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Introduction

In addition to the usual concern with appropriate methodology that teachers are confronted with on a daily basis, the naturally varying atmosphere of all classrooms can be a source of perplexity to many. Teachers typically encounter even quite divergent reactions to the same or similar course from similar student bodies. Given that every human interaction is unique, this is hardly surprising. But this need not become an excuse to overlook what is a very central aspect of the teaching profession, namely the exploration of roles in the classroom. The centrality comes from the fact that the way we teach is necessarily influenced by the assumptions we bring to the classroom regarding our roles as educators. Recognizing that much of our classroom practice is semi-automatic leads to the possibility of deliberately investigating our work for the purpose of trying to make a positive change. Teachers who do so, particularly with the willing support of colleagues, can gain fulfilling insights into their situations as well as unforeseen solutions to pressing, even insidious, sources of confusion or discord. However, formal techniques that exist to help teachers express their deeper, less easily articulated feelings about their classroom interactions are not generally well known. This paper will report on two such tools of reflection through which teachers can find a voice, through colleague-supported investigation. As one example, a situation that I encountered, which was brought into perspective and articulated by directed investigation supported by a supportive teacher friend, will be recounted. The insight helped to define a fresh way of looking at classroom interaction. A subsequent action research

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investigation then led to smoother classroom interaction.

It will be suggested that making use of such techniques of colleague-supported investigation as part of teachers' professional discourse can greatly help teachers to understand and re-evaluate their aims and goals for teaching, especially at a time when curricular change may be taking place.

The particular benefit to language teachers

Teachers of language, in particular, can be well rewarded by finding time to ponder, reflect and actively analyze what is happening in front of them. The creative teaching of language, in particular, goes far beyond just imparting knowledge. Issues of, for example, the control of who gets to speak when and how, and why, may be imperceptible on a moment to moment basis. However, mini instances of discord or frustration can accumulate to the point where a teacher can usefully set him or herself the task of investigating what has gone awry or could have been done differently. Naturally, probing into classroom proceedings requires a considerable commitment of time and energy to relive specific episodes of teaching. However, the rewards themselves can be considerable.

Different assumptions about learning and teaching styles and the very purpose of learning English, particularly on the part of foreign teachers with their students, can bedevil smooth classroom interaction (e.g. Pennycook, 1994) When the values of teachers and students are incompatible, the classroom methodology in use may become unsuitable. For example, even students in Japan who eagerly pay to study English from non-Japanese EFL teachers can encounter frustration with the unexpected complexity of their teachers' views regarding English. One study (Duff and Uchida, 1997) reported on the wide discrepancy of four language school teachers, two Japanese and two foreign, teaching similar classes. While one of the foreign teachers was sanguine about the students' expectation that his class be entertaining rather than educational, another was very concerned to focus heavily on the straight educational, but only succeeded in putting further distance between herself and the students. Upon careful reflection, this teacher could see what suddenly appeared as obvious but which had stubbornly stayed out of her consciousness previously.

In a setting such as a required class in a university, a further level of complexity arises with students possibly less willing to accept the teaching values of the English teacher.

Faced with having to study English, the total set of varying student expectations of the English teacher within the same class will be larger and more unpredictable, and consequently it is even harder to achieve an equitable balance. Even disregarding the common factor of the need of credit to pass the course, students may resent being called on to speak, for example. This common symptom may in turn mask cultural assumptions of the need to learn English, or not, which teachers need to be aware of in order to negotiate their role in the classroom. More commonly though, the swirl of such expectations washing imperceptibly over teachers causes them to unconsciously adjust their stance and may result in a situation where they gradually realize they are professionally dissatisfied but are perplexed about how to advance to a better situation. Unhappy teachers are clearly not best for students and it is in this situation that turning to a colleague to engage in some form of directed professional discourse can significantly improve the situation, given a teacher's willingness to honestly confront a potentially painful or troublesome situation.

Enlightenment through Discourse

Diary writing about teaching is a very useful discourse the benefits of which are well documented (Bailey 1990) The physical process of writing works well as a tool of reflection because it leads the writer-teacher to re-engage in a social process that created the experience in the first place. In a very real sense, private reflection about the language classroom becomes more than a just a purely individual process and becomes a dialectical (Kemmis, 1989) process. If we wish to know why a given situation is causing a problem, teachers have to be aware that their thinking process is constructed by the social and cultural environment and conversely the social and cultural environment is shaped by the actions, thoughts and feelings in that same environment. A shift in perception can be a form of Action Research in itself, and such an example from the author will be shown later on in the paper. However, diary writing is a process that requires fairly strong discipline to maintain.

Having established that the general form of meta-thinking outlined above is useful in clarifying and modifying thought processes, it is possible to use any number of compelling forms of dialectic to explore a situation. Below, two such methods that this author has tried and found to be helpful are presented.

1) Cooperative Development

The benefit of this stylized interaction in the light of the previous discussion is to provide for a formal meta-thinking workshop, with pre-determined dates and venues, something for the teacher in question to plan for and look forward to. However, a strong commitment is needed to maintain the correct form of the interaction and once it lapses into general conversational mode, the benefit is lost since a simple discussion opens where the views or opinions of all 'pollute' the dialectical inquiry of only one teacher. Nevertheless, Cooperative Development offers an opportunity for a kind of professional discourse that allows teachers to move away from merely impressionistic or random chat about classes that may never go to the heart of subtle issues. Additionally, due to the complexity and the multiplicity of nuances of meaning (and their implications) in the interaction, recording the sessions for later review is highly rewarding. The recordings which I used to review my Cooperative Development sessions of greatest concern to me amounted to about two hours. As I replayed the interaction, nuances of meaning and allusion, largely forgotten, emerged. Taken in addition to the main insights derived from the face-to-face interaction, the recorded interaction served as the basis for reflection regarding my attitudes to teaching for more than one year.

One kind of framework for peer supported inquiry is the model known as Cooperative Development (Edge, 1992) As the name implies two or more colleagues are involved in helping one teacher to focus on some dialectical exploration, as described above. Some pre-study of the conventions of this form of interaction is required for the supporting members and they need to understand they will gain nothing directly from the interaction for themselves other than a sense of professional fulfillment in helping a colleague elucidate some issue. Edge describes meticulously the optimal conditions in Cooperative Development to permit teachers to start delving deeper into their consciousness. For example, all members must be aware of the moment at which the interaction begins. The role of the supporting member is to as judiciously and neutrally as possible reflect back the comments of the teacher in question so that he or she can rehear the observations independent of his or her own internal thought processes. In this way an external source of discipline is offered to the teacher to help him or her stay focused on one line of musing, instead of being overwhelmed by a cascade of emotions. Helping the teacher to stay focused on one parcel of commentary can help to unpack its contents in a respectful and supportive manner.

2) Repetory Grids

Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955) is a branch of psychology which studies the way in which the individual creates a framework of constructs, or a kind of template, for interpreting and understanding every aspect of life, including, of course, teaching. The normally unconscious constructs are used for predicting and responding to experiences in life, and as such constitute the value system of all individuals. An important aspect of this school of thought is that at any time the framework of constructs is able to adjust. Kelly wrote, "Constructs are used for predictions of things to come, and the world keeps on rolling on and revealing these predictions to be either correct or misleading. This fact provides the basis for the revision of constructs and, eventually, of whole construct systems" (p.14) From this position Kelly developed a method of getting his subjects to consciously examine their constructs as a means of creating "constructive alternativism", empowering people to consciously change their stance or attitude once their construct system has been revealed. This method is known as 'Repetory Grids' and has found increasing use in areas such as business management and, recently, education. Its has recently appeared in ESL teacher training seminars in Japan (Paul, 1998) and elsewhere and is becoming highly regarded as a tool of Action Research.

The process involves writing down many key words which represent the subject's feelings. Through a process of comparing and contrasting and finally pairing off key words which appear to form polar opposites of an aspect of the issue in question, the teacher's dialectical avenue of investigation is provided with a highly useful signposts that aid in funneling the introspection in helpful new directions. To the degree that the teacher wishes to continue, an increasingly complete array of cross sections of the teacher's construct system is developed in this way which, in a way similar to Cooperative Development, honestly and neutrally reflects truths back onto the teacher to explore or ignore as they wish. Unlike Cooperative Development which necessarily requires a conversation, Repetory Grids can be performed by oneself. However, in practice, very few teachers know about this system (although it is not hard to learn and practice) and so it is recommended here as a new skill that can be introduced among a group of teachers by someone, such as a head of department, who has studied the technique, and is able to answer any questions and help with interpretation. In my experience, it is a perfect complement to Cooperative Development for taking a

particular insight further. Such an example of this dual approach is presented next.

A case-report of teacher development based on the above two methods of inquiry

Working as a 'business English' teacher often implies teaching the various skills required for coping in international meetings. Teachers new to this form of teaching naturally have a strong preconception of fulfilling such specific skills and prepare themselves for it. However, it can sometimes be hard to determine exactly what is required in terms of curriculum planning, especially when there is a lack of overall central coordination. This uncertainty is the seed around which a lot of professional stress may crystallize. This was especially true in my case where I did not feel integral to the functioning of the host institution, a large multi-national company. As such there was no room for negotiation with the personnel department for a coordinated needs analysis on a company wide basis. There was a culture of no pedagogic expectation of what should be taught, and so it was left purely to my discretion. Being left alone to do as one sees fit may appear to be an ideal situation, but the drive towards professionalization and a desire for a greater sense of integration and belonging and not to remain on the edge of an organization is a normal human emotion. However, in this particular case, the reality was that whilst the importance of an English programme was paid lip service, there was only the fuzziest concern with actual implementation, or even ensuring workers attended classes. On entering the company I had accepted at face value a misplaced conception of 'corporate' learners as those with a high-powered agenda to master English as efficiently as possible in time for the next crucial business meeting. In reality, chronic non-attendance inevitably led to an increasing sense of frustrated expectations and isolation within the company, ultimately leading to feeling a sense of disempowerment, and even ineffectiveness as a teacher. In the situation where students were appearing only sporadically for classes, it was difficult to maintain the integrity of my own curriculum or to maintain the self-confidence of the teacher as the master of my own classroom.

Against this background the author decided to try the Cooperative Development model outlined above. With the help of a close confidante it was possible to zero in on the exact causes for dissatisfaction. As I was the lone teacher in the company, a British teacher friend agreed to engage in the investigation. We had had many conversations about my dissatisfaction working in the company previously, but this in no way prejudiced the

discourse which transpired in the session. Being allowed to talk and have increasingly rich insights neutrally reflected back by a trusted colleague helped to focus on a realization that there were far more positive aspects to the situation than were apparent my day-to-day search for meaning in the job. Supported by a classroom observation by the same colleague it was suggested that lessons were being conducted on a very ad hoc basis, depending on who was present in each particular class. The Cooperative Development session and classroom observation session were followed up at distance by a long exchange of e-mails. This is no way detracted from the quality of interaction and may have even enhanced it, as it is possible for the listener to slowly formulate as neutral a reflection of the speaker's words as possible, something which is not so easy to do in replying in real time.

The result of the Cooperative Development sessions, both oral and by e-mail, was an elucidation of a feeling of guilt on my part at having failed to encourage enough students to be motivated by 'business English', rather than the assumption that my teaching ability per se was at fault. It was suggested that the negative view of my own teaching performance had become entrenched, due to the disjointed attendance pattern, to the point of thinking that my skills as an English teacher were not sufficient. At this stage, my confidant suggested examining my construct system of what constitutes a good teacher, through the use of a repertory grid session.

Linguistic Valet : a liberating construct brought to light through repertory grids

The following day, a repertory grid investigation, a process that takes around an hour, was carried out to elucidate the issue of what I felt constituted a good teacher in this 'business English' teaching environment. As outlined in the discussion of the repertory grids procedure, various emotional and attitudinal cross sections regarding this issue were written down and compared and contrasted. The most resonant, and hitherto, invisible construct that emerged was my construct that I should act as a 'linguistic valet' to each day's unpredictable teaching situation. This metaphor immediately started helping me to amend my view of my role and effectiveness within the company. The 'valet' construct, which implies a servant but also someone to whom students can turn for special advice as and when they require, helped enormously to re-interpret my professional service. On the one hand, it became easier to accept teaching straight

English conversation in the absence of any needs-curriculum (a traditional 'sensei' figure to sporadic attendees) whilst on the other always being willing to slip into a supporting, or service, role whenever someone asked for specific help in preparing a research paper, for example. This perception provided confidence to assuredly continue working in the company because I had demystified my fear of not teaching specific English all the time.

In such a fresh light, it became much easier to view my teaching role as one of providing customized assistance to employees as and when they needed it in their professional endeavours, rather than as one of failing to interest all students in learning how to make an international presentation, for example. When I tried un-apologetically teaching a conversation book, and not worrying about being judged professionally negligent because of it (this actually constituted a mini action-research project) I became far more sanguine about my role in the company, and my lessons were far better as a result. However, it had taken quite a degree of investigation to arrive at this point. Ironically, the actual content of my lessons had changed very little.

Teaching in Nagaoka University of Technology

Within an institution such as Nagaoka University of Technology, one way teachers in the Language Center can develop their own professional identity is through continuously adjusting their own methodologies in response to staying open to new ways of 'construing the classroom' (Prawat, 1991) Fundamental change such as increased contact hours with students is more than can be hoped for. Rather, in a time of new curriculum demands, there is an increased need for adjusting one's expectation of what can or should be taught, especially within the limited time available. Edge advocates such an ongoing 'emergent methodology' (Edge, 1996) and says, "The most appropriate way for a person to teach is exactly the way in which that person does teach, *provided he or she is committed to this process of exploration, discovery and action*" (p.11)(my emphasis) The empowerment that can be gained by an appropriate shift in perceptions both before and after the implementation of a new curriculum may be enormously valuable. The resulting higher degree of inner peace can help to see through any ill-defined aspects of the situation, leading teachers into reinterpreting their professional goals or values with the aim of moving towards the most appropriate methodology. To achieve this, this paper recommends the use of formal modes of professional discourse and investigation such as Cooperative Development and/or Repetory Grids.

Conclusion

In this investigation a method to renegotiate perceptions of empowerment threw up something as simple as a metaphor. Indeed the value of metaphor as a tool to influence teaching practice has been discussed extensively. Thornbury (1991) for example, says, "metaphors help to see what is invisible, to describe what otherwise would be indescribable."

The introduction of the process of teacher development undoubtedly provided the impetus to re-interpret what seemed like an untenable situation, allowing a re-calibration of the frame of expectations. Part of this helped the author to escape from the strait jacketed vision of 'corporate' classes to accept a much more holistic view of teaching performance. This altered perception placed much less emphasis on the quantitative impact of professional presence to a more qualitative appraisal of the effect on the people who were available for classes amid their busy schedules. Reaching this stage required breaching many pain thresholds but eventually resulted in a far more sanguine and immeasurably more cheerful (and productive) frame of mind.

Having achieved such calm concerning one challenging teaching situation, the power of precedent remains strong. Awareness of always having the option to use teacher development techniques not only in the lines outlined in this paper but in many others too, or to offer it as a supportive gesture to perplexed colleagues in any troubling situation, makes for a powerful addition to the toolkit of any supportive teacher body.

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