be the sort of teacher they could approach with a problem.

Manami’s story

Later in our conversation I commented that the decision to put Hokuto in that class had been a very wise one and suggested that teachers might have a role to play in order to optimize the students’ time outside the classes. This was partly because I wanted to change topics and guide the students’ attention to what they can do as teachers, excluded though they may be from a ‘student family’, and partly because I wanted to do justice to the teacher who taught Hokuto. A few students responded to my proposition with a report of what they each had read or heard. Manami’s story followed.

Manami: In the Japanese language school I teach at, I taught a class this spring term where there were only Korean, I wonder if I should be saying this

Everyone: (laughing)

Manami: I taught a class where there were only Korean and Chinese students. There were roughly equal numbers of Korean and Chinese students. Half of the Korean students had been studying together since the previous year whereas the other half joined in April, and somehow the class fragmented into three groups. I only taught the class once a week but it was obvious whenever I asked the students to choose another student in the class because they always chose the same people. I felt the students weren’t getting on very well with each other but didn’t do anything about it and then the summer vacation came. The teacher in charge of the class made three tapes for the students to listen to over the vacation and I got a note from her asking me to tell the students to get into three groups to share the tapes. I decided to leave it to the students to work out the groups. I was also secretly interested to see what would happen.

Everyone: (laughing)

Manami: I told the students to choose a chairperson and discuss it among themselves, but five or six minutes went by without anyone speaking. I was really disappointed at my failure to manage the class and couldn’t keep quiet any longer. So, I asked them who lived near whom and who was likely to see each other during the vacation but whatever I did I couldn’t
get them into groups. Even putting the Korean students who arrived the previous year in one group, the Korean students who arrived in April in another, and the Chinese students in the last group didn’t work. The class had become so fragmented that they couldn’t even pass the tapes on to each other. I think perhaps I’d been placing too much emphasis on results and the students had become very competitive with each other. It’s just my own opinion but I think that was probably the cause. So I really think I let the students down in that class. Professor Aoki’s words last week about starting with whatever we could have really stayed in my mind and I’ve been thinking that I need to do something about that class.

Everyone: (laughing)

Manami: I’ve started to think about ways I can improve the situation. For the moment I’m putting students into groups to interview Japanese people. I make suggestions like “You were talking about so-and-so. Why don’t you join the same group?” and so on. The students are talking to each other on the phone quite a lot now. I really think the teacher has a part to play in developing student relationships and I want to apologise to the students for not doing more about it last term. I’m not sure if I know the right way to go about it though. If anyone has any ideas I’d like to hear them.

Histories and co-texts

The stories in the previous section may be read in their own terms, but they assume deeper meanings when the tellers’ personal history and discourses co-existing in their minds are integrated into the interpretation. In this section I shall elaborate on my interpretation of those stories using the method of explanatory narrative research (Polkinghorne, 1988) based on the story tellers’ written reflections and interviews with them. My interpretation was confirmed by the story tellers.

Xiaobo

Xiaobo says that she only had Hokuto’s story in mind when she told the first half of her story. Her reasoning that a teacher’s conscious effort to appear weak may make it easy to get close to the students may have been based on her own experience, but she never thought of talking about her class in China at this point. My question, however, stimulated her memory about the class. Although Xiaobo stated her conclusion first that it’s impossible for a teacher to enter a family relationship with the students, she says she actually remembered about the episode first and arrived at the conclusion later in her mind. This conclusion is somewhat contradictory to Xiaobo’s reasoning in the first half of
her story. The contradiction seems to reflect an ambivalent feeling Xiaobo experienced when she taught the class in the story.

Xiaobo was in charge of the class of freshmen in the first year of her teaching career. She liked the students and wanted to get close to them. As a teacher in charge she also felt a responsibility to get to know the students. However, Xiaobo had never been taught about JSL pedagogy and she had to rely solely on her own language learning experience. She believed that she must behave in a “teacherly” way in class. But behaving in this way meant being Spartan to her. Xiaobo and her students developed a dual relationship. A strict teacher and biddable students in class and an older sister and her siblings elsewhere. Exploring why this was possible in the interview Xiaobo told me of an episode at the entrance ceremony when she was unable to find the class she was supposed to take to their classroom. The students waited for the teacher they had never met and the teacher who finally showed up was almost as young as they were. The students had expected a university teacher to be a teacherly teacher and they became suspicious about Xiaobo’s capacity. Her teaching, however, was completely different from the first impression she made. This gap, Xiaobo suspects, contributed to the development of the dual relationship. Xiaobo thought that the students and herself constituted an in-group. She was happy when her students told her that they considered her as an older sister.

Xiaobo taught by lecturing on grammar. Sometimes she wondered why students did not make the expected progress when they spent so much time studying, but she was not able to pinpoint the cause of the problem. She noticed that the students were trying hard not to fall asleep in her class and realised that her teaching was not interesting, but she never had a chance to reflect on the realization nor did she have anyone to give her advice. She carried on with her teaching style.

Xiaobo came to Japan for graduate work in 1998 and encountered theories of second language education for the first time. She started thinking about learners. A few weeks before we read Hokuto’s story we read Kiku’s story and discussed discipline problems. In her reflection on the topic, Xiaobo wrote:

When I taught in China I scolded my students when they chatted and didn’t listen to me. I felt my talk was wasted. When I scolded the students, of course they would become quiet and listen to me. I now teach [Chinese at a university] in Japan and don’t scold the students who don’t listen to me.
But I don’t necessarily feel very good about it. Am I incapable as a teacher because I cannot control the class? Is it OK not to control?

I met a Japanese student I teach on a train coming home today. We talked about our Chinese lessons among other things. She said “I like your class best. It’s most relaxing.” I can be a bit assured if that’s true.

I’ve recently been thinking whether a well controlled class is really a good one. Students must have a reason when they don’t listen to me. I may be saying something unnecessary. If the class is orderly and students listen to me, it’s questionable whether that really helps the students.

In my present class the students talk and laugh loudly while I talk. When I give them a task, they are noisy but work on it fairly seriously. They give presentations seriously too. Of course other students would be noisy, but this kind of situation may be the most comfortable for students. Whether that helps language acquisition is another matter though.

Xiaobo’s realization that it is impossible for a teacher to be fully accepted as a friend by students seems to parallel the process of her coming to doubt her beliefs about the teacher’s role. Xiaobo says that these changes had been happening before she told the story, but that listening to other students’ talks and telling stories herself in the course made the unconscious conscious.

On the weekend following the class meeting reported here Xiaobo happened to see three of her ex-students, who were studying in Japan. Their conversation naturally led to Xiaobo’s class in China. Xiaobo writes about this conversation in her reflection on Hokuto’s story.

I told them that I’d never teach now in the way I taught them then. They were surprised and said that they’d learned best in my class. I don’t think they tried to console me, but I wonder if it was their real feeling. They probably didn’t think my classes were good when they were students. I still remember their faces tired with grammar studies. I never think I gave good lessons. But they don’t criticize me when they’ve graduated. I remember Hokuto’s comment that a classroom is only one scene of many in students’ lives. The students have graduated and chosen their own career path. Perhaps their evaluation of me that I was a strict but good teacher who was like an older sister connects us now and enables us to talk about our past casually. Still I think I should have been able to leave a better scene for them with better teaching skills.
In a class prior to the one reported here, when we discussed discipline problems, Manami was rather sceptical about whether teachers could do anything to alleviate problems. I commented that we should start with whatever we could to improve the situation rather than groaning about it and doing nothing. Manami remarked rather emotionally that she had never been taught about classroom management in her initial teacher training and asked me, perhaps half accusingly, where she could possibly learn about it. I was amazed with Manami’s story quoted in the previous section because her attitude seemed to have changed from pessimism to realistic optimism within a week. Manami says, however, that the change had been taking place for a while and that my suggestion to start with whatever we could was only a final push towards taking action after years of frustration with what was happening in her classroom.

Manami attended two initial teacher training programmes in the late 1980’s. She was taught about alternatives to the structural syllabus and about teaching methodologies with situational and communicative orientations. She was told that teachers should maximize learner talking time by keeping their own talking time minimum. She was quite happy with those programmes and taught for over ten years in several different contexts. She particularly liked a university language training programme for technology students where she had colleagues who shared her beliefs and freedom to do whatever she felt was helpful in her class. When she started teaching a pre-college language programme at a language school, however, she had to face a challenge. The programme was exam-oriented and the curriculum was extremely packed. The students expected spoon feeding explanations from teachers and complained about Manami’s approach to teaching reading. She was shocked to learn that her teaching style was not appreciated in all contexts. She tried in vain to find a solution which would allow her to cover the course content in the allocated time without explaining and, at the same time, enable her students to achieve high scores in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. With the time and energy available to her she had to resort to explanations, but she never liked it.

Manami kept teaching part-time at both the university and the language school. She started thinking about doing graduate work when her trusted colleague went to a graduate school and told her that discussions with fellow students offered a lot of insights into teaching. Manami had become sceptical about the effectiveness of her teaching. She taught socio-linguistic aspects of communication and received positive feedback from students, but she came to realize that she did not know whether the students were really able to use those
expressions she taught appropriately outside the classroom. She wanted to study learners in society.

After a while Manami’s family relocated to Osaka and she had to quit all the jobs she previously had. She knew that it would be difficult to get another university job. So she decided to study socio-linguistics at a graduate school as she taught part-time at the language school she referred to in her story.

Considering what Manami wanted to do, the socio-linguist that Manami originally approached and myself made an arrangement that we would jointly supervise her. For the first six months, however, she was not very happy. Manami writes in her final feedback on the course as follows:

I have always been a practicing teacher and the world of research was completely new to me. It was difficult to find pleasure in it. Perhaps it was because I could only speak from my experiences but experiences are not made much of in it.

At the same time, though, she worked as a teaching assistant for a methodology course leading to a teaching practicum and refreshed her memory of how she taught the university language programme and how good it felt. She also became aware of some aspects of second language learning which she had not thought of before by talking with other students about their research and by reading. She particularly refers to Ohta (2001) as triggering her realisation that a learner-centred approach meant much more than reducing teacher talking time and that interaction among learners played an important role in learning.

In the second semester of her first year at graduate school Manami took the teachers’ conversation course. My comment that we should start with whatever we could surprised her. Asked why in one of the interviews, Manami said she had probably expected I would say something like “Language schools are like that. They are hopeless, aren’t they?” Up until that point she had felt that my courses and her teaching practice belonged to separate realms. My comment made her realize that those two realms could be connected by her own practice.

So she started trying quite a lot of alternatives in her class, one of which she reported in our conversation. Those alternatives were largely successful and both Manami and her students enjoyed them. The rest of Manami’s final feedback reads:
It was a surprise for me to be allowed to tell stories of my experience in this course. And my reflection assumed multiple perspectives and deepened by talking with other students. I wouldn’t have been able to do that on my own. It also helped that the teacher sometimes reoriented our discussion. It prevented the development of our discussion from being blocked or becoming unconstructive. It was the class most looked forward to in this semester.

**Hokuto’s comment on our conversation**

Hokuto is more or less an analytical person. He says he could not have helped analysing his experience before he wrote the story. He withheld his analysis as best he could in writing the story, though, because it was supposed to be a narrative. The family metaphor was the least expected theme for him and he thinks that withholding his analysis made the space for the rest of the group to come up with it. Coming to this awareness was an important learning experience for him. He feels that he would have explained the background of the story if he had been present, which probably would have determined the flow of the conversation to some extent. Then he may not have come to realize the value of withholding analysis. So he feels he was lucky not to be able to attend the class.

**By way of conclusion: the stories continue**

Stories are like the tip of an iceberg which tells of a much larger invisible existence. Xiaobo’s and Manami’s stories told in our conversation are only partial autobiographies. However, each story was connected in the teller’s mind with her history of professional development and events concurrently unfolding outside our classroom. Both Xiaobo and Manami had a reason to tell those stories at that particular point in their career and they used the act of telling for their own purposes. For Xiaobo telling her story led to a new understanding of her past experience and consolidated her changing belief about the teacher’s role. For Manami it was a celebration of her renewed hope and success in her new practice.

It has been four months since the course finished. Xiaobo has started narrative inquiry based fieldwork for her doctoral thesis. Manami is doing ethnography to find out how a social network helps or hinders second language acquisition and development of the second language user’s identity in the host community. Hokuto has started his graduate work and professional career as a teacher. Their new experience will yield more stories which will demand rewriting of their history of professional development. But rewriting will not be my job. They should be able to author their own history, choosing
from innumerable pieces of experience those relevant to the storyline of their choice. If they decide to share it with me, I will take it as a privilege. I will be more than happy if telling me about their history helps them establish their professional identity. But I do not need to know everything.

In this paper I was not able to show how stories resonate with each other while reflecting each teller’s unique concerns. There were analytical thinkers as well as story tellers in the group and I was not able to describe how the course affected the analytical thinkers. All of us were concerned about the unsolved problem of uneven turn distribution. I suspect it was mostly due to the difficulty of self-disclosure which some students say they experienced in their feedback to me. Whether they benefitted from simply being there, listening to others and making whatever contribution they felt was safe to make would be worth exploring, although reporting my findings in a paper may not be ethically appropriate. I learned a lot from reading the transcript. Manami, who was absent from one of the classes in which her story was discussed, says listening to a recording enables her to concentrate on listening because she does not have to think about what to say next while listening. Perhaps reading a transcript or listening to a recording can be used as a follow-up task to conversations. I am going to run the same course again this coming autumn. But the course will not be the same as the previous one. My story continues too.

References


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