

How the intersubjectivity of teacher and learner reflections contributes to transformative learning experiences

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| 著者 | 黒田 ジョーン |
| journal or publication title | Journal of Research Institute |
| volume | 53 |
| page range | 159-186 |
| year | 2016-03-24 |
| URL | http://id.nii.ac.jp/1085/00001867/ |



How the intersubjectivity of teacher and learner reflections contributes to transformative learning experiences

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Abstract

This study traces my development as a teacher through investigating my underlying teaching beliefs by engaging in reflective practice. These beliefs were influenced by experience, not theory and although I felt I needed justification from professional researchers, I simultaneously rejected this notion. I participated in a reflective journal-writing course from April to July 2014 where I focused my inquiry on a 3rd-year university-level reading course. The descriptive inquiry, or data, consists of reflections taken from my journal entries and the learners' written weekly and final reflections. During the analysis phase of the reflective cycle I discovered a symbiotic relationship between the students' and my reflections, and learned how this created a classroom community that fostered a transformative learning experience for both parties. I began my inquiry with a strong conviction coupled with self-doubt. After going through the reflective cycle, I am a more insightful, confident and mature teacher, able to use literature to support my inquiry and comfortable with being a subjective, emotional and democratic educator. This is the story of how I found my voice.

Key words: teacher beliefs, reflective cycle, intersubjectivity, communication, discovery

1. Introduction

This study describes the journey of my growth from a teacher lacking confidence in my methods to one who understands the reasoning behind those methods through reflective practice and becoming a more self-assured and perceptive English instructor. The intersubjectivity of the learners and my relationship, and its effect on my development as a teacher is the focus of my story.

I brought many frustrations with my experiences in education, both as a teacher and as a student when I designed the syllabus for a reading course at the university where I

would be teaching for the first time. I welcomed this new job as the guidelines for teaching the course closely matched my teaching beliefs. During the interview for the position I was told the students would complain if their critical thinking skills weren't challenged and I looked forward to creating a syllabus that would meet their needs.

I was given the opportunity to enquire into my teaching beliefs and the inner workings of my classroom when I participated in a reflective journal-writing course from April to July 2014. My new job coincided with the start of this course in classroom analysis, so the decision to choose that class to focus on for the course was an easy one. I explored the beliefs I brought with me to the classroom, questioned my assumptions, and with the help of the learners, traced my on-going development from an "English entertainer" to a self-assured instructor by reading and analyzing my journal entries. I searched for literature to gain a deeper understanding of my interpretation of the phenomena I observed and experienced. By using previous research to support my awareness rather than to follow a specific protocol, I was able to take ownership of my journey and felt a sense of authenticity throughout my investigation.

The literature review was, and still is, an ongoing process for my inquiry and I have chosen to integrate the literature into my story to explain how I was able to come to a new awareness by reviewing the work of professional researchers.

Reflection and the reflective cycle offer the freedom to explore while providing a framework for data collection and analysis that is scientific (Rodgers, 2002a). This method also takes into account the subjectivity of the teacher-researcher, necessary for gaining insight into classrooms.

I begin my story by discussing the experiences that shaped my current teaching beliefs. I felt uncomfortable with my beliefs, not because I felt they were wrong, but because they didn't seem to fit into my social environment. I was subconsciously looking for the opportunity to test them when I accepted the new job offer. Consequently my teacher beliefs were manifested in the syllabus and I was testing the validity of my teaching beliefs when I taught the course. Looking back on my actions I can see that this was the emergence of my research question, but at the time, I simply wanted to provide a challenging and engaging course.

I learned to be more ‘present’ (Rogers & Raider-Roth, 2006), which enabled me to notice the events unfolding in the classroom, by participating in the reflective journal-writing course. The observations and reflections recorded in my journal provided the descriptive review and the learners’ reflections, in the form of written reflection papers, formed the descriptive feedback. These two perspectives provided the data for the descriptive inquiry phase of the reflective cycle. Our reflections were often intertwined and impossible to separate as we wrote about our experiences and assessed each other. David Hawkins’ (1974) triangular I, Thou & It framework helped to categorize my understanding into three planes: I-Thou, Thou-It, and It-I.

Along the I-Thou plane, or relationship between teacher and student, I discovered how communicating with the learners through their written reflections had a significant impact on my teacher identity, including my conception of truth. By acknowledging intersubjectivity, that is, seeing myself through their eyes, I was able to change the image of myself as a teacher of English and not simply a native English speaker.

The Thou-It plane represents the relationship between the students and the subject. The learners’ description of their experiences with the course corresponded with Widdowson’s (1998, p.715) definition of authentication in that it was their engagement with the language in a community of learners and in a relevant context that made it an exciting learning experience.

My observations and “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983) can be represented by visualizing a vertical line from the apex of the triangle, or “I”, to the center of the “Thou-It” plane where I struggled with subjectivity in my teaching and learned how to control my emotional reactions in order to respond to situations in the classroom.

The exploration of my teaching beliefs falls along the I-It plane where I experienced alignment of theory and practice.

As I researched the literature and analyzed the learners’ and my reflections, I gained a deeper understanding of my philosophies about teaching and learning. If Husserl’s intersubjectivity as a precondition for interaction and communication (Duranti, 2010, p. 24) is to take place, teachers must be willing to share the power structure of the classroom with their students. This can awaken learning that is meaningful and relevant

to both teacher and students.

Now that I understand why my teaching beliefs are valid, I don't struggle to be the objective, neutral teacher persona. I can be myself: sometimes playful, sometimes subjective and emotional, but also responsible and serious about education.

2. The Reflective Cycle as a Guide

I had just created a syllabus for a reading course at a university that was new to me, and coincidentally joined a reflective journal-writing course at the same time. Following the advice of the instructor my course to choose a class that would offer the most challenging situations, I decided to choose the class with the new syllabus. I included reflection papers (see Appendix A) as part of the course to take attendance and to see what the students were learning during the lessons. However, as the journal-writing course progressed, I started to learn about myself through their reflections.

By reading the reflections written by the learners in my class and seeing how they experienced the course and viewed me as their instructor, I was able to perceive the experience from a different angle. Taking the time to think about and write my own reflections enabled me to see how my past experiences affected my teaching in the present, and also how the learners and I worked together to co-construct our learning experiences.

Reflection can happen at any time, both during and after an experience. During the middle of a chaotic situation in the classroom, teachers often have to make split-second decisions (reflection-in-action) that can be analyzed later after the experience (reflection-on-action) (Schön, 1983).

The reflective cycle for teachers begins with experiences in the classroom. Describing the experiences, analyzing them by thinking critically, creating theory and using paradigms and frameworks to name and understand the experiences leads to taking intelligent action and the final as well as the initial phase of reflective practice as the cycle begins again with a new inquiry into the intelligent actions (Rodgers, 2002b).

To enquire deeply into your own practices, as opposed to simply going through the motions, takes discipline and having an open mind. It also requires a community of

like-minded people and, in my experience, a sensitive and knowledgeable facilitator. These conditions allow the participants to go beyond the surface of their actions and interactions. Connecting previous experiences and prior knowledge and bringing them to new experiences, is part of the meaning-making process (Rodgers, 2002a).

Studying previous research helped me see how my beliefs shaped my chosen pedagogy. It is important to note that I started reviewing the literature after interpreting the data. In this way, I was able to form my own opinions and interpretations first with the literature providing a support for my discoveries rather than a structure to follow.

It was important for me to have space to explore without the pressure of following a specific protocol. The reflective cycle served as a guideline, and although methodical, it was not stifling. I was able to take ownership of my journey and felt a sense of authenticity. I think it is important for teachers to be able to find meaning in their teaching through this same journey of discovery. John Dewey's (1916) "give the pupils something to do, not something to learn" applies equally to teachers.

I'd like to share the discoveries I made during the reflective journey that changed me as a teacher and have organized my story to follow the stages of the reflective cycle.

3. My Teacher Beliefs

I became a master's candidate in the field of education at a Japanese public university in the Spring of 2013. Although many of the courses were not in my native language, I developed strategies, including asking questions, to help overcome some of the difficulties I was having with comprehension. However, my questions were not always for clarification. I often asked questions to further discussion. This inability to keep silent made me feel embarrassed as I assumed I was behaving inappropriately in the Japanese classroom. I also felt frustration, as my classmates, including another American, remained silent unless called upon. My previous experience as an MBA candidate included many lively discussions, questions and comments from the learners. These two learning experiences contrasted sharply with each other and I found myself in the middle of an identity crisis as I tried to adjust my beliefs about learning to accommodate this new situation. This struggle ended abruptly the day my professor drily commented to my "I have a question!" with "Of course you do." His response communicated acceptance of my differences and immediately put me at ease. I started

to feel like I was contributing to the class rather than taking away from it.

I was impressed with the practice of handing in a short reflection written on a half sheet of blank paper with our names and student numbers in lieu of taking attendance for the large classes that had hundreds of students. At the start of every new lecture, the professor would patiently answer some of the queries, often about grading, from the reflections. Having attendance taken at the university level was a new experience for me and I admired the efficiency of the short reflection papers. Some of my courses required longer reflection papers or papers that gave the students the freedom to choose their own topic to write about. I enjoyed being able to research and write about my own areas of interest and appreciated the flexibility of the instructors. These experiences never left me, and came to have a direct impact on my teaching.

3.1 Designing a Syllabus that Matched My Teacher Beliefs

I accepted a new part-time teaching position during the second year of my master's program and brought my experiences both as a teacher and as a student in a Japanese university with me when I designed a reading syllabus that would emphasize critical thinking. I was strong in my belief that a syllabus that focused on learner participation would be appreciated by the learners, but at this point was relying on teacher's intuition rather than research-based theory. Richards (1987) would call this the 'Develop a Methodology' approach. In other words, I developed a method based on my teacher and learner beliefs, rather than one based on a particular theory and this led to insecurities about my teaching.

It is reasonable for teachers, pre-service and in-service alike, to search for the latest methods and change their teaching to fit a theoretically sound model. To be able to speak confidently about the craft of teaching can give the teacher a sense of security about their work. My teaching and syllabus didn't seem to fit any popular models and that made me nervous.

Richards (1998, p. 51) makes the distinction between two types of knowledge that influence teaching. One is knowledge about subject matter and curricular issues. This is observable in the classroom as the teachers display their teaching techniques and learners participate in the set tasks. The other kind of knowledge, the underlying philosophies that make up their understanding of good teaching, is not as obvious.

(Brown and Rodgers, 2001, p. 151) Perhaps, it is due to the unpredictability of the classroom comprised of teachers and students with their unique histories that prompts them to look for an orderly system with rules to follow. In practice, however, teachers do not adhere to the prescripts set by the model (Richards, 1987).

Clearly, the dynamics of the classroom cannot be contained by a rigid methodology and by automatically deferring to a higher authority, teachers may blame themselves or their students if lessons do not progress as expected. Pajares (1992, p. 319) notes, “All individuals, at some point in their lives, suffer attacks of cognitive (belief?) dissonance, where incompatible beliefs are suddenly thrust on them and they must behave in a manner consistent with only one of these beliefs.” Teachers are at risk for having these episodes of dissonance in their classrooms when teaching styles conflict with the learning styles of their students or with the regulations of their teaching institutions. I was fortunate in having the opposite experience when the university guidelines for the reading course matched my teaching beliefs.

Since the learners were from the International Relations department, I chose globalization as the reading theme of the course using current world events from online sources. I searched for advice on how to teach presenting in a foreign language and modified the information from several sources (King, 2002; Cheung, 2008; Zhang, n.d.) for this particular class. Two group presentations comprised the majority of the coursework. Grading was based equally on teacher-, peer-, and self-evaluations for the mid-term presentations totaling 30%. The final presentation grades used the same calculation (30%) with intra-group evaluations replacing self-evaluations. A final reflection paper accounted for 10%, with attendance and participation recorded in the form of weekly reflection papers rounding out the final 30% of their grades.

4. Descriptive Inquiry: Reflection Papers

The impetus for inquiry often begins with a sense of unrest and the desire to look further into an experience. Insecurity about my teaching methods and new syllabus prompted me to choose this class to focus on in the journal course. I wanted to know if my teaching plan was effective and appropriate. The data for this investigation was gathered during the descriptive inquiry phase of the reflective cycle. Descriptive review entails observing and describing an individual or a specific event, rather than generalizing the group from the standpoint of the teacher. The more the teacher is able

to see in the classroom, the greater the potential for gathering rich data. Descriptive feedback solicits the point of view of the students through structured feedback. The importance of descriptive feedback is to focus on the students' learning, rather than the teacher's teaching. (Rodgers, 2002a) Descriptive feedback can often throw light on teachers' assumptions and unconscious judgments by viewing them from the standpoint of the students. I wrote about my observations during the class and also about the students' reflection papers. The students wrote about their experiences with the class.

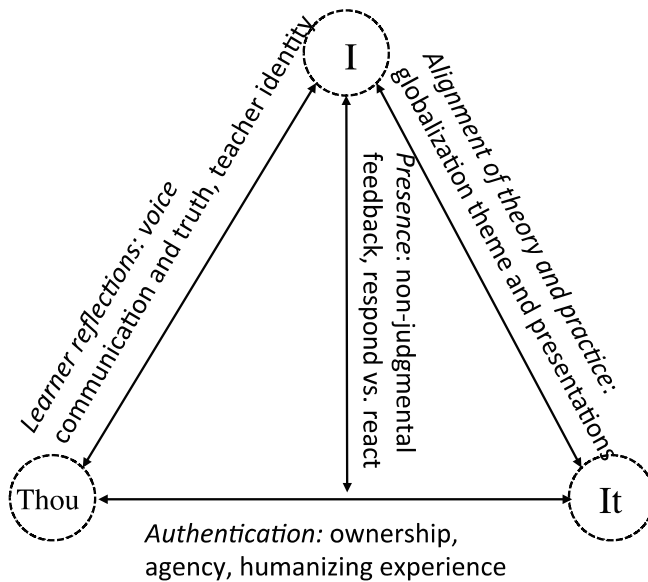
I started every class by responding to queries from the weekly reflection papers as I imitated my previous instructors. The purpose was to address any difficulties the learners were having, but were not able to bring to my attention during the class. This was my way of communicating with them, to show that I was listening and taking their concerns seriously. As the course progressed, I discovered that their preferred method of communication was through these reflection papers, they remained quiet during the class. Furthermore, I realized the learners' weekly reflections also helped me with my own reflections, and in turn, came to have an influence on the view I had of myself as an instructor. This was a surprising discovery for me as the intended purpose of the short reflection papers was as a classroom management tool.

In addition to the weekly reflection papers, the learners were required to write a final reflection paper about their experiences with the course during the first semester. Using highlights from my journal, I wrote the story of my journey as their instructor as a prompt (see Appendix B) for the learners to respond to for their own reflections.

I was often overwhelmed with the stimulus that came with teaching a class of over 40 students in a new environment and found it nearly impossible to focus on a single person or event. However, with practice and with the help of the short reflection papers, I learned to concentrate and became more present. 'Presence' in the classroom is defined by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006, p. 265) as "a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical working of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step." I now had a mass of data including the learners' weekly and final reflections, and my own teacher reflections. The learners and my reflections were so entangled that it often became difficult, if not impossible, to separate.

4.1 Reflection as Analysis: I, Thou, It Framework

One can conceptualize the relationships among teacher (I), student (thou) and subject (it) as a triangle, as David Hawkins' 1978 model does. Teachers, or "I" in this framework, as well as students, "Thou", bring beliefs, previous experiences, expectations and a multitude of attributes with them when they enter the classroom.



The I-Thou relationship centers on trust building and respect among multi-faceted individuals. Teachers ('I'/'Thou') come into the relationship by trusting in the students' ('Thou'/'I') capacity to learn, while students trust that the teacher has knowledge about and the ability to teach the subject at hand. The trust building relationship is a fragile and ongoing process that relies on the teachers' willingness to respond to the students in a respectful and caring manner. One of the hallmarks of being a good teacher is to be able to interpret a situation in such a way as to offer appropriate assistance. Hawkins (2002, p. 57) refers to this as the teacher's ability to 'diagnose'. The better teachers are at diagnosing, the more likely they will be able to develop trust. The teacher's relationship with the subject, or I-It relationship, is where the efforts expended to learn more about the subject matter and how best to teach it are aligned with the teacher's own beliefs and the purpose of the school. Brown and Rodgers (2001, pp. 151-154) address the significance of research on teacher beliefs along this plane as they explain how teacher beliefs shape classroom management practices. The relationship between

student and subject matter, or Thou-It, is the most visible, and quite possibly given the most attention since it is the reason why teachers and students have contact in the first place.

The I-Thou-It framework is used to help organize the data and the many ideas generated during the reflective journey. It can be a rather complicated process as learner and teacher reflections are often intertwined, but by categorizing the discoveries generated by the reflections into I-Thou, Thou-It, and I-It, the holistic experience can be seen more clearly.

5. Discoveries

The learners response to the coursework corresponded with Dewey's (1916) view on learning; "... give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results" (p.167). By recognizing this correspondence, I was able to align theory with practice and find validation in my teaching methods shown in the I-It axis. As I observed and reflected on the class, represented by the vertical line drawn from "I" to the middle of the learners relationship with the subject (Thou-It), I discovered a new problem: my subjectivity. Once discovered, this struggle permeated all of my reflections as will be seen throughout the rest of the paper.

Communication and trust are necessary for any pedagogy to succeed, but this is especially true for a method that requires active learner participation. Learners and teachers must trust in each other to take the risks needed to stretch their capacity for learning. This relationship came to have a significant effect on my teacher identity. As the students and I explored the course together, we also experienced maturity as learners and perhaps re-defined our concept of learning.

5.1 Participation as Communication

I wrote in my reflections about being unsure of the decision to feature presentations so heavily in a reading course and about handing over a substantial amount of power and control to the learners through the division of the evaluations that give the learners the majority of the input.

I'm also very concerned about how they will complete their evaluations.
(May 21, 2014)

I am now wondering how the students feel about giving presentations. The second half of the course has emphasized presenting and presentation skills, but it is a reading class after all...I wonder if any of them will complain about giving presentations for a reading class.
(Journal entry from July 9, 2014)

I hope that I have taken the right course of action and though nervous before the presentations, my reflections indicate that I discovered another type of communication with the learners, which is through participating in the presentations and evaluations.

I was very nervous about their mid-term presentations, but they performed beautifully and it seems that was a form of communication as well.
(Journal entry from June 25, 2014)

5.2 Communication and Truth

My concern about communicating with the learners and my realization about how truth is formed took place as I read and responded to the learners' reflections in the I-Thou relationship. This was a recurring theme in my journal along with the notion that they were not telling the 'truth'.

As I look through my journal, I see that I am mostly concerned about communicating with you. I am very worried that you are telling me what I want to hear, not what you want to say.
(Final Reflective Paper Prompt, July 23, 2014)

I initially thought the learners were reluctant to be honest with me because of my large presence in the classroom and my authority as the instructor of the course.

The feedback in their reflection sheets was also very positive. I would have felt satisfied with the class were it not for an incident that happened in another class...I really, really have to keep my big personality in check or the students won't feel comfortable telling me what is really going on. (Journal entry from April 9, 2014)

I was also distrustful of flattering comments and worried that if I didn't understand the learners' true feelings about their experiences in the classroom, I would have difficulty in meeting their needs and my teaching objectives of sharing responsibility for their learning.

I revised my reflection sheets...but I still feel that maybe they aren't telling me what really concerns or interests them. I think it may have to do with my inability to be neutral.

(Journal entry from June 18, 2014)

My conception of 'truth' was one-sided, that is, positive comments cannot be the truth, only negative comments are a sign of truthfulness and I am the one who makes this judgment. A sign of my struggle with subjectivity can be seen in, "I think it may have to do with my inability to be neutral" (June 18, 2014).

Some students voiced their frustrations [in their final reflection papers] as well and their reflections are giving me a lot to think about. Some were very private and quite revealing. Most of them wrote warm and encouraging messages. I have to say overall, it was a positive way to open up communication between us, especially since it seems so hard for them to speak up in the class.

(Journal entry from July 23, 2014)

I seem to have come to terms with the learners' reticence and understand that it did not mean lack of interest or participation since they were forthcoming in their writing. The discovery of this new mode of communication along with the recognition of the difficulty I have being neutral and non-judgmental came the realization that rather than the learners not telling me the truth in their communications with me, perhaps it was my incapacity to believe them.

When I let go of my pre-conceived notions about truth and started to respond to what the learners were telling me I was recognizing the learners' 'voice'. Rodgers (2010, p. 50) uses Mary Meares' 2003 definition of 'voice' as "an emotional and intellectual ability to express one's own thoughts and perceptions and have them acknowledged and acted upon". It was the voice of the learners that allowed me to discover my identity as a capable teacher.

5.3 Communication and Teacher Identity

When I first entered the classroom, I had big ideas, but limited experience as a university instructor. I also carried ‘baggage’ (Allwright, 2003, p. 116) from my previous experiences as a Peace Corps agriculture volunteer (1990 – 1992) and as an Assistant Language Teacher (1993 – 1995) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. As a native speaker, therefore presumably a credible source, I was often asked to teach English. They were enjoyable and even rewarding experiences at times, but it was difficult not to feel objectified and I often felt more like an English entertainer rather than a teacher. Ryan and Makarova (2004, pp. 51-52) investigated the expectations Japanese university students have of their language learning experiences and two of their findings were of particular interest to me; that of the expectation to be entertained through interesting, lively and varied lessons, and wanting their teacher to be friendly towards them. I can see now that the image I had of myself as a friendly English entertainer was due in part to the expectations of the learners from my previous experiences.

The feedback from the learners about the class, gave me a clearer picture of my teaching and their reflections helped me with my own reflections, which eventually came to have an influence on the view I had of myself as an instructor.

The final reflection paper gave us a chance to think about our growth over the entire semester. I asked the learners to write about their experiences with the course after reading about my own journey in the form of a final reflection prompt (see Appendix B).

Full credit would be given for the final reflection paper, the learners were free to write anything they wanted about the course, and the paper would count towards 10% of their grade as was originally noted on the syllabus.

The learners wrote about the things that were in the forefront of their minds. They were different for each learner, but some themes did emerge. Many learners wrote about their experience with group work and presentations. As part of the course, group work, including group presentations, was featured heavily. This was in part due to the logistics of managing the large class size of 44 students. Like the reflection papers, I planned to use group work for the purpose of class management. However, I discovered benefits of

group work I hadn't previously considered through the comments of the learners as they discussed their experiences, both good and bad, of working with their group members while they prepared for their two presentations.

The beginning of the course...[t]o be frank, I'm sorry but I couldn't feel this course was interesting. However, after divided into groups, I could participate...thanks to [names of group members], I could make effort and enjoyed preparing for presentation! 😊 (S1)

Through our meetings where we made our final presentation, we learned these basics of communication, without any teacher supervision or instruction. It was like magic. (S2)

...Some groups are organized with sophisticated students perfectly and other groups don't have any students who can organize the group as a leader. It is a significant problem to be improved because if there is no one [to] lead the other members in the group, the group can not learn anything in the class. (S34)

For some learners, having independence from the teacher gave them the latitude to explore their abilities and exercise their leadership skills. Others appreciated the support from their group members, and for S34, searching for an authority to replace the teacher was a frustrating experience.

Like S34, some learners felt frustrated with group work and were not satisfied with their groups' and their own performances during the presentations. This type of course with its different kinds of responsibilities, was a new and quite challenging experience for the class. The words 'difficult' and 'difficulty' appear often, quickly followed by words of appreciation.

This class told us not only the way to make presentation, but also the importance and difficulty of making one thing as 'group'. I learned a lot, so I appreciate you. (S29)

What I have learned through this class is difficulty of telling an audience what I want to say... I really regret what I couldn't make audience understood, but I think it

was good experience for me. Thank you very much!!! (S24)

Interestingly, many learners report a deep sense of satisfaction with their learning in spite of not feeling successful with their assigned task. S34, who expressed frustration earlier, in the end wrote, "I'm glad to attend this class in this semester." Clearly the students feel there is more to learning than passing tests and memorizing texts when describing their learning experience. Notably, some learners do not describe achievement at all. This learner used negative terms to illustrate his experience.

...my "journey" is full of negative feelings, but I believe I've grown up mentally and as a presenter. I was not at least irresponsible. I learned how to present, for example, how to organize the presentation, how to speak (but I couldn't do well), how to make power point to make the audience understand easily. They are all my property now...(S15)

The learners indicate experiencing difficulties contributed to their learning as well as to their maturity. When S14 recounted his unhappy experience, he acknowledged that it was the difficulty that allowed him to recognize his maturity through his work ethic. In other words, he took ownership (Kohonen, 2001, p. 34) of his experience as he made sense of it.

5.4 Intersubjectivity

My growth as a teacher was directly related to the learners' reflections and my observations of the learners. I had to rely heavily on the written reflections of the learners as they often remained quiet during our time together but I came to understand that there were different forms of communication that did not necessitate the use of language. When the learners participated in the assigned tasks, they told me that I had communicated my intents clearly and that they accepted my teaching. I was also able to see myself as a teacher from their perspective as I read their reflection papers and tried to communicate my understanding through making adjustments in the course based on their feedback.

Duranti examines Husserl's work on intersubjectivity and ascertains that the original understanding is "closer to the notion of the possibility of being in the place where the Other is" and "is the source of objectivity" (Duranti, 2010, p. 16). Furthermore, he

claims that intersubjectivity is a precondition for interaction and communication, not a result and that “a great deal can be said to be happening without the involvement of language(s).” (Duranti, 2010, p. 28)

The notion of intersubjectivity as the willingness to see ourselves through the eyes of others and being open to the possibility that communication takes a variety of forms that is not restricted to language explains the underpinning philosophy of the intertwining of the learners and my reflections and my interpretation of the learners participation in the course. In this way, I could overcome my problem with subjectivity, and see the underlying concepts of my teaching beliefs.

5.5 Aligning Theories with Practice

When I set about designing the syllabus for the required reading course, I was obviously influenced by my teacher beliefs and past experiences. I had a notion that the learners would respond positively to this type of course, but didn't have a clear understanding of the reasons behind it. After reading the learner's and my reflections about the course, and seeing the learners mature and grow holistically, I have come to understand that my teaching beliefs are similar to experiential learning which is modeled on the reflective cycle mentioned earlier in this paper. Viljo Kohonen (2001) expands on the foundations of experiential learning by including Dewey's progressive pedagogy, Kurt Lewin's social psychology, Maslow's humanistic psychology and Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence among other notable researchers, but experience, reflection and learning involving the whole person remain as the foundation of experiential learning.

Far from being empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, these learners were able to have control over their learning experience. It was in this way that learning was not pre-determined and the curriculum orientation can be categorized as being part of the critical-emancipatory paradigm which aims to create a more democratic society. This is conceptualized by Kohonen's (2001) transformation position where “the learner and the curriculum are interconnected in a holistic manner” (p. 17). Kohonen's description of the underpinnings of this position, “[t]he world view underlying this position is humanistic with a concern for the sense of individual identity and personal growth” (p. 17) match the descriptions the learners made of their experience with the course curriculum when they write about their maturity in comments such as “I've

grown up mentally.” The reflections show holistic growth of the learner when they describe their experiences with the course in terms of enjoyment and appreciation rather than focusing on the success or failure of their task.

These learning experiences could not have happened without the creation of a community that values authenticity, civic capacity and a humanizing pedagogy.

5.5.1 Authentic Experience

The learner’s reflections correspond with Widdowson’s (1998, p. 715) definition of authentication, in that it was their engagement with the language in a community of learners and in a relevant context that was an exciting learning experience.

Taking into account Japanese cultural values such as conforming to authority, groupness and harmony (Tamai & Lee, 2002, p. 39), it is not surprising that the learners responded positively to working in groups and preferred to communicate through reflection papers as opposed to speaking up in class. However, it is these same values that help explain much of the excitement I saw when many of these learners experienced ownership and agency as they took responsibility for their learning. Following in Rodgers (2010, p. 50) footsteps again and using Meares’ definition of agency as having the sense of making a difference and having input and control of a situation, it can be suggested through the learners’ reflections, “thinking is fun!” (S2), that they were encountering this kind of agency for the first time.

5.5.2 Civic Capacity

Rodgers (2010) refers to civic capacity as “one’s ability to contribute to the sustenance and growth of a democracy” (p. 50). There are primarily three aspects of civic capacity taken from the writings of Dewey that Rodgers concentrates on: voice, agency and community.

I am able to understand that what I call ‘communication’ and ‘truth’ is listening to the learners’ ‘voice’ and when the learners talk about ‘maturity’ they are referring to their ‘agency’. As the learners and I negotiated course content and learning strategies, we were creating a democratic community and by doing so developing civic capacity.

5.5.3 Humanizing Pedagogy

A humanizing pedagogy is essentially treating learners with respect, and is especially

relevant in multi-cultural classrooms and contexts. Lilia Bartolomé (1994) suggests “creating democratic learning environments where students become accustomed to being treated as competent and able individuals” and are “informed by both action and reflection” (p. 178).

Approaching the learners as capable human beings is not as easy as it sounds. Certainly as teachers, we value them as human beings capable of learning, but is this communicated to the learners through our teaching strategies and pedagogies? When we offer the learners the space to make and correct their mistakes we are also offering them the possibility to exercise their agency, but in order to do this we must listen to the voice of the learners. It is this willingness to be vulnerable and curious that helps us learn to appreciate the viewpoint of the learners and to truly value them as human beings. This involves being present in the classroom, questioning assumptions, and working on responding and not reacting. Husserl’s definition of intersubjectivity is a key concept in this approach.

6. Subjectivity: Responding vs. Reacting

Throughout the reflective journal-writing course, my classmates and the instructor had been writing comments on the entries offering advice and encouragement. In particular, the instructor regularly wrote thoughtful and thought-provoking comments. This feedback from the instructor had a significant impact on expanding my perspective during my reflective journey and is the reason why I include a sensitive and knowledgeable facilitator as a necessary component for reflection. We would meet once a month to talk about our journals and the instructor would introduce another aspect of reflective writing.

The June mid-term presentations of the learners in my reading class coincided with the time when the instructor of the journal-writing course challenged us to practice non-judgmental feedback and the focus of my journal takes a turn. Up to this point, I had been nervous about classroom management and how the learners would respond to my learner-centered pedagogy. With the success of the mid-term presentations I felt reassured. However, I discovered the source of a serious flaw in my teaching strategy that was blocking the purpose of implementing my intended pedagogy when I was introduced to the concept of non-judgmental feedback.

Regarding non judgemental feedback, I am a complete and utter failure. I cannot NOT give my own opinion to save my life. At least now I am aware of this problem and I am more aware of when I do it... Teaching objectives were definitely not met.
(Journal entry from June 12, 2014)

I think I am very subjective when I teach so I don't give the students an opportunity to form opinions on their own and decide for themselves if it is important or not. I want to work on this.
(Journal entry from June 18, 2014)

These journal entries show how difficult it is for me to even attempt non-judgmental feedback, and also realization of the fact that I am subjective during other aspects of teaching, not just during feedback.

I continued to struggle with reducing subjectivity in my teaching style and in my responses to students, when I am faced with another challenge. One day my instructor casually asks me in passing if I know the difference between reacting and responding. I suddenly find clarity with the introduction of these two key words. I recognized that my difficulties with non-judgmental feedback and being neutral occurred because I was reacting, often emotionally, and not taking the time needed to think in order to respond thoughtfully. After further reflection, during the monthly meeting of the journal-writing course on June 28, 2014, I wondered if, as the instructor, perhaps I felt that it was my responsibility to always have an answer at the ready. Taking on the challenge of reducing subjectivity helped me connect my emotional reactions to the feeling of responsibility and power. I considered that perhaps the fear of the learners challenging my authority contributed to my emotional responses and made me feel protective of my status.

With the awareness that I lacked objectivity in my teaching as well as in my interactions with the learners, I discovered that not only are these emotional reactions hampering my ability to communicate with the learners, they were also derailing my efforts to facilitate the learners' initiative with their learning. I was asking the learners to take control of their learning, but I wasn't relinquishing my own power.

It was during a small and seemingly insignificant incident that happened in the last class of the semester when I was able to see how much I had grown as an instructor. The learners were to use the entire class period to write their final reflection papers and I had reminded them the week prior to bring paper or a laptop to write their reflections.

To my surprise the students kind of sat around for a while, and nobody started writing. They were chatting and looking at their phones and, to me, not taking the assignment seriously. I felt rather angry and then I realized it might be because they didn't have any paper to write on and didn't know what to do. So I asked if they needed paper, they did, I gave it to them and that got them started. I didn't react, I responded! This is such a huge change in my teaching behavior.

(Journal entry from July 23, 2014)

Although the episode was inconsequential in terms of the class proceedings, it was a milestone for me in my development as a teacher. After becoming aware of my tendency to react emotionally, I had been consciously making the effort to be more present in the classroom and to control my emotions. I was often unsuccessful, which is why this incident was particularly notable.

7. Discussion

The importance of the word 'discover' in my story cannot be emphasized enough. I may have come to the same conclusions by reading the literature first, then conducting research and writing about how the previous research affected my teaching beliefs and practices, but I would have felt dissatisfaction following in someone else's footsteps. I needed to go on my own journey.

The 'bottom-up' approach that I experienced through reflective practice can allow teachers to explore their teaching beliefs and practices using previous literature to enhance their understanding and in the process change or confirm current beliefs. The distinction between using the literature to understand currently held beliefs and changing one's beliefs to adhere to the literature is a great one. The latter denies credence in the teacher's autonomy, being capable human beings, an essential element of a humanizing experience that should be recognized in educational research. So while Pajares (1992) makes the plea for more research in changing teacher beliefs, I would like to make the plea for research in how teachers *challenge* their beliefs. Whether or not this process leads to a

change or confirmation in their beliefs and how it has an effect on learning is worth exploring.

When I took the opportunity to join the reflective journal-writing course in 2014, it was out of curiosity and in the interest of becoming a better teacher, not for the purpose of writing a paper. However it was through using reflection as a method of analysis that I was able to collect rich and authentic data to analyze subjectively and scientifically. It has been my experience that the subjectivity of the teacher-researcher can and should be included as data to be analyzed as it provides tangible and relevant data about the classroom environment where the teacher, with all of his or her complexities, plays an integral role.

I learned to see myself as an instructor through the perspective of the learners, and thanks to them, could finally understand the concept of the learners being co-participants. They are still a relatively quiet group, but I understand now that this doesn't mean they aren't communicating with me, we have found alternate ways of communication, through reflection papers, through participation in tasks, and now some face-to-face conversation. We have changed, transformed by our experiences together in the classroom. Mezirow (1997) describes experiences as transformative when frames of reference, that of habits of mind and point of view, undergo change. Our reflections clearly show this change.

It would be easy for me to conclude with a successful resolution, but reflective practice is a never-ending process.

A learner who had missed the majority of classes during the first term, returned during the second semester.

The few times he came to class, he was the class clown. His goals on his reflective papers were to be funny and to make his group mates laugh. I had written him off as someone who was not serious about his education and felt no sympathy for him. I was rather annoyed with him since he didn't show up to class and didn't communicate with me. I informed him that he was automatically failing the class because of his absences and that I really had no say in it. I then off-handedly asked him why he missed so many classes and he told me of a

terrible family tragedy. My heart dropped. I wasn't expecting this at all.
(Journal entry from October 2, 2014)

I am often surprised at how a careless remark made by the instructor can have the potential to both open new lines of communication and shut them down. Just as the professor who accepted my differences with his comment, the single question word, "Why?" enabled me to see not only this learner, but also myself more clearly.

8. Conclusion

Without the opportunity to make meaning from our experiences, we are in danger of simply going through the movements. This includes participating in reflection, conducting research and attending teacher trainings.

A 'top-down' approach risks teachers conforming to the research and denying their own voice thereby losing the opportunity to reconcile their beliefs with their teaching. This alignment of theory and practice benefits all members of the classroom. Brown and Rodgers (2001) recognize, "[t]eachers whose beliefs and teaching behaviors are in accord will be well-matched, will be more effective teachers, and will have more successful students than those teachers for whom beliefs and behaviors are in conflict." (p. 152)

If teachers are able to enquire into their experiences in the classroom, they can gain a greater understanding of their teaching beliefs that can enrich their classrooms and increase their confidence. If researchers allow teachers to answer their own questions, it can open up communication between research and practice, and offer the possibility of introducing new questions and making connections that haven't yet been considered. In other words, it can offer a richness and authenticity that may be lacking in traditional top-down studies. Pajares, in his comprehensive report on teaching beliefs, recognizes the connection between teaching beliefs and classroom practices, but also acknowledges the difficulty in untangling the complicated relationships by adhering to traditional top-down research methodology when he states,

However because *researchers have defined beliefs in terms of their own agendas* [italics added] and seldom explored the many possible interactions among belief subcontracts or their connections to other cognitive or

affective structures, it has been difficult to develop a clear understanding of this relationship. (Pajares, 1992, p. 326)

One of the fundamental assumptions about teacher beliefs is that change is not a common occurrence and on the rare occasion that it does happen, rather than a change in a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997) it is simply a change in allegiance to authority (Pajares, 1992). If teachers are allowed to explore their beliefs freely, they stand a greater chance of developing their own voices and their own beliefs. Reflective practice can fulfill both the needs of the teachers who wish to learn more about themselves and satisfy the curiosity of researchers.

The significance of teacher beliefs on classroom practices is not surprising. However, Pajares notes, “[b]eliefs are unlikely to be replaced unless they prove unsatisfactory, and they are unlikely to prove unsatisfactory unless they are challenged and one is unable to assimilate them into existing conceptions.” (Pajares, 1992, p. 321) Participating in reflective practice compelled me to challenge many of my assumptions and I was able to change some of my teaching beliefs and confirm others. I wasn’t on my journey of discovery and change alone. It is impossible to participate in reflective practice without students. We couldn’t undergo the process of change without each other, and by doing so we were able to challenge our previously held beliefs about teaching and learning as can be seen by our written reflections.

As a typical teacher and student who sought to make meaning from her experiences in education, I have to conclude, based on my own experiences, that reflective practice benefits both pre-service and in-service teachers. Not just in the realm of teacher training, but for job satisfaction, teacher growth, and for the benefit of the learners.

Teachers who are curious about the events unfolding before them in their classroom can gain a greater understanding of the phenomena and of their teaching by going through the reflective cycle as I did. I matured both professionally and emotionally. Since I was able to shed light on the reasoning behind my beliefs, I currently feel less frustration and am better prepared to teach (and take) classes that don’t match my teaching beliefs and practices. In this sense, my convictions are stronger, but I have also learned to become more flexible. The key to my growth and understanding was being given the space to explore and discover meaning at my own pace and in my own way. To borrow a phrase from one of the

learners in my course, “It was like magic. (S2)” It is my hope that more teachers will be given the opportunity to explore their own questions about their classrooms, especially before answering questions from researchers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Tatsuhiro Yoshida of Hyogo University of Teacher Education for giving me space to explore, Dr. Ken Tamai of Kobe City University of Foreign Studies for giving me guidance during my journey, and Dr. Theodore S. Rodgers of the University of Hawaii at Manoa for clearing the path for better understanding.

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Appendix A: Weekly Reflection Sheets

| | |
|--|-------|
| Name: | Date: |
| Student Number: | |
| 1. What went well in class today (e.g. what did you learn, enjoy or do well) | |
| 2. What would you like to do better next time? | |
| 3. Questions/Comments: | |

| | |
|---|-------|
| Attendance and Reflection | |
| Name: | Date: |
| Student Number: | |
| 1. List the things you learned today. | |
| 2. What helped you learn? What did not help you learn? | |
| 3. If there is something that you feel unsure of or frustrated about, what is it? | |

Appendix B: Final Reflection Prompt

I'd like to share the story of my journey as your instructor.

I've been keeping a reflective writing journal about the reading class at X University since the course first began. I chose this course to write about because I thought this one would be the most challenging for me. There are so many students in one class, and the university and its rules are new to me. I wondered how I would manage a class of over 40 students and still stay true to my beliefs that more time should be spent with the students actively participating with less time listening to the instructor.

I had this idea that you would enjoy using your critical thinking skills when doing the readings and started designing a curriculum that would give plenty of opportunities to think, rather than memorize. I also wanted to teach reading skills, like skimming and scanning, to show you that you could understand what you were reading, even if you didn't understand every word. I decided to use short reflective papers to try to open up communication and take attendance.

As I look through my journal, I see that I am mostly concerned about communicating with you. I am very worried that you are telling me what I want to hear, not what you want to say.

Almost every entry is about how you are communicating with me, but my writing changes from how nervous I am about my ability to understand what is happening in the classroom to how you are communicating with me through your presentations. The presentations have been wonderful and this is how I can see your attitude about the class.

I notice how some groups seem to communicate with each other better than other groups. I can clearly see the difference during the presentations, and it makes me curious about what is happening outside of the class.

When I started teaching this course, I felt really nervous and insecure. I had a strong belief in my teaching philosophy, but I had no idea how you were going to react to my lessons. I don't know if it is my imagination, but along the way, I felt that the

atmosphere has changed in the classroom and it has made me feel more confident about my lessons and my ability to understand what is happening in the classroom. For example, when it came time to give the final presentations, many groups seemed to be looking forward to giving their presentations. Afterwards, when I spoke to you about your presentations, many of you seemed to find real satisfaction in what you had accomplished. I don't think it was just relief that you had crossed an assignment off your list. I was impressed with many of your comments. Even if you felt it was a job well done, you seemed to know that there is always room for improvement and more to learn.

I can't know for sure though if you don't tell me the story about your journey in this class.

As you know, we have come to the end of the first semester, but we still have another semester together. I use the term 'journey' when I ask you to tell me your story because I think we are still exploring what we can do in this course together. At the beginning of the course I hadn't met you before, the syllabus was new, and the university was unfamiliar. I'm sure you were also faced with new situations and challenges. I'd like to hear about them so we can make the most of our time together during the rest of this course. For some of you, this is the end of your journey with me, as you prepare for your year abroad. This does not make your reflections any less valuable for the rest of the year. I value your experiences with this course and your classmates will benefit from your insight.

I have prepared portfolios that contain 1) your weekly reflection papers, 2) teacher and peer evaluations from your final presentation, 3) a copy of your teacher evaluation from your mid-term presentation. You should already have your self and peer evaluations from your mid-term presentation. Look through your portfolio to remind you of things that happened during the course.

I look forward to reading your stories.