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Introduction to Teaching Narratives

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Introduction to *Teaching Narratives*

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1. The Genesis of this Volume

In May of 2015, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies generously agreed to host the PanSIG conference sponsored by JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching). The conference theme selected by the organizing committee was “Narratives: Raising the Happiness Quotient” which was considered a broad enough title to appeal to all 27 different Special Interest Groups (SIGs) that would participate in PanSIG.

Narratives were deemed an appropriate theme for a language teaching/learning conference since the ability to create narratives is an essential life skill. Narratives give people a means to express their inner world, their subconscious selves. Furthermore, they build community. Stories reach into the humanity of the author/teller and resonate with the humanity of the reader/hearer. The “happiness” part of the conference theme is also encapsulated within this volume (although in a less direct way as will be explained in the description of two relevant chapters).

After the conference, the JALT organization prepared its own “Conference Proceedings” that consisted of a large number of short articles that would readers give a taste of the broad range of presentations/topics covered. However, there was a need for a separate, more focused volume to explore in greater depth the central themes of the conference as expressed through ideas of a select collection of authors. Hence, the present volume came into being.

2. Explanation of the Title

The title of this volume is intentionally ambiguous; the volume serves two purposes. On the one hand, the first section of the volume looks into the hows and whys of teaching stories/narratives in the English classroom. However, as it is also important to listen to and understand narratives about teaching as told by teachers, students and others, the second half

of the volume takes this other perspective. Thus, it allows the combination of two distinct themes—one, regarding methodology and classroom practices involved in the teaching of narratives, and two, regarding a collection of stories shared by teachers, students and others with a stake in education. It is through the sharing of our stories (and helping others to find their voices) that we ensure continuity in the ELT community. The next sections provide further exploration of these distinct yet intertwining themes.

2.1 Theme One

The teaching of narratives is not new but it has taken a number of different shapes. In order to appreciate the myriad of approaches one must also decide on the productive focus (written, or spoken) since the language choices and complexity varies in each. Whether it is a story to be told or a story to be read, however, creating a good structure seems to be a universally agreed upon requirement. Furthermore, most agree that story creation works well as a collaboration whether at the planning stage or later at the editing stage.

2.2 Theme Two

Narratives about teaching (and learning) as told by teachers, learners and others (observers, interested stakeholders) allow an interpretation of events through narrative inquiry. Stories come in many forms (e.g., autobiographies, journals, field notes, letters, photos/artifacts, etc.). Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999) uses these texts as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives through narratives.

For teachers who wish to find a way to reflect upon and examine their own teaching, *Action Research* can utilize narrative inquiry. Furthermore, teaching stories build community between teachers of all ages and stages of their professional journey (e.g., Mattos, 2009). Many of these activities are central to *reflective practice* and should be a required component of every teacher's training and subsequent professional development.

Learners also can also benefit from sharing their stories as a form of personal reflection of events past in order to make sense of meaning out of their actions (or inactions). Storytelling can also serve as a means of making a future projection of optimal outcomes yet to come that ignites and succours motivation.

Other stakeholders in learning and teaching (administrators, observers, friends, relatives, the general public, etc.) participate in the sharing and weaving of stories—sometimes to give

voice to those who are unable, sometimes using their own voices to make the meaningful known.

3. The Papers in this Volume

Reflecting the ambiguity of the volume title, this volume is divided into two sections of four chapters each. The first section considers how to teach storytelling and story writing to learners. The second looks at the various ways stories have enabled us to share and reflect upon teaching and learning.

3.1 Teaching Narratives: How and Why

The first chapter in this section, (Teaching narratives and successful storytelling: A survey of approaches, Donna TATSUKI) is an exhaustive compilation of the various approaches available for the teaching of how to write and perform narratives. This is followed by a chapter that recounts the processes involved in the creation of a group performance in the style of Oral Interpretation (Creative synergy: The story of collaboration in storytelling, David KLUGE). The next chapter, (Visual plus verbal: Improvisational, collaborative storytelling for creativity, Haruko SANNOMIYA) introduces two activities that utilize improvisational drama techniques within story structure. The final chapter in this section offers some neurological explanations of why stories are so appealing to human beings and offers a glimpse at methods used to encourage story writing among university students (The Neuroscience of Stories and Why our Brains Love Them, Curtis KELLY).

3.2 Teaching Narratives: Sharing stories of Teaching and Learning

The second section of this volume requires the reader to change their understanding of the word class for the word “teaching” from a verb denoting *action* into a modifying gerund denoting *description*. After those mental acrobatics are done, the reader might ask: Why do we need to share stories about teaching and learning?

The opening chapter in this section, (Narratives about teaching: Remembrance, reflection and controversy, Donna TATSUKI) sets the stage of the chapters that follow. It catalogues the kinds of narratives written by the various stakeholders in the teaching learning enterprise and comments (where appropriate) on the mutual influences they exert. The next chapter, (Self-narratives in post-visualization: Raising language learners’ awareness and emotivation, Liliana LANDOLFI) shows how guided visualizations, in which learners imagine a positive image and storyline for themselves, activate an inner motivation (termed *emotivation*) that

leads to a change in attitude towards learning language. This theme of learner awareness-building through the use of personal narrative is further developed as a reflective practice in the next chapter (Reflections on a model united nations simulation, Lori ZENUK-NISHIDE). In a departure from learner narrative, the final chapter, (What is a language teacher to do? A narrative of planning and adaptation, Brian BRESNIHAN) takes the teacher's perspective and hears the teacher narrative his thoughts, plans and adaptations throughout a series of classroom activities.

References

- Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, E. M. (1999). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mattos, A. (2009). *Narratives on Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.