

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-81342-6 - Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development

Karen E. Johnson and Paula R. Golombek

Excerpt

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PART I: INQUIRY INTO INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Teachers looking into their instructional practices represent a critical component of professional development, as they negotiate their own interests, those of their students, and those of their institutions. In Part I, "Inquiry into Instructional Practices," these stories of inquiry are driven by teachers' sense of dissatisfaction with some aspect of their classroom practice. Yet, as they examine their practice, they are also compelled to examine their beliefs about teaching; how their understandings of teaching came to be; their own and their students' needs, interests, and objectives; and institutional constraints. Pauline Johansen ignores the advice of fellow teachers to wait until her ESL students "can speak and write English" before expecting them to "think about what they are reading." Instead, she struggles to integrate a literature-based curriculum and reader-writer workshops in a secondary school in the Canadian Northwest. Lynne Doherty Herndon recognizes that her love of reading and her passion as a teacher of literature often leave her lessons belonging more to her than to her students. Through reading workshops, a full-class short story unit, and book groups, she learns to let her immigrant students learn to read in a New York City secondary school. Patricia Sackville struggles to help her adult ESL students pass the English requirement for entry into a technology or trades program in the Canadian Northwest. Her choice to allow her students to rewrite graded assignments challenges common notions of grading, fairness, and what constitutes "real" language learning. Kimberly A. Johnson uses exploratory practice to solve the puzzle of how to sequence activities in her adult ESL Developing Fluency course. As a result, she witnesses firsthand the enthusiasm students feel when they are given the opportunity to make decisions about their own classroom experiences.

These teachers' dissatisfaction with their practice motivates them to look at who they are as teachers and people, what kinds of interactions they want to have with students, what kinds of interactions they want students to have with one another, and what they hope students will achieve. As they examine these issues, they describe the rich pedagogical reasoning that serves as

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the foundation for their practice, as well as the sources of their reasoning and its evolution. For each of these teachers, giving students voice, and allowing them to take ownership of their own language learning experiences, fundamentally alters them, their students, and the entire classroom experience.

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Part I Initial reflection

The teachers featured in Part I, “Inquiry into Instructional Practices,” explore the types of theoretical and pedagogical concerns reflected in the following questions. As you read their stories of narrative inquiry, reflect on the concerns embedded in these questions and how you have or might have addressed them in your own teaching.

1. How do I align my instructional practices with my knowledge, beliefs, and values about second language learning and teaching?
2. How do I remain true to what I believe in the face of institutional constraints, such as standardized exams, mandated curriculum, and assigning grades?
3. How do I challenge the dominant view that second language learners are somehow deficient and thus work against the common belief that second language instruction is remedial?
4. How do I create instructional opportunities that recognize my students not as remedial learners but as legitimate learners?
5. How do I create instructional opportunities that are truly student-centered, in other words, that go beyond students' interests and needs and entail personal involvement and engagement in their own language learning?
6. How do I develop instructional practices beyond what I am already doing?

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2 *“And now for something completely different”*

Personal meaning making for secondary ESL students . . . and their teacher

Pauline A. G. Johansen

I love a good story. I think most people do. I'd like to share one with you that has an intriguing beginning and a complex, action-filled middle. . . . I'm working on the end. Like all good stories, this one has a rich cast of characters and a plot with lots of ups and downs. There are questions here as well as sadness, joy, and excitement that came from exploring new horizons. And I want to tell you of these times in story because I hope that we can connect as all human beings do when they hear a familiar story: “Oh yes, I know what you mean.” Through this story I hope to shape meaning out of the diverse and differing realities that created it.

The scene: An ESL classroom in a suburban secondary school in the 1990s. The main characters: First, there are two groups of sixteen- to eighteen-year-old Asian ESL students, one group designated as “advanced” and one as “intermediate.” They are funny, sincere, and often bemused. They all came from either Taiwan or Hong Kong and spoke often (I think with longing) of their traditional education. One day they were going to school, hanging out with their friends, being “cool,” and the next day they found themselves on a plane, leaving behind everything they knew and cared about. Few really wanted to be here. They were lonely, and often alone. Many with no family here and few friends beyond their ESL classmates, they were suffering the normal pains of growing up in particularly trying circumstances. I liked them. We sometimes ate lunch together in our stuffy, smelly portable classroom. At those times we laughed, shared stories, and, for a time, connected.

And then there was me, their ESL teacher. Recently arrived from a stint as a district consultant and just embarking on a master's degree, I felt ready at this stage in my career to explore some fairly uncharted territory. I had been an elementary school teacher for twenty-four years, and I believed that my experience, along with my districtwide work, prepared me for this next challenge. Well, I was right and I was wrong. You'll see what I mean.

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The plot: A year-long journey with these two groups of secondary ESL students. I wanted to explore rich literature with these students. I wanted to make clear for them the value I placed on personal response to reading. It is probably important to understand that my decision to take this path of exploration had not come to me in a "eureka" moment. In fact, the pathway to that point had been rather long and meandering.

I had reached a stage in my career at which I was asking myself some tough questions about what I really cared about in teaching. My beliefs about teaching and learning had developed over a long time, and I knew that they had not developed in a vacuum. There had been thousands of conversations, hundreds of workshops, hour upon hour of working with students and other educators. One thing I felt I knew for certain was that whatever I now believed had developed through those interactions. I am an amalgam of what I have experienced, read, and taught.

Oh, yes, and I had recently fallen in love with a dead Russian. Leonid Vygotsky (1981) and his Zone of *Proximal Development*. The more I read of him and his ZPD, the more I came to believe in the notion that students can and should be engaged in learning that takes them to a place where they are truly challenged but are supported in their learning. This zone was a place where they would be engaged, and at the same time not frustrated and confused by being expected to perform beyond their current abilities.

This heady mixture of beliefs about the social nature of learning and the notion of carefully scaffolded learning had developed over many years while I was a mainstream intermediate teacher. When I began to learn with ESL students, my belief system came with me. I began to look at my beliefs through the lenses of ESL. There was no sea change in my beliefs. I didn't suddenly throw aside everything that I valued in teaching and learning. But, and it was a big *but*, I suspected that learning an additional language would certainly put a different "spin" on things. Still, I really wasn't prepared for how my beliefs would be tested again and again.

We all have those "if . . . then" propositions in our minds. If, for example, I believe in the social nature of learning, then it follows that students learning English need to be allowed to work in groups in order to talk, share, and clarify issues and ideas together. What I wasn't prepared for was the absolute terror with which my students approached such tasks. They found the notion of group work, with its shared responsibilities and the attendant expectation for dialogue, totally unnerving.

How was I going to support these students as they engaged in group work centered around sharing reading responses and at the same time respect their need for individualism? In addition, I wanted to put into action

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with these ESL students a way of interacting with print that valued their personal and primary responses to what they were reading. I wanted these responses to occur in their writing, and in their dialogue about what they were reading. That challenge remained throughout the year. This story is about the successes we had together in finding a place for responding. It is also about the struggles and the “miles to go before we sleep.”

I was and am attracted to a pedagogy that values and supports students' thoughtfulness. I wanted my students to “own their learning.” I wanted them to be motivated not by marks but by the sense of sheer joy gained from interactions with print and the related interactions with others. I wanted to create an environment in which that kind of learning could take place.

The concept of students making personal responses to what they have read is now almost a given in most mainstream classrooms. It is not such an accepted notion in ESL pedagogy. In fact, some colleagues questioned why I would even bother with such activities when there were clearly so many important grammar points to learn, sentence structures to grasp, and verbs tenses to memorize, especially at the secondary level. “When they can speak and write English clearly and effectively,” I was told, “then you can take the time to ask them what they think about what they are reading.” And, truthfully, my students were saying much the same thing. They ached for grammar sheets; they longed for fill-in-the-blank activities. They didn't want to tell me in their imperfect English what they were thinking.

So, there was definitely a glitch in my “If... then” proposition. And so the “search” began: my students the rather unwilling passengers on the voyage to see how and in what ways the notion of personal responses to reading could be made a part of their language learning in a literature-based, response-centered secondary ESL classroom.

Like any good traveler, I consulted the “guides.” Much has been written about the use of a reader response approach to reading with students for whom English is a first language (Dias, 1979, 1992; Langer, 1990, 1994; Meek, 1983; Probst, 1988, 1992; Purves, 1972, 1984; Rosenblatt, 1976, 1978). There was no doubt in my mind about the efficacy of this approach. Their research has made it clear that when “all students are treated as thinkers and [we] provide them with the environment as well as the help to reason for themselves, even the most “at risk” students can engage in thoughtful discussions about literature, develop rich and deep understandings, and enjoy it too!” (Langer, 1994, p. 210). Unfortunately, my students and I didn't exist on an island. We were surrounded by a complex environment that included mainstream classroom norms and expectations as well as frequently conflicting school, societal, and family expectations. These pulls were strong, and the students were often torn between the familiar and the unknown.

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I am a pragmatist and a realist. I want whatever I do in my ESL classroom to support students' learning English in their mainstream classrooms, where they spend most of their time. These classrooms have cachet and, ultimately, educational power.

I had so many questions. I wanted to know what opinions these students had toward making personal responses, and whether these opinions would change over time. And, ever the teacher, I wondered what approaches or methods might be most useful in helping them make these responses. I was intrigued to find out what forms the student's written responses might take, given the kind of program I was trying to create.

There is an ancient Chinese saying: "May you live in interesting times." Educators in my school district were experiencing very interesting times, indeed. There had been a 2,581 percent increase in ESL students from 1987 to 1994! It is a tribute to the dedication and caring of teachers in the district that, even given the attendant strains and stresses that this amount of increase brought with it, I was still having conversations with mainstream classroom teachers in which they talked about the value of having students learn an additional language in their classrooms.

Of course, all was not rosy. As willing as they were, many teachers felt completely unprepared to work with language-learning students in ways that they believed were supportive of their language needs and at the same time to hold fast to their belief systems. They were questioning their own ability to assess the different linguistic and cultural schemata of their ESL students and their ability to choose suitable teaching methodologies. They wanted to plan learning experiences that were appropriate for their students' intellectual abilities regardless of their language proficiency. I shared their goals. When I looked around my district, I saw wonderful teaching going on in terms of teachers working to support personal meaning making through reading. But somehow, when it came to ESL students, the rules changed. A long history of language instruction that looked and felt different from what was done with students in mainstream classes fostered and maintained a somewhat "us and them" approach.

I felt privileged to have worked in both mainstream and ESL classrooms and was thankful for the broad perspective it gave me. So my beliefs tugged me forward in spite of the swirl of questions and concerns. A goal of a reader response approach that empowered ESL students to take ownership of their learning, encouraged them in their own meaning making, and provided them with a structure within which to experiment and exchange new and developing perceptions was worth pursuing.

Preparing for the trip took me down some interesting roads. I immersed myself in sociocultural learning theories: the mysterious Mr. Vygotsky

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(1978, 1981), the profoundly radical and yet, by today's standards tame, Mr. Dewey (1963), the irreverent and always challenging Mr. Smith (1988). I became intrigued with the role of language in a social structure as a resource for meaning making. The social dimension of language was what truly interested me.

The concept that knowledge was constructed in the mind of the individual knower – now this was heady stuff! I had always had a niggling little feeling that the knowledge, the “stuff,” that I had wanted to give to my students via a transmission model just wasn't the whole story. Ironically, this transmission model was what my secondary ESL students were most familiar and comfortable with. I think they thought that it was rather tragic to be in a situation in which the teacher who they felt held the key to English was expecting them to behave in ways that were really so very discomforting. They were used to being passive receivers of information. I was asking them to become actively involved. They were terrific at regurgitation. I was asking them to create their own interpretations. These were rocky times, to say the least.

I wanted them to “experience” their learning in the sense that Dewey describes. The experience that he suggests has a special two-pronged quality. First, is the immediate effect of the experience, and second, more important, is the nature of this experience as it causes the learner to connect with future learning. “Just as no man lives or dies himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences” (Dewey, 1963, p. 27). That was what I wanted for my students: connections. Connections to one another, connections to other learning, and connections to their inner selves and what was vital to them in their lives. I wanted these connections to come through and be sparked by their reading and their responses to it.

I knew that the students would need a great deal of nurturing as they worked in these unfamiliar ways. Vygotsky and his perspective on the social nature of learning provided me with great comfort. I clung to the notion that what was once an external, group process could, with support, become an internal, individual one. An acceptance of the power of social learning brings with it great responsibilities in terms of creating a learning environment in which students can flourish. So, rather than looking only at what students are able to accomplish on their own, now I would consider “their zone of proximal development”: “those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (1978, p. 86). I believed in my students' potential as learners. Now it was up to me to co-create

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with them a situation in which this socially mediated learning could take place.

So now you have a sense of the players, the setting, and some of the dilemmas we faced. At this point I would like to paint in broad strokes the backdrop that existed in the classroom in terms of the frameworks or "superstructures" I had initiated. They were:

- The use of a literature-based curriculum
- Thematic units and content-based instruction
- Dialogue journals
- Readers' workshops and response journals
- Writers' workshops

Frameworks or "superstructures"

I think that my students felt betrayed by the reading and writing activities I asked them to do in my classroom. I was not playing by ESL rules. I had broken a powerful unspoken pact, according to which the teacher agrees to run the classroom in such a way as to avoid asking the students to make personal meaning of what is being read or to share perceptions with others, a classroom in which the students agree to answer reams of questions to which there are already answers, and both parties agree to call this "reading."

Well, I didn't buy into that pact. Early in the school year, I had the students complete a reading survey. I was not surprised that most students said they did not read well in English. What did concern me were their responses as to the purposes for reading. Most of their responses indicated that they viewed reading as the act of getting information – basically an efferent activity. They did not read for pleasure. I quote: "We read to get information." "People read because learning things will improve their knowledge and hobbies." "People can get some reference and knowledge from the book." I sighed and realized that the notion of reading as an aesthetic activity was not part of my students' current thinking. But I love and trust good literature and believe in its power to transform.

Literature-based curriculum

At this point I would like to stand tall on my soapbox. High-interest, low-vocabulary books, Scientific Reading Approach (SRA) kits, and the wide range of programmed materials "created" for ESL students to read are not what will cause students to pause and consider, to go back and reread, or to

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think again about what they have read and what it means to them. I believed that it would have been meaningless to introduce a response-based reading program that wasn't predicated on the use of literature. How could I expect these ESL students to care about and to make personal choices about rich literature if they were being served Pabulum on the page?

There is, of course, a lot of support in the literature for a skill-based view of reading. There seems to be a "commonsense" view of reading that can be thought of as the manipulation of parts into a whole. The very strong belief persists that simplification is the answer to reading experiences for ESL students. Many lessons suggest breaking down reading into small, easily digested pieces in order to make for more effective reading. However, reading is much too complex an act to be amenable to this approach. Instead, I wanted to guide the students in making choices that would provide them with satisfying reading experiences. I wanted to highlight the role of literature "in the development of a sharp and critical mind" (Langer, 1990, p. 182). Literature, I felt, was a source of ideas, impressions, feelings, and emotions. At some point, I hoped that it could provide an impetus for students to create their own writing. I wanted them to get in touch with and to have insights into their own behavior based on encounters with a broad range of other humans' behavior. I wanted them to be touched by the humanity of literature and to experience other living things, ideas, and events. The language that they needed was there on the page in all its wonderful structural complexity. Good literature allows students to see, in a deeply contextualized way, how to use the rules of grammar for effective communication.

The possibilities of human life are illuminated, both the good and the evil, and we are free to explore, to take sides, to experience, to learn, but without the dire consequences we sometimes encounter in our physical world. When we read a story we truly merge heart and intellect. (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, p. 16)

Thematic units and content-based instruction

Language learning takes time. My own experience told me this, as did my reading of the work of researchers such as Collier (1987) and Wong-Fillmore (1989). But oh, my students felt the tyranny of time. These students arrived at the age of sixteen or seventeen, and their parents expected them to graduate with their peers and then go on to university. However, there were secondary school English requirements to be met first. And the entrance into those courses was dependent on successful completion of their ESL