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Autonomy and Collaboration in Teacher Education: Journal Sharing Among Native and Nonnative English-Speaking Teachers

- This article presents a successful case of collaborative teacher development that draws on the diverse backgrounds of emerging teachers, including their native languages. Specifically, the article focuses on the use of electronic dialogue journals as a way of facilitating autonomy and collaboration in teacher education. The roles of teacher educators in facilitating greater autonomy and collaborative relationships between native and nonnative English-speaking teachers are also discussed.

The issue of nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) has attracted much scholarly and professional attention in the last few years. In 1998, a caucus was established in the organization Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in order to address through research and networking various issues related to NNESTs. The California/Nevada affiliate CATESOL followed in December 1999 by creating an interest group devoted to the issues of nonnative language educators. Several articles and books that specifically address these issues have been published (e.g., Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, Lee, & Lee, 1999; Liu, 1999; A. Matsuda, 1997; P. K. Matsuda, 1999/2000). This issue of *The CATESOL Journal*—the special issue on nonnative English-speaking professionals—adds to the growing body of literature. While it is a recent phenomenon, the growth of interest in this topic is not surprising because the majority of English teachers in the world are nonnative speakers of the language.

Many, if not most, teacher education programs in English-dominant countries enroll both native and nonnative speakers who are pre-service or in-service teachers. In these contexts, collaboration between NNESTs and native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) is not only desirable but may even be necessary. From the perspective of teacher educators, collaboration is desirable because it can contribute to the creation of a community in which teachers

learn from their differences. In such a learning community, the professional, cultural, and linguistic diversity that teachers bring with them becomes an asset rather than a liability. From the perspective of pre-service and in-service teachers, collaborative teacher development not only makes their learning experience more positive and productive but also helps them develop the ability to work collaboratively, which may be a necessity in their future careers. After graduation, NNESTs may stay in an English-dominant country or move to countries other than their own and begin careers as English teachers. Similarly, many opportunities are available for NESTs who are interested in teaching English in countries where English is not the dominant language. In any of these teaching options, all of which are common in the TESOL profession, one is likely to be working with colleagues who have linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds that differ from one's own. Consequently, the ability to establish good rapport and to collaborate well with a diverse group of teachers and administrators is essential for building a successful career and for providing effective instruction for one's students.

In order to create such a learning environment, we argue for a collaborative model of native and nonnative English-speaking teacher development (P. K. Matsuda, 1999/2000). Traditionally, the evaluation of teacher development has tended to be based on the "deficit model," in which teachers are individually evaluated only in terms of qualifications they have (competence) and those that they do not have (deficits). For instance, some nonnative speakers (NNSs) may be viewed as lacking experiences in certain English genres, while some native speakers (NSs) may be viewed as lacking the metalinguistic awareness of the English language. Based on *either-or* logic, NESTs and NNESTs in this model are viewed as discrete (NESTs or NNESTs) or competitive (NESTs versus NNESTs).

In contrast, in the collaborative model of teacher development, which is driven by *both-and* logic, "teachers see themselves as members of a collaborative community in which they share their special strengths to help each other out" (P. K. Matsuda, 1999/2000, p. 10). Because this model focuses on the learning community created by teachers and on the development of the teachers as a group, learning takes place through sharing stories and adopting, adapting, and learning from others' "approaches and strategies that are informed by differing linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds" (p. 10). In other words, this model strives for integration (NESTs and NNESTs), cooperation (mutual sharing), and addition (NEST strengths plus NNEST strengths), all of which can lead to the type of collaboration that increases the effectiveness of teacher education programs.

In this article, we describe an example of such collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs. Specifically, we show how the use of on-line journal sharing maximized each teacher's strengths and encouraged teachers to learn from the diversity in the group—including, but not limited to, linguistic diversity.

Journals in Teacher Education

In recent years, the use of journals has gained popularity in teacher education programs. It has been adopted by many teacher educators as a way to monitor new teachers' progress and to provide formative responses (Bailey, 1990; Brinton, Holten, & Goodwin, 1993; Cole, Raffier, Rogan, & Schleisher, 1998; Dong, 1997; Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, & Conrad, 1990; Thornbury, 1991). Some researchers have also used journal entries as a source of data to gain insights into the process of teacher development and to evaluate teacher education programs. Murphy-O'Dwyer (1985), in an analysis of the reflective journals of pre-service teachers in a two-week teacher education course, identified issues that concerned the teachers, including group dynamics, administrative constraints, personal variables, and presentation and content of a lesson. Similarly, Numrich (1996), in her analysis of the journals of novice English as a second language teachers, was able to identify such concerns as preoccupation with teaching behavior, transfer and rejection of the teachers' own second language (L2) learning experience, and unexpected discoveries about effective teaching and teaching frustrations (see also Brinton & Holten, 1989). Furthermore, as Dong (1997) suggests, the reflective journal can help teacher educators re-evaluate and redefine the needs of teacher education programs:

One of the focuses in my methods course...is on content-area instruction. However, students' responses from their field work reveal that content-oriented ESL instruction was not often practiced in real teaching because of the departmentalization of content teachers at high schools and the isolation of ESL teachers. Peer responses made me realize that interdisciplinary collaboration and access to resources are critical to making this happen. (p. 31)

Although responses to the use of journals in teacher education have been mostly positive and enthusiastic, some limitations and concerns have been identified. The lack of motivation among teachers, for example, is one of the potential problems in the use of journals. Teachers may not fully understand the benefit of keeping reflective journals in their professional development because the results of critical reflection are not always tangible. Teachers may also feel that the task of keeping a journal is not worth including in their already busy schedule. This is an important consideration, especially when the journal writing task is imposed by the teacher educator, because as Barkhuizen (1995) points out, teachers may perceive the purpose of the journal differently or even become suspicious of the intent of the teacher educator.

Another possible problem is appropriation, which occurs when the teacher's goals in writing journals are controlled by the teacher educator's goals for using the journals. Considering the teacher educator as the primary audience, teachers may choose to write what they think will please this person. Even when the teacher educator does not respond to the text, the sheer presence of the authority figure—however unthreatening—may make teachers overly self-

conscious and sometimes defensive, influencing how they perceive and use the journal (Jarvis, 1992) and can undermine the whole purpose of using the journal. Furthermore, the teacher educator's use of journals as a data source for their own research may also raise ethical questions (Barkhuizen, 1995).

The use of journals may also isolate members of the class when it is limited to the "dialogue" between the teacher educator and individual teachers (see, however, Cole et al. [1998] and Dong [1997] for examples of interactive uses of journals). While this type of interaction allows the teacher educator to focus on the specific needs of each teacher and thus may sometimes be useful for teachers with little or no experience, it may also cause the teachers to depend too much on the teacher educator for directions. Furthermore, too much focus on the individual may promote competition at the expense of cooperation among teachers. As a result, unique perspectives that teachers from diverse backgrounds bring to the group may remain untapped.

Although these limitations do exist, they are not "insurmountable" (Barkhuizen, 1995, p. 33). In our journal sharing described below, we attempted to overcome these limitations.

Description of the Context

Participants in the on-line journal project discussed in this article were four graduate teaching assistants, including both authors, who were teaching sections of first-year composition designated for ESL students (ENGL 101I) in Fall 1996. Since this was our first time to teach ESL sections of this course, we were enrolled in a practicum course in teaching ESL writing, which involved a weekly one-hour group meeting with the mentor.

The four of us came from diverse backgrounds and had diverse experiences and interests. Betty, a native of Oklahoma, was a second-year master of arts student in Linguistics and ESL and was engaged in an MA thesis research project on language and gender.¹ Her teaching career had begun the previous year when she started teaching English 101 and 102—mainstream sections of introductory composition courses. In the fall of 1996 she was teaching a section of 101 along with a section of 101I. Jack, originally from Nebraska, was in his second year in an MA program in rhetoric and composition. Like Betty, he had taught mainstream composition the previous school year. Aya, a native of Japan, was also a second-year MA student, specializing in Linguistics and ESL. Her prior teaching experience included teaching English as a foreign language to secondary students in Japan and teaching mainstream introductory composition. Paul, also from Japan, was specializing in ESL composition as a second-year doctoral student in rhetoric and composition. He had worked as a tutor both as an undergraduate and as a master's student and had taught mainstream composition the previous year.

Our journal project was carried out in conjunction with this practicum although it was independent of the course requirements. The original goal of our journal sharing project was to critically reflect on our own teaching practices and to relate our previous teaching experience to the knowledge of ESL

and composition theory in our new instructional context—the first-year ESL composition course. We did not specify how often we needed to post our journal entries, but two to seven (about four on average) entries were written and exchanged each week.

As was the case in Cole et al. (1998), our reflective journal project was completely self-initiated. Some of us were in the process of developing proposals for a conference when we received the teaching assignment for the following semester. We decided to collaborate and met then, during the semester preceding the assignment, to plan our project. At this first meeting we chose reflective journal sharing as a way to facilitate our collaboration. Although we received encouragement and support from our mentor, he neither required nor evaluated this project in any fashion; the four of us took the initiative to conceive and implement it. In fact, to prevent the possibility of appropriation, our mentor voluntarily refrained from reading our journals, allowing the four of us to express our views and discuss concerns without the fear of being judged.

We shared our journal entries and responded to each other, which helped to create a supportive and collaborative network among the four of us. This defining feature of our project also transformed the nature of the reflective journal itself—the reflection was no longer at the level of each person but became a collective endeavor. We used the journal not only for personal reflections but also for sharing ideas and stories. By doing so, we were able to develop a body of local knowledge, or what North (1987) has called “practitioner’s lore” (p. 23)—a body of practical knowledge that arises from the network of teachers.

Another important feature of our journal-sharing project was the use of e-mail, which, as Kamhi-Stein (2000) has also pointed out, can be a useful tool to facilitate the exchange of insights. We initially exchanged hard-copy versions of our journals until some of us expressed interest in using e-mail as a vehicle for the exchange. The use of e-mail made our journals more interactive because we were able to share our thoughts and to respond to each other more frequently. Using e-mail also facilitated the preservation of “significant or important events for the purpose of later reflection” (Richards, 1990, p. 10).

In addition, this project included not only making and sharing journal entries but also analyzing them as a group. Several times during and after the semester we printed out the journals and analyzed them collectively, which added another layer to our critical reflections. In the process, we also negotiated what to discuss in our future journals and how to respond to each other. The ongoing as well as retrospective analyses helped us reflect critically on our own teaching practices from multiple perspectives.

Our Journal Entries

Our journal entries addressed a wide range of issues in teaching ESL writing because we intentionally left the focus of the journal open and flexible at the beginning. Most of our entries, however, reflected the following

themes: sharing teaching ideas and information, discussing issues in L2 writing, reflecting on one's own development and practices as a teacher, and providing moral support.

Sharing Teaching Ideas and Information

As we described earlier, we initially shared our journals off-line by leaving a copy in each other's mailboxes, and we did the same with handouts in order to exchange teaching ideas. When we decided to use e-mail, the exchange of teaching ideas became more than a mere sharing of "recipes" because we soon started to include reflections on how each task or activity worked in the classroom. Furthermore, we often adapted each other's ideas, used them in our own classes, and reported back how they went. For instance, Aya wrote:

I've been trying to figure out how to deal with the concept of "writing as thinking" which was one of the central issues in my 101 & 102 last year. I would like to introduce it to my 101I students, too...However, my concern is that many of my students seem to be still at the stage of getting used to putting their ideas in English that makes sense, and making them think through writing "English" may be too much burden for them. I asked them to freewrite today in any language they like, but I'm not sure if I should or want to rely on their L1 [first language] all the time. (September 1, 1996)

Aya discussed this experience again in detail at the following weekly meeting, and described the freewriting activity in which she encouraged students to use their L1, if they so choose, to initiate thinking. A few days later, Jack responded:

I stole Aya's idea for a first language freewrite, which seemed to go very well. Only one student (Luis, the near-native speaker) did not write for the full time. Because my class has two or more speakers of each first language, I did a first language group activity in which the groups evaluated each member's topics, and tried to advise on both topic selection and possible lines of development. The class seemed genuinely surprised that I was encouraging them to not speak English in an English class, and that I was not interested in looking at their work (even if I could read it). I must admit that I felt very peripheral to the class activity when all of the groups were working in their native languages. (September 5, 1996)

In addition, the on-line journal provided us with a convenient way of asking questions and of exchanging information about teaching related issues. Betty asked, for instance:

Hey, Paul and Aya. Here's a question for you: What are your teachers like in Japan compared to here? Several of my students comment on their native teachers being very personal. Any thoughts on that? I'm thinking of the implications for us as teachers. My [international] students love it when I [divulge] personal info and talk to them about their families. (September 17, 1996)

In response to this question, Paul and Aya wrote:

My teachers in Japan seemed much more impersonal than my teachers in the U.S. partly because of the class size (almost all high school classes had 40+ students). But that depends on how you deal with them—they were more personal with me because I always sat in the front row and went to their offices just to chat. Even then, teachers in Japan have a sense of distance that they have to maintain in order to keep their ethos as teachers. But I'm sure that's changing as well...(Paul, September 17, 1996)

My teachers from elementary and secondary schools were more personal than many professors and instructors in college/univ., but I think it is more of the difference between higher education and non-higher (??) education than the cultural difference...(Aya, September 17, 1996)

Because we were trying out many activities for the first time, knowing how they worked in different contexts helped us examine the usefulness and effectiveness of those activities. Furthermore, the fact that our journal often functioned as a vehicle for generating teaching material provided a practical motivation to participate in the sharing of journal entries.

Discussing Issues in L2 Writing

While many of our discussions were related to day-to-day teaching practices, such as the ones discussed above, some of them developed into more general discussions of issues in L2 writing. For example, the issue of responding to students' texts often generated active discussion in our journal exchange and during the weekly meeting:

I stopped several times in the process of responding to their papers, thinking that I was focusing too much on grammar...I am now wishing that I had a chance to give them feedback on the content and rhetorical features of their paper before I collected this version. I know both are important, but commenting on both grammar and rhetoric is probably too demanding for some students (and for me). Maybe I will start commenting on one or the other. For those who are strong in content and organization, I will provide minimum comment on these areas and provide extensive feedback on grammar and convention. For others who have problems in both "rhetoric" and "syntax" (to use Barbara Kroll's [1990] distinction), I will focus on rhetorical features. (Paul, September 29, 1996)

This type of discussion helped us connect theory and pedagogy—to apply insights from our readings, off-line discussions, and the mentor's advice to our teaching practices—because we not only shared anecdotes but also tried to make references to readings and research.

The issue of nonnative English-speaking professionals was also an important topic of discussion in our exchange. We shared our personal experiences, as the following comment from Aya describes:

I personally think both NS [native speakers] and NNS [nonnative speakers] have some good things to offer to our students. There are probably certain things that I can do and NS can't, or I cannot do but NS can—or what I can/can't do and other NNS can't/can. So I do hope my students get someone other than me for 102I and learn something different from you guys...To tell you the truth, being NNS does not have as much advantage as I first thought. And not as much disadvantage either. Or they are about the same so they cancel out. It may appear one way or the other (good or bad) on the first couple of days, but students learn to see beyond my dark hair and exotic name...(September 20, 1996)

In response to this comment, Betty provided her assessment of American students' attitudes toward international teaching assistants as well as her own view on the issue:

I think that the attitudes reflect both an acceptance and a reluctance to appear racist. I think that American undergrads are quicker to voice their opinion than nonnative undergrads. I think that native undergrads are more hostile to nonnative teachers—and not just of English. I have had several students write about it in their journals in the past year. Of course they don't realize that I am majoring in ESL...I always turn to a more experienced teacher whenever I have questions about teaching. So naturally, I have turned to Paul, Aya, Mike T. and others. I know for a fact that Paul knows more stuff about teaching strategies—not to mention the English language—than I do. Why would I go to someone with less experience than me just because they were L1 speakers? (September 24, 1996)

This topic, as easily imagined, was a sensitive one. Although most of the discussion addressed the native and nonnative English speaker issue in general terms, we were, in a way, talking about ourselves. However, this explicit discussion was crucial in establishing our collaborative relationship because it helped us realize the complexity of this issue as well as the richness of our diverse backgrounds that we brought to the group.

Reflecting on Our Own Development and Teaching Practices

In addition to sharing teaching ideas and discussing issues specific to ESL writing instruction, we often shared our reflections on our own strengths and weaknesses as teachers. For example Aya wrote:

As you have probably noticed by now, I do expect a lot from my students; not so much in the quality of their work, because I know they are to improve it in this class, but trying their best, doing work on time, coming to class and participating, and that kind of stuff. When my students don't meet those expectations, I get frustrated with my students for not "fulfilling their responsibilities" and also with myself for not being able to communicate my expectation or why it's important to do the work on time. Am I expecting too much from my students? Am I not "threatening" enough? (September 24, 1996)

To this message, Betty responded:

This is a specific response to Aya's concern about whether she is "threatening" enough or not. My students that are not doing their part have begun to do their part because their grades reflect their inactivity. They have all begun to sit up and participate. I sometimes have to [coerce] them into participating, but they are doing better. (September 25, 1996)

We did not respond as directly to these entries about our teaching as we did to other types of entries, but they still created a strong sense of sharing and interaction. Some of us felt that having someone to talk to about our own progress and frustrations was helpful in itself. Reading stories of other teachers' struggles and development also helped us get to know each other better and build a tighter and friendlier learning community.

Providing Moral Support

Finally, there were some "pep talk" entries that provided moral support. All exchanges contributed to our group morale by strengthening our collaborative network, but some remarks specifically expressed our trust in this group. For example, Betty wrote:

I just want you guys to know that I think our mentor group is extremely productive and that we all work together very well. We have a group dynamic that is unsurpassed I'm sure in other groups. I am excited about sticking together next semester. (September 24, 1996)

What Happened Next

In the following semester, the four of us stuck together to some extent as Betty had hoped. All of us taught ENGL 102I, an ESL section of the second course in the introductory composition sequence, and we continued to exchange our journals. The exchange was less frequent, however, because we were all using very different syllabi, making the exchange of teaching ideas somewhat difficult. We probably had also gained some confidence as ESL writing teachers and did not need the same level of support we had needed the previous semester. Nonetheless, we maintained the on-line journals as a vehicle for interaction and continued more informal exchanges such as conversation in our offices.

At the same time, our collaboration went beyond the realm of teaching into the realm of scholarship. From this project, each of us found and developed research topics such as (a) how our differing backgrounds affected our views and practices as teachers, (b) how ESL students' perceived and reacted to NESTs and NNESTs, (c) how group dynamics may influence the process of collaboration and of mentoring, and (d) how teachers may develop professionally through collaboration. We even presented papers collaboratively at two conferences, and some of us are continuing to explore the research interests we developed through this project.

Conclusion

Just like any project, our on-line journal-sharing project was not without problems. We began participating in this project with different assumptions and expectations; and did not initially foresee the need to articulate them. For example, at our first collective analysis meeting, we found out that one of us had not read the others' entries while the rest of us had been reading and responding to each other. We realized that we had to decide how interactive these journal entries could and should be. After much discussion, we decided to read and respond to the journals as they were distributed and to write our own entries regularly so that all four of us could benefit from the exchange. Setting the ground rules at the beginning of the project could have prevented such problems, although in our case the process of identifying assumptions and negotiating solutions provided an additional opportunity for collaboration that may have contributed to a stronger sense of community.

Despite these small glitches, the on-line journal-sharing project was collaborative, productive, and successful. Two factors that seem to have contributed to the success of this project were the autonomy of the participants and the opportunity they had to observe each other's growth. As described earlier, the teachers were autonomous in that the teacher educator refrained from participating. This gave us complete freedom and responsibility to shape the project. Thus, from the very beginning, we had to communicate with each other frequently and make group decisions regarding the journal sharing. In addition, other logistics of this teacher education program encouraged our individual autonomy. For instance, although we were asked to use the same syllabus, we were allowed to be flexible; we had much freedom in how we organized each lesson. With this flexibility came the need for a series of decisions that had to be made in a thoughtful yet timely manner, just as in any teaching context. For the four of us—novice teachers who were not always confident about their decisions—e-mail was a convenient way to share our plans and get quick feedback, and the journal-sharing project provided such an arena for this exchange. In other words, the teacher autonomy that was allowed in the structure of the teacher-education program created the need for networking and collaboration among teachers.

This flexibility also allowed us to explore ways to use our strengths and develop our own teaching styles, which leads to another characteristic of this project—it provided opportunities to see others grow as teachers. The on-line journal allowed us to have an informal, candid, and spontaneous exchange of our stories about struggles and success. We witnessed how others develop their teaching styles using their unique strengths and expertise, and we gained a better understanding of why they teach the way they do. In other words, both the general structure of this teacher education program and this particular on-line journal project contributed to greater teacher autonomy, which encouraged us to be different, to appreciate our differences, and to learn from the differences.

Since our collaboration was completely self-initiated and autonomous, it may be difficult to replicate it in other contexts—unless a group of teachers happen to be reading this article and decide to start their own version of a collaborative journal-sharing project. However, teacher educators can facilitate autonomous and collaborative teacher development in a number of ways. For example, they can ask teachers to read articles on teacher reflection journals and collaboration (e.g., this article) prior to or at the beginning of the term and encourage them to consider how they might collaborate. Discussing the rationale and strategies for collaboration in teacher development in class or at professional development workshops may also be effective in introducing teachers to the idea of collaborative teacher development. Teacher educators can also encourage collaboration by creating an e-mail list exclusively for teachers and by encouraging them to think about how they might use it to suit their own needs. Although it may be disheartening for some teacher educators not to be able to monitor or evaluate some aspects of the teachers' progress, we believe that the benefit of autonomy outweighs its cost.

The collaborative approach to teacher development, we feel, is especially important in TESOL because TESOL professionals, no matter where they go, will encounter colleagues—as well as students—who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. The experience of collaborative development in the context of a teacher development program can encourage teachers to develop a collaborative learning community in their own classrooms and, in the long run, to continue their professional development by collaborating with their colleagues.

Authors

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Endnote

- ¹ While the authors use their own names in this report, Betty and Jack are pseudonyms for the other participants.

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