THE ROLE OF STORIES IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Teachers’ professional knowledge is said to be storied. This means that teachers have stories of particular students, classes, and classroom events in their memory and that these stories are thought to form a network. Faced with a new situation, teachers search for similar stories in this network and decide on a course of action based on the stories in their repertoire. If this is the nature of teachers’ knowledge, telling stories of their own experience and listening to other teachers’ stories should facilitate teacher development. However all stories are not equally helpful. Nor do teachers always tell stories when they are requested to. In this paper I shall elaborate on the nature of teachers’ professional knowledge, and discuss what kind of stories are more likely to conducive to teacher development and what kind of learning environment teacher educators have to create for teachers to tell such stories in teacher education classrooms.

1 A starting point

When I was a novice Japanese language teacher many many years ago my role models were the teachers I learned English from. I tried consciously, and most likely unconsciously as well, to copy their friendly positive attitude towards students in my teaching. But some of my senior colleagues said that I was patronizing my students and that I should behave more properly “Japanese”. I just couldn’t take their advice. I simply stopped talking about teaching with them. This was sad. There must have been a lot I could learn from them, and they from me. What could have been done was a nagging question for me for a long time. In fact my motivation to find an answer has been boosted every time I witnessed or heard about disagreements among JSL practitioners. There have been a wide range of issues from grammar vs communication focused teaching, teacher vs learner centred approaches to humanistic vs disciplinary orientations in teaching not-so-mature students and conflicts between “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” teachers. These differing opinions and sentiments sometimes lead to a bitter dispute in which teachers become casualties. Some might quit the job. Others might lose commitment to teaching. Yet others even get sick. This is costly not only to relevant institutions but also to the field of JSL on the whole. Today I’d like to share my tentative answer to the question I started asking almost three decades ago.

2 Nature of teaching and nature of teachers’ knowledge

Why did teachers tend to stick to their beliefs and teaching styles and why were they often unwilling to change were probably the questions educational researchers asked in the 1970’s and 1980’s, when they were faced with the fact that almost all top-down educational reforms in the past had failed. They embarked on studying teachers and, as far as I see it, there were
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three trends among them. One studied teachers’ lives (Huberman, 1993; Goodson, 1992; Goodson & Ball, 1989). The second studied teachers’ thinking process (Elbaz, 1983; Lampert, 1984; 1985). The third studied teachers’ knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Researchers, irrespective of which trend they were following, came up with a very important finding that is relevant to our concern today. That is teachers’ teaching is a reflection of their identities. Lampert (1985, p. 183), for example, describes her thinking process when faced with a dilemma as a mathematics teacher and states that “my ambivalence about what to do was not only a conflict of will, however; it was a conflict of identity as well. Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 3), who originally studied teachers’ practical knowledge, observe that “teachers were more inclined to ask questions along the lines of ‘Who am I in this situation?’ than ‘What do I know in this situation?’.” Cole and Knowles (2000, p. 2), with a background in life history research, claim that “teaching is an expression of who teachers are as people”, and that “it is imbued with the beliefs, values, perspectives, and experiences developed over the course of a teacher’s lifetime.” In the context of second language education researchers have also presented some compelling evidence that teachers’ identities influence their practice (Morgan, 2004; Verghese, Morgan, Johnston, Johnson, 2005; Clarke, 2008; Aoki, 2009; Trent and Gao, 2009). In fact my style of teaching in my novice years was closely related to my emerging bilingual and bicultural identity. That was exactly why I was not able to appreciate the advice from senior colleagues. In more general terms differing opinions among teachers could become disputes when teachers assume that if they are right others who differ from them should be wrong and try to redress the wrong. Trying to persuade teachers to change their professional behaviors is trying to change their beliefs, values, and perspectives firmly rooted in their whole life at best, and denying their identities at worst. It cannot be done lightly.

Recognizing the nature of teaching as such, the concept of teacher development assumes a new meaning. On top of acquiring content knowledge and pedagogical skills teacher development becomes a matter of understanding who you are and who you want to be as a teacher, managing dilemmas among conflicting identities, and/or transforming your identity to satisfy both your desire and contextual demands. How, then, does it take place? We need to know so that we can help each other to develop professionally without stepping on each other’s toes and damaging our relationships. An insight comes from another significant finding in research on teachers. Namely teachers’ knowledge is narrative (Grumet, 1987; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1991; Carter, 1993; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2007). Let me elaborate what this means before going further.

Bruner (1986) recognizes two modes of cognition, paradigmatic and narrative. The paradigmatic mode of knowing uses a formal mathematical system of description and explanation. It tries to categorize particulars and establish relationships among the categories in order to extract general propositions. In other words it is the mode in which logical thinking takes place. The narrative mode, on the other hand, bears with particulars and configures human actions and events into a believable story. Whereas a cause-effect relationship in the paradigmatic mode is derived by logical argument, the concept of cause in the narrative mode is based on a likely connection between two events. Polkinghorne (1988) claims that narrative is a means by which human beings give meaning to their experience. It joins everyday actions and events into episodic units and provides a framework for
understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions.

Teachers make sense of their practice by joining classroom events into stories. Let me give you an example. Imagine you are assigned to a class of beginners and asked to use a popular textbook that you have used many times. You probably imagine a scenario for a term like this: The first four lessons are easy and students will not have any problems. With an excitement of learning something new they will rather enthusiastically participate in classroom activities. Then at Lesson Five the book introduces quite a few verb forms at the same time, which will baffle many students. They may withdraw from whole class activities and struggle in pair and group work. Some of them may even drop out. After twelve lessons there will be around two thirds of the original number. There will be a few who are still enthusiastic and making an impressive progress, but the rest of the class will need a lot of pushing from me… This is knowledge about a specific textbook and a specific group of students in a specific institutional setting. It is generated out of your past experience. You create a scenario based on that knowledge and plan your actions according to the scenario. It is not academic knowledge of curriculum content. Neither is it knowledge of pedagogical principles. But it is valuable and indispensable for teachers to function in a classroom all the same. Teacher development, then, can be considered as change in the stories teachers live out in their classrooms. In the next section I shall explore how stories might change.

3 Nature of teacher development

I ran a course named “Talking shop for Japanese language teachers” in a teacher education programme for ten years (Aoki with Sunami, Li & Kinoshita, 2002; Aoki with Hamakawa, 2003; Aoki with Yagi, 2006; Aoki, 2006). This course was inspired by Clark (2001) and designed to create an opportunity for teachers to share their experience. I changed formats over the years, but basically students wrote stories of their own experience and we discussed them as a whole group. I normally had around ten students, mainly in-service teachers with a few pre-service ones. I asked the students to refrain from making judgmental comments and asking questions about the story, and to respond with a story of their own. After the session students were asked to write their reflection on the conversation. I did not necessarily monitor these weekly reflections, but in their term-end reflections I have found at least five different kinds of change in stories.

First the number of stories you’d tell to other teachers is likely to increase as you accumulate experience. One undergraduate student who travelled Korea on her own during a school break writes as follows:

I made a tremendous effort to get meanings across. So I was relieved when I met up with a friend who spoke Japanese. When she wasn’t around I felt I was incompetent and that made me a bit sad. As I had feared it was inconvenient not to be able to speak Korean. I thought of strategies to convey my feelings without words and tried to use them, but it was difficult. As I was only a tourist I never experienced any situations where I felt I was cornered, but I remembered the stories I’d heard from learners in Japan. I felt I’d understood that we got weak both mentally and physically when we didn’t understand language.
This student is a very empathetic person by nature. By telling a story of her experience in this reflection she is consolidating her identity as empathetic teacher although she may not have that purpose in her mind.

Second when you listen to stories other teachers tell these stories offer vicarious experience. In discussing the value of case reports Guba and Lincoln (1989) claim that a holistic lifelike thick description allows readers to vicariously experience the case in question. They maintain that humans learn by experience and that “while vicarious experience is not equivalent to actual experience, it does provide many of the same opportunities to learn” (ibid., p. 181). Stories are not case reports, but they share an important aspect in common. Carter (1993, p. 6) observes that a story “captures in a special fashion the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs.” If it is a detailed description of a specific case that make vicarious experience possible, stories should also make vicarious experience possible. Another undergraduate student writes about her experience in the talking shop as follows:

One of the changes that happened to me is I started wanting to go abroad. I’d had a vague idea that I want to go abroad to teach when I enroll in the graduate school, but this course made that vague wish into a concrete plan. I used to have a great deal of worry that I wouldn’t be good enough, but hearing in-service teachers’ stories I learned they hadn’t been perfect from the beginning and they’ve had dilemmas and uncertainties as they kept teaching. This awareness became one of my driving forces. […] I wanted to be able to talk like them. I think I should have something to share in this course when I come back.

In fact this student had a lot to tell when she came back to Osaka. In other words she succeeded in getting closer to her desired identity, a teacher who can “talk like them.” This was possible because experienced teachers’ stories offered her vicarious experience, helped her imagine her career path in concrete terms and gave her the courage to take the first step.

The third change can mean reinterpretation of past events by telling and retelling the story. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 71) state that “difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but more important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change.” An in-service teacher writes as follows:

When I reflect on my teaching I tend to think of hard times and difficult classes first. Listening to other people’s stories in this course I remembered a positive attitude to teaching. I do have a lot of happy memories. We could of course learn a lot by reflecting on failures in our teaching, but repeating only that may lead to burnout. In fact I was in a very difficult situation and if I had been asked whether I liked teaching I might have answered, “Maybe I don’t.” I was feeling down probably because I always reflected on bad things in my teaching. In this course I realized I could learn a lot from memories of happy classes too. This is perhaps a very good measure to prevent feeling desperate.

This student’s perception of her current teaching practice has turned from completely negative to more or less positive through listening to other teachers’ stories. In this reflection
she is retelling her story and saying that she felt she maybe didn’t like teaching not because she was in a difficult situation but because she only focused on a negative side of her teaching. This is a significant change.

Fourth a change in stories can mean development of a complex web of stories joined by resonance (Conle, 2000; 2006). Resonance is a form of reaction when you listen to other people’s stories and typically starts with your inner language such as “Me too” or “Not me.” Resonance helps you to remember your experiences that have not been in your consciousness. Stories, both yours and other people’s, that are connected with resonance form a web. The more stories you tell and listen to, the more complex your web of stories becomes. An in-service teacher writes about her developing web of stories as follows:

Listening to and reading other people’s stories I often thought of my family background, values and personality. Probably it is related to the fact that I only have a short teaching experience. But as our teaching is based on our family background and values we may naturally resonate with those aspects in other people’s stories. When I resonated with other people’s stories I sometimes became aware of aspects of myself that I hadn’t been aware of before. Sometimes I would think “It was like this in my case” or “I had a different consequence because this factor was different”. I had assumed that my family background and experiences were common, but I learned that they were not by looking at my experiences through other people’s experiences.

This student has started relating her teaching experience with her non-teaching experience, values and personality and gaining new understanding of herself. Clandinin and Connelly (2007) warn that self-knowledge in and of itself is not enough. They claim that it is only important as a means to understand and improve teaching practice. Indeed as teaching is a form of self-expression deeper understanding of who you are is likely to lead to more informed choices in your teaching.

Fifth a change in stories can mean a discovery of “stories to live by”. Stories to live by represent teacher’s identities (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et. al., 2006), but these stories may not be in our consciousness from the onset. They normally become clearer as our web of stories develops. One student tells of such an experience as follows:

Discussing our past experiences in this course, I came to realize I have at least two reference points. […] The other of my reference points is that I want to be treated as an individual rather than a teacher. When I shouted “Shut up” to the students the whole class burst into laughter and I felt happy. This episode seems to indicate that I want to shed the cast of “teacher” and get closer to students. When I work with students, though, I sometimes treat them only as students or as a mass. I realized that this is a contradiction.

By discovering her stories to live by this student became aware of a contradiction between her desired identity and her actual behaviour in the classroom. Her reflection does not discuss how to go about solving the problem, but she will resolve the issue sooner or later. Teacher development takes its own time after all.
The students’ reflections show that storytelling is an effective way to stimulate teacher development. In the next section I shall discuss what we can do to facilitate the process.

4 Necessary conditions for teacher development through storytelling

At the end of the previous section I suggested that telling stories of our experience was a very good way to stimulate change in teachers’ knowledge. This may sound simple, but there are some pitfalls. Arguably the biggest pitfall is our habitual thinking pattern. We are so used to the paradigmatic mode of knowing through our educational experience that we tend to think that stories are just anecdotes and do not qualify as legitimate knowledge. We also tend to summarize and abstract our experience (Conle, Li & Tan, 2002). We need to recognize the legitimacy of stories and focus on details of each piece of our experience. Some teacher educators (Li, Conle & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2009) encourage student teachers to ask questions about details of each other’s stories in order to help retell the stories with a thicker description. I myself have been reluctant to let students ask questions about each other’s story for two reasons. One is that questions could be interpreted as criticism and they can actually be formulated with that purpose. The other reason is that storytellers may not like to share every bit of their experience with fellow students and a question could create an uncomfortable situation for them. I would raise the awareness of students by explaining why telling stories is important, telling stories myself, and pointing out summaries and abstractions in students’ talk. The difference in these two approaches may reflect a difference in cultural norms, for example how much self-disclosure is expected in a particular kind of situation. Or it may be difference in situational urgency. Li, Conle and Elbaz-Luwisch work in deeply divided societies and there is a pressing need for teaching teachers tolerance and mutual understanding whereas in the Japanese context we can take more relaxed approach and let teachers take their time for their development. In any case each of us need to think of a way appropriate to our own context that will help us learn to tell good stories.

Another pitfall is that teachers may tell cover stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) observe that the language outside the classroom is paradigmatic. If teachers tell stories of students and classroom events, or secret stories as Clandinin and Connelly (ibid) call them, in the world outside the classroom, it would portray them as “uncertain, tentative, nonexpert characters” (ibid., p. 15). So teachers talk about goals, plans, strategies, evaluation and so on, or tell cover stories, in order to present themselves as “certain, expert professionals” (ibid., p. 15). But these cover stories are seldom, if ever, relevant to teacher development because it is by living, telling, retelling and reliving secret stories that teachers make meaning of their classroom experience and reflect on it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To help our colleagues stop telling cover stories and start telling secret stories we need to create a safe environment where we don’t have to pretend to be competent. For that end we need to avoid judgmental comments. We also need to free ourselves from the permeating belief that teachers should be perfect (Aoki, 2010) and acknowledge ambiguities, uncertainties and failures in our work.

Last but not least important is we need to write down our stories and reflections. Many students commented that when they tried to write a term-end reflection they were not able to remember what we discussed in class without referring to written stories. This would mean that stories told and thoughts evoked in our mind may be lost unless they are written down.
This is wasteful. Writing also has more constructive functions. One student wrote that by trying to write a story of an experience she often discovered alternative meanings and feelings associated with an event. Another student wrote that she could only write about an experience that she had already given meaning to and that writing resolved any remaining issues. Writing seems to be an indispensable part of teacher development through stories.

5 A concluding remark

Let me briefly go back to the question I started this paper with. How can we help each other to develop professionally without stepping on each other’s toes and damaging our relationships? Building a storytelling community seems to be an obvious answer. This can be started with no resource or formal arrangement. Change your behaviour in the staffroom a bit and other teachers may follow. If that proves difficult, then find like-minded teachers from other institutions and form an informal storytelling group. Elbaz-Luwisch (1997) discusses narrative research and comments that “In North America, the number of researchers doing narrative work seems to have reached a ‘critical mass,’ and narrative researchers no longer need to argue for the legitimacy of their method with every new study.” I’m sure the same thing will happen with storytelling teachers.

References


