

# Brian's theorised in-classroom space: A story to live by (ブライアンの教授及び学習理論)

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## Introduction

My aim here is to present the results of a classroom observation I carried out in late October 2002. The analysis covers both the classroom observation and the pre- and post observation interviews I conducted with Brian, a 35 year-old American EFL instructor who holds degrees in English literature (BA) and English education (MA) and has spent his language teaching career of nine years at universities in Tokyo and the surrounding area.

The focus here is on teacher identity, or more specifically, how teacher theories can be an important factor in the construction of teacher identity. The structure of this paper centres on Brian's *story to live by*, a term borrowed from Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly's (1999; 2000) work on narrative inquiry. Like the stories of teachers' educational practice they outline in their work, I see Brian's place on the *professional knowledge landscape* (another metaphor of Clandinin and Connelly's) as clearly shaping his identity as a teacher: I believe that Brian's story reflects the assertion by Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 94) that, "...teachers' working lives are shaped by stories and [...] these stories to live by compose teacher identity."

I will show that Brian's teaching identity is one that he constructs around a narrative of teaching and learning theories. I also point to certain tensions of the sort that Schon (1983, in Connelly and Clandinin, 1999) claims to drive professional practice. Despite the fact that Brian has constructed a very coherent teacher's story to live by and confidently uses it to both explain and drive his in-classroom practice, I will later demonstrate the subtle tensions existing beneath the surface of his com-

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posed account. I show these tensions through both discourse analysis and through a comparison of his words and actions. I have come to believe that these tensions may exist because the source of Brian's *personal practical knowledge* (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999) appears to rely so exclusively on, and thus is perhaps limited by, his classroom experiences. I believe this knowledge of Brian's to be multi-faceted, including cultural, professional and pedagogical understandings, but I suggest that the limited source of its construction causes a tension below the surface of the confident and coherent story he tells to rationalise his pedagogy.

In discussing narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 62) say, "it is impossible (or if not impossible then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring moralizing self." When I asked Brian if he would allow me to interview him and observe one of his classes, I had already decided to include myself more centrally in the research project. I wanted both to tell Brian's story and to expose the 'myth of objectivity' (Medawar, 1963, quoted in Walford 1991) regarding my part in its construction. To facilitate this, I use an autobiographical voice and describe events in chronological order in my analysis. This is in keeping with Clandinin and Connelly's (1999; 2000) understanding of what narrative inquiry should be and, as such, is designed to reduce opacity.

I now turn to each of the major steps in the data-collection stages of this study - the pre-class observation interview, the classroom observation, and a follow-up telephone interview. Although I leave my cumulative analysis of the study to the section following these, what I choose to mention and how I choose to do so in these mainly descriptive sections are also part of my interpretive analysis.

### The pre-class observation interview: Brian's theories

I begin this section by briefly summarising from a transcript of my pre-classroom observation interview with Brian, an interview in which he described his Travel USA course and his plans for the class I was to observe. Before doing so I wish to acknowledge that my summary is inevitably marked by my own (re)construction of the interview, as the interview also was inevitably marked by my transcription

methods (see Ochs, 1979; Bucholtz, 2000; Reissman 2002).<sup>1</sup>

The class is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year English communication course with around fifteen USA majors enrolled. Brian meets them once a week for 90 minutes over two semesters for a total of approximately 26 weeks. He centres the course around an authentic travel text, *Let's Go USA!*

In the first ten meetings, Brian used the text to focus on the different geographical areas that the text distinguishes (e.g. the South-West, Florida, New York). He describes what they did during these meetings as mainly small group-work tasks in which the students responded to questions he had prepared for each of the areas. These questions came from Brian's pre-class readings of the text, and involved them in searching the text for answers. Students were given class time and the summer break to prepare for a whole-class presentation which was supposed to last about five minutes and be "a primer for the final project" - a 'personal travel planner.' However, this final project has now been abandoned because the students spent extra time giving their presentations which Brian decided to allow them since they were "doing good work." This resulted in an overrun of two weeks and Brian has decided on a final poster-project that requires less time.

In the class I am scheduled to observe, Brian has a rough idea of what he wants the students to do. They are to individually choose two places they want to visit in New York City before describing these places to a partner who should be able to name them by finding them in *Let's Go USA!* He is hazy about the details of how it will be done but plans to think about it before the class, and, as we talk, comes up with the idea of making it into a game and possibly adding some prize as an incentive.

Brian asked for the interview to be conducted in his favourite Indian restaurant despite my attempts to encourage him to meet in a more private space. We were interrupted on several occasions and the resulting interview was not perhaps as fluent as it might have been. However, I was later to understand Brian's request as an

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<sup>1</sup>All steps of the research process including the selection of data for analysis are interpretive acts shaped by researchers' theoretical interests

example of his rejection of formality, something he consistently demonstrated in his in-classroom space and on this *out-of-classroom place*<sup>2</sup> in his professional knowledge landscape.

Brian uses a range of personal theories to explain his professional landscape. He foregrounds his theory of language learning that he believes mirrors learning more generally:<sup>3</sup>

my idea is that language is making .. is *ordering* the chaos .. making order of the *chaos* (lines 20-21).

and it's chaotic .. and that's that's how I think of .. life and that's how I think of my *classroom* (29-30)

but there's too much information in life .. I mean we've gotta .. we've gotta be be dis- discerning discriminating hah hah we have to .. I mean when you go choose a bottle of water in America there's fifty kinds (294-296)

He uses this theory to rationalise his approach to the reading tasks he sets students, asking them to delve into their weighty texts to find answers to complex questions. He also decides that this chaos can be tamed by preparation and by breaking tasks down into manageable chunks:

the key to .. ordering this *chaos* .. making *sense* of the chaos .. making order yeah ah .. *is* giving them time to prepare (84-85)

the reason I use these books is that they are broken down so that people can *handle* them (124-125)

Brian's belief in the learning process being chaotic is consistent with the information he supplies about his lesson-planning procedures. After giving me a rough outline of the lesson I am going to observe, I probe for more detail:

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<sup>2</sup>Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) metaphor to discuss teachers' professional identities outside the classroom. In the case of this interview, although Brian and I are far from our respective schools eating at a restaurant on a weekend evening, we are very much in our teacher identities, showing the suitability of the metaphor.

<sup>3</sup> The following transcription conventions are used: [...] indicates a short pause; [italics] indicate

it's a new thing I'm making it up right now .. (66)

yeah if you're looking for a pinpoint you know what is the purpose of the class .. I guess I'm a bit more vague about that .. there's ambiguity in .. in hah hah my planning if that makes sense (308-310)

Brian theorises about the best language teaching methods for his students. He doesn't believe in a one-size-fits-all approach and thus feels uncomfortable focusing on grammar-based instruction, although it appears he sometimes does so nevertheless:

I've *never* found it all that satisfying .. to say ok today we're gonna work on modals .. and then if they *don't* do it you feel like you've failed *somehow* .. um .. when in fact they've been working on other *things* .. and that's how you .. you should approach that is that today they might not catch that but they're gonna get it in some *other* way .. I did that last week .. with a different lesson I said ok I want you to use that definitely positively surely um .. you know probably most likely .. and they used them here and there but it didn't come about as naturally as if .. ah like they would find it in their reading here .. when it comes from *them* (314-315)

He navigates his uneasiness with such types of practice by stressing soft skills in his classes, although, as the above example shows, he reveals some tension in his choice. He links this preference for a soft skills focus explicitly to his beliefs about what Japanese university students want:

I just like to see them somewhat ami- *animated* .. hah hah .. when they're doing the you know I'm gonna look for this I'm gonna do that ok they say I got it now I gotta *create* that somehow I gotta go in there and be enthusiastic too (402-404)

my goal is that they are experiencing English without being bored and it's something *useful* (314-315)

There is some suggestion in Brian's words that his own need not to be bored is as important as his students', and this was an idea that I took with me to the class-  


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stress; [bu-] a dashes shows a sharp cut-off of speech; [hah hah] represents laughter.

room observation. Having had numerous previous conversations with Brian in which we had shared information concerning our in-classroom experiences, I believed that he used considerable energy to provoke this 'animation' from students. I was also aware of his desire to make them forget they were learning English (and perhaps him teaching it), something Brian also mentions during the interview when he referred to his style of teaching as content-based:

it's just the whole content *idea* .. you're teaching .. *something* else .. or you're teaching English .. I make them .. I *hopefully* I make them forget they are learning English .. and sometimes I forget too (94-96)

I was not surprised therefore when I encountered little or no overt language teaching in his *in-classroom space*. In the next section I describe the lesson I observed.

## The classroom observation (CO)

I begin this section with a brief discussion on classroom observation (CO), using ideas from Allwright (1988; 1999; 2000) to preface my description of the events in Brian's classroom.

Having been a participant in CO on approximately a dozen occasions as both observer and instructor being observed, my memory is that they always produced differing opinions about what had actually happened. What's more, observed teacher behaviour was often used to explain student behaviour or vice versa with the underlying premise seeming to be that by somehow improving the teaching we could improve the learning (or at least the learning *opportunities* for the students). However, as Allwright (1988) has outlined, covert learning processes cannot be detected by CO alone. Moreover, even if we use introspective methods in a search to find connections between the teaching and learning, we are unlikely to be able to account for the multiple perspectives happening at any one time in the classroom - as Allwright (2000) asserts in a later work, learning is essentially a private matter.<sup>4</sup> Such understandings of the teaching/learning processes have been reflected in recent years by a move from trying to make connections between teaching and learning towards a focus on what teachers know and can tell us about being lan-

guage teachers (Allwright, 1999). In the pre-CO interview and through his in-classroom practice, Brian told me quite a lot about what it means for him to be a language teacher in Japan. I explore both of these areas below.

I begin by describing the approximately 80-minute lesson that I observed and video-recorded. This is followed with a discussion of my thoughts about the classroom events I observed at the time of observation, referring to both my fieldnotes and my research diary notes.

Brian begins the class by acknowledging my presence to the students, reminding them of why I am here and asking me to introduce myself to them. He then explains briefly that they are going to finish the last student presentation before moving on to a new task.

He invites the presenters to the front of the room and leads the class in giving them a round of applause before they begin. The next 25 minutes are taken up by the presentation given by two students almost entirely in English. They present their proposed travel plan to San Diego using a variety of maps and pictures they have prepared on a flip chart. The other twelve students in the class appear to listen attentively and enjoy the presentation. There is laughter from both sides at 'mistakes' made by the presenters who seem comfortable enough to ad-lib occasionally from what is obviously a thoroughly prepared presentation. Brian sits towards the back of the room and occasionally asks the presenters questions.

After the presentation, Brian begins the planned activity we had talked about in the interview. He takes about 10 minutes to explain the 'rules' to the class both verbally and on the board. The students are to find two places in New York City in their copy of *Let's Go USA!* and write hints for a partner who will later try to guess their choices by asking questions. Depending on the type of question (e.g. open or closed), the 'finder' will accumulate points every

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<sup>4</sup>Allwright (2000) cites a study by Slimani (1987) in which a group of Algerian university separately listed 114 items when asked what they had learned from their lessons, with very little overlap among these items.

time she has to ask a question. Between questions, the prepared hints will be given. The aim of the game is to 'find' the place accruing as few points as possible.

In pairs, students spend about 30 minutes preparing for the task during which time Brian circulates quietly, helping them individually. He talks to every student at least once and to many on several occasions. He occasionally uses a query by an individual student to address the whole class in a loud voice, apparently answering particular questions he believes everyone will benefit from.

Brian spends a few minutes mixing the pairs and reviewing the instructions. The students spend the remaining ten or so minutes on the task. Most, if not all pairs are able to complete only one turn (i.e. only one student gets to play the role of finder). Throughout this period, Brian continues to mingle and converse with both the students and myself about the task. The class ends with the students talking - some continuing the task, others apparently chatting about non-related matters in their L1 - and Brian calling out reminders for the next class. As students are preparing to leave he continues to wander among them saying goodbye, commenting on things they had been saying during the task and introducing some of them to me. We all leave quickly to catch the bus to the station. The last period of the teaching day is over.

The fieldnotes I made during the observation are noticeably critical when they are not simply being descriptive. I noted that the instructions Brian gave for the main task were confusing: They were "too long" and included "too many tangents." I observed that Brian "talks too much" and "tied himself in knots" and that I got the feeling that the students were "helping him as much as themselves." I also noted that Brian had forgotten about the homework he had given them in preparation for the task, and that he didn't allow enough thinking time for the students. Overall, I felt he created an air of chaos both during the explanation of the task and its execution. I also pinpointed other areas where I felt Brian either made things more complicated than they needed to be or forgot to include things that I deemed to be important (e.g. clearly stated timings for tasks). The other ideas that emerge from my fieldnotes are more positive and concern Brian's interaction with his students.



Although I critically questioned whether Brian places himself centre of attention in his in-classroom space and sometimes 'performs' to achieve his aims, I noted that generally he created a vibrant and enthusiastic atmosphere.

These two threads of mine - one negative and fore-grounded, the other positive and back-grounded - were interpreted by me at the time as being connected with Brian's identity as a teacher, or in Connelly and Clandinin's term's, his story to live by. I connected all the 'negatives' with the formal teacher roles that Brian was obliged to carry out (e.g. the giving of instructions and explanations, the overall class management tasks) and the 'positives' with the theories about teaching and learning in a Japanese university EFL classroom that Brian had espoused during our pre-classroom observation interview (e.g. good atmosphere is important, keep students animated, learning is chaotic). As my question and comments in the field-notes show, I had time to consider these issues during the observation. I wrote in note form, "Do teachers build theories to fit their own way of behaving in the classroom? There is unpredictability in Brian's classroom as he says, but he is largely the cause of it here."

It is clear that my role as observer and as writer of this text is a powerful one, and Allwright's (1998; 1989; 2000) warnings about the limitations of CO and of the multiple perspectives happening in a given classroom should be considered again at this point. Brian clearly had a different perspective on events as the notes from my research diary make clear. He claimed to be extremely pleased with the lesson. He acknowledged some of the 'problems' I saw (e.g. confusing instructions) but downplayed their significance alongside the overall success of the lesson.

During the period immediately after the CO and before the follow-up interview, I transcribed the period of the lesson where Brian gave the instructions for the main task. Although I am able to point to areas of the transcript that support my earlier assertions, I came to believe that my focus on this transcript was largely irrelevant; I was more interested in Brian's interpretation of events. Based on our previous interview, I fully expected him to theorise about what had happened in the class I had observed. I also had my own theory about Brian from the interview and observation that I wished to test. I was convinced that because Brian's theories seemed

to stem on the whole from his in-class experiences, they would therefore presumably be used to explain and justify subsequent classroom events in his lessons, even events that Brian largely had control over. One such event was the giving of instructions that both Brian and I had agreed were confusing in a discussion immediately after the observation. If my theory was correct, Brian would explain what had happened with reference to the theories of learning he had already outlined to me. In other words, I hypothesised that there was a circularity to the process of Brian's pedagogic practice. I illustrate this in Figure 1:

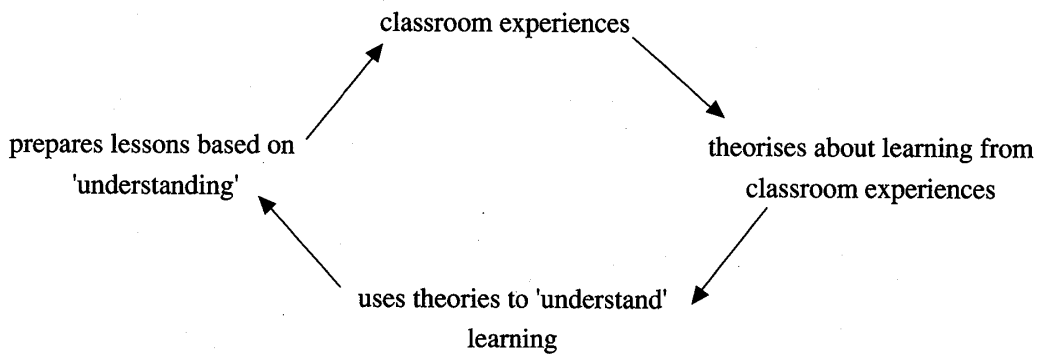


Figure 1: Brian's circular pedagogic practice?

## The follow-up interview

The follow-up interview was completed by telephone and the conversation taped and transcribed. As I expected, Brian soon begins to connect his actions to the theories of learning he had proposed earlier:

they went with my convoluted directions .. they really tried to understand when I was making it up as I went along .. um .. which I don't think is a bad thing all the time because sometimes your energy carries you past your ... execution .... your efficiency .. your .... if you have everything together and you think you know everything then sometimes it comes across as I'm the teacher and let me show you this and follow my directions .. in this case I told them hey it's my first time .. let's try this out [...] but there was confusion .. but was there learning .. (15-24)

In a more obvious example, Brian discursively orchestrates what was ostensibly a negative in-classroom experience for him - the giving of directions - into a positive

learning experience for his students. He even manages to put a positive pedagogic spin on it:

.. and the bad points yeah .. there were too many directions .. but in a way .. I can look at it in another way .. I mean if they were a class that just didn't care .. they just sort of said ok and went on with it .. but instead they tried to clarify it for themselves .. so I mean that was unintentional but .. it's not a bad way to teach (39-42)

Brian again prioritises engagement as the principal objective. I inquire whether he plans to finish the task in the following lesson so that the students who didn't have a chance to present their clues to partners and have them guess their chosen locations could do so. He says:

I don't think it's important to finish I think it's important to try (49).

I see this idea as being connected to his theories about what is best for Japanese university students. It is one example of the overarching importance Brian places on students not being bored. Another example of this type of prioritising is shown in his assertion of the importance of energy levels in the class:

.. I keep talking about the energy because it's al- .. almost more important than what is actually accomplished in the reading (50-52)

In a final example, Brian explicitly compares learning with active involvement in the classroom:

I'm not sure how much learning went on in the class .. except that they were actively .. reading and speaking .. and listening to each other (54-56)

This quote is also a good place to finish this section, as I believe it betrays the underlying tension Brian feels about his in-classroom practice. This tension exists in opposition to the confident posturing he displays in his theorising about teaching and learning, but, as I mentioned in the introduction, it is something that helps

drive his professional practice. I turn to examples of this tension in the following section.

## Further analysis

I have already argued that there is a circularity to the process of Brian's theorising about good pedagogic practice in his in-classroom space. I have also made several references to an underlying tension in Brian's accounts of that practice. This is the same tension that surfaced during the class observation, a tension that led me to make the comment that I felt Brian was caught between two identities in the classroom. I have also noted that Brian gave a coherent and consistent account of his theories about teaching and learning, and I would like to claim that the tension exists both because Brian has constructed such a powerful story to live by on his professional knowledge landscape, and because the theories underpinning this story to live by largely emanate from his in-classroom experiences. Although Brian's story allows him to 'make it up as he goes along' (it is robust enough to turn everything into a learning experience, even experiences that might make less confident instructors question their practices), at times he seems to suggest that perhaps his story to live by might be better served by being informed from wider sources.

Brian's story to live by shows none of the emotions of guilt, anxiety and frustration that Hargreaves (1994, in Gertzman, 2000, p. 110) claims teachers talk about when discussing their practice. This is not surprising though, as Brian's theories rest on his confidence about 'knowing' what works best with Japanese university EFL students. My observation made it clear that Brian does have success with his students on a number of levels, but what is not clear is how much learning is going on despite his confident assertions on this topic. Again, it must be remembered that there is some evidence that Brian's beliefs about what is best for Japanese students parallel what those students like best, once again pointing to where the theories emerged from. Gertzman (2000, p. 88-89) cautions:

The ways [teachers] devise for coping with the myriad details of student-teacher interaction and instructional matters come to be a part of their personal-professional knowledge and as a basis for future practice. Yet some

researchers suggest that there can be a counterproductive circularity to this process. As teachers modify their classroom practice in response to student behaviour, for example, students likewise make changes to adjust to the new teaching practices. Thus teacher behaviour influences student behaviour, which in turn influences teacher behaviour, which influences students' academic performance. This reactive system may in fact be detrimental to student learning.

I found some specific examples of tension in Brian's words and actions. For example, his claim that the key to ordering chaos (his overarching learning theory) lies in giving students time to prepare is at odds with his decision not to continue the half-finished task in the next lesson after the students had spent so much homework and in-class time preparing for it. But perhaps the most telling tension exists in the few occasions when Brian hints that his practice or theories are not as rock-solid as he otherwise maintains. Take the word 'bad' in the following two examples, remembering that word choices often suggest their antonyms:

the students have asked me things you know .. what the hell's b.y.o.b. .. ok it's not a bad thing to be teachin' hah hah ..(138-139)

[about instructions] instead they tried to clarify it for themselves .. so I mean that was unintentional but .. it's not a bad way to teach (post-interv. 41-42)

I believe the following quote shows this tension most clearly. Brian refers to the possible lack of awareness on the part of his students about their in-classroom practice.

I would say .. my students might be lacking in awareness of what they're doing .. and an- an- that might make me rethink what I'm how I'm teaching in the future [...] if you have them do a *real* life task my students are gonna do it as well or better .. I just have a- I- I don't have a I have no proof for that (210-214)

Referring back to what I earlier claimed was circularity in Brian's pedagogic practice, I suggest that Brian might do well to embark on some research of his in-classroom space; research that might include ways of comparing his theories with others in the educational literature.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

I chose to focus here on the subtle tensions I saw beneath Brian's story to live by. Although I showed that these tensions were apparent in the justifications he uses for teaching practices that 'don't quite work,' I believe this might be a common strategy teachers use to explain their in-classroom spaces. Indeed, I have used this strategy and have heard others do so.

I also wish to emphasise here that Brian's class exemplified the type of interactive and engaged EFL university classroom that many teachers in Japan strive to create amid a landscape littered with stories of both student and teacher apathy.<sup>6</sup> Brian is a committed and hard-working teacher who shows care and consideration for his students. I suggest that the tensions inherent in his story to live by might serve as a useful starting point for both him and I to understand our teaching practices better. They might also point the way towards further areas to explore in our continuing professional development.

Finally, a word on power: The observer and interviewer roles that have allowed me to construct my version of events here are powerful ones, and my intention throughout this process has been to leave the final words to Brian. I sent this paper to him for comments and offered him the chance to incorporate his reactions into a co-authored publication. He accepted this invitation at first, but in the end was too busy with other projects to do so. I will however keep my promise:

The reading of your paper was good fun with many truisms that made me laugh aloud. I do have a kind of rebuttal in mind but not as much as I had hoped. I mean it was what it was; a work in progress at its very earliest stages. I do think I should have been given more credit for trying something new. I know that as I teach something time after time that it becomes more solid though not necessarily more useful for the students. I mean the real emphasis should have been on the project you observed rather than the one-off work in progress lesson. Still, I knew the deal and I find myself as a rich source for any would be CO. Also, it needs to be noted that you put restrictions on me as to what you wanted, needed to observe. Something about reading

I believe it was....

Still, if I disagree at times with your observations, I remind myself that it does not matter what I do - it only matters how I am perceived. I would also add that students are the real audience and that what they take away from your classroom is more important than what is finished during the 90 minutes.

(email from Brian, 19.10.03)

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<sup>5</sup>Action Research (AR) is one popular type of research for teachers (e.g. Nunan, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>Brian McVeigh's (2002) book, *Japanese higher education as myth*, summarises many of the prevailing ideas in a chapter devoted to English language education.

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