EFL teachers' conceptual development and the transformation of teaching through narratives in the e-portfolio*

Yoshida, T.[1], Imai, H[1].; Yanase, Y.[2], Tamai, K.[3], Zeng, G., Sakamoto, N.[4]; Matoba, M.[5]

1: Hyogo University of Teacher Education, Japan; 2: Hirosihma University, Japan; 3: Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Japan; 4: Junior High School of University of Hyogo, Japan; 5: Shoei High School, Japan

Email: tyoshida@hyogo-u.ac.jp

Introduction

- **Teacher development**
  - is a complicated process, situated in particular contexts and his or her particular experiences.
  - "has no start or end point" (Johnson & Golombek, 2011: ix)
  - is not time- or place-bounded (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

- **The role of formal teacher education programs (such as a MA program)**
  - Scientific concepts as **psychological tools** (Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Golombek, 2011)

    "In SLTE, **scientific concepts** are presented to teachers in order to restructure and transform their **everyday concept**" and vice versa. (p.4-5)

    Teachers reconceptualize the way they think about teaching and students learning.

- **But reconceptualization of teacher's experiences is not easy!**
  - teachers are busy!
  - teaching is too complicated and dynamic (or even messy)!

  - **Yet we believe that narrative account of teachers' experiences becomes a powerful tool, which mediates their reinterpretation of their understanding of teaching.**

A Narrative Account of Teacher' Experiences

- **Why narrative?**
  - Elbaz (1991)
    "teachers' knowledge in its own terms is ordered by story and can best be understood in this way." (p.3)

  - Connelly and Clandinin (2000)
    "For us, narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. In effect, narrative thinking is part of the phenomenon of narrative. It might be said that narrative method is a part or aspect of narrative phenomena. Thus, we say, narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of the social sciences." (p.18)

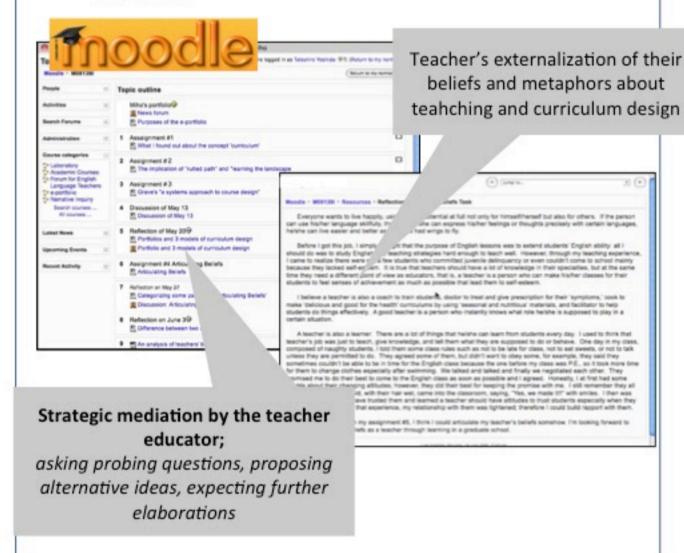 - Johnson & Golombek (2000)
    "We believe that, ultimately, narrative inquiry enables teachers not only to make sense of their professional worlds, but also to make significant and worthwhile change within themselves and in their teaching practices." (p.7)

    - the **knowledge, ideas, perspectives, understandings, and experiences**
    - the **complexities** of their practice
    - the struggles, tensions, triumphs, and rewards of their lives as teachers

Our previous study

- **Yoshida (2011)**
  - a course in a MA program; ELT Curriculum Design in 2008
  - Graves (2000) as a course textbook: design components, emphasis on '**articulating beliefs**' and '**defining one's own context**'
  - A use of Moodle as a eportfolio; students uploaded their narratives in their web space
  - **The dialogic process** with the instructor and **his strategic mediation** enabled the student teachers to reorient their everyday concepts of 'language curriculum' and develop its new concepts as they were exposed to scientific concepts of curriculum.

Teacher's externalization of their beliefs and metaphors about teahching and curriculum design

Strategic mediation by the teacher educator;

asking probing questions, proposing alternative ideas, expecting further elaborations

Questions of the study

- **How would teachers' conceptual development in the SLTE program lead to the actual transformation of teaching after they leave the program?**

- **How can we (teacher educators) encourage the teachers to continue narrative inquiry in the busy school life?**

Methodology

- **Teacher inquiry group (from August, 2010)**
  - Eight Japanese EFL (six female and two male) teachers teaching at secondary level joined.
  - Teaching experiences range from 10 to 25 years
  - All of them completed MA programs in language teaching.

- **The task for the teachers**
  - Keep their teaching journals to promote their professional development
  - Collaboratively investigate the ways in which their understanding and reconceptualization of language teaching

- **Eportfolio: Web tools for writing & sharing their stories**
  - **Google Apps for Education** = working portfolio
  - **WordPress** = showcase portfolio

... publish them in the blog.

Sharing the stories

Select, reflect, and compile the stories and....

- **Tracing teachers' development**
  - Teachers' narratives uploaded in Google Docs and the presentations of their experiences on the showcase portfolio were analyzed.

Katsunori's stories

- **His narrative in the MA program in 2008 (reported in Yoshida, 2011)**
  - **Struggled with the conflict** between learning English for sound pedagogical and learning English for the exam
  - **Stopped thinking in an either-or way**; accepted the significance of the entrance exams in his students' live and encouraged student participation in meaningful experiences and established trustworthy relationship with them.
  - **"Trust"** and **"commitment"** in language learning: Two common pedagogical notions, but retelling his own stories and experiences, **Katsunori was able to define the meaning of the two concepts as something essential for his own teaching.**

- **Katsunori's narrative inquiry continued (2010-)**
  - Uploaded 20 stories; most of them were shared by other community members.
  - Reexamining the stories in the web space and had dialogues with other members, he published his reinterpretations in his showcase eportfolio.

- **Three issues: Beliefs, Pair work, Writing Activity**

  Pair Work
  I am still searching for good (effective) ways to incorporate communicative pair activities. Sometimes students collaboratively work in pairs and sometimes they don't. There are some conditions for good pair activity;

  - **good topic** (something authentic for learners)
  - **good planning** (clear instruction and gradual approach)
  - **sound interdependency among the students** (i.e. trust and commitment)

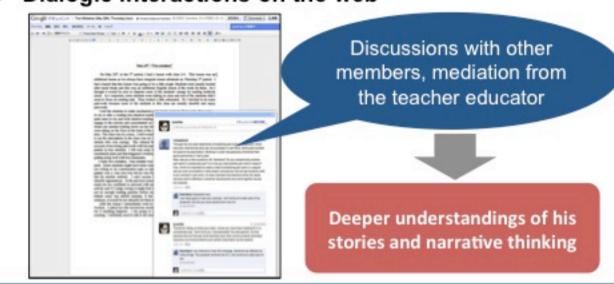- **A critical event in the pair work activity**
  - An analysis of "Two mistakes" posted on May 26th, 2011, and "Renewed conception of Pair-Work" posted on May 27th, 2011
  - Failure of the activity, disappointment, a student upsetting emotion, and a mess in the classroom…

  I made two mistakes. One mistake was that I used the mechanical pairs on the wrong timing. Some students might have been very frustrated to make pairs with someone who is not willing to do a collaborative task… A second mistake was that I did not give enough reading practice before moving into the shadow-reading test;

  - **A critical event approach to narrative** (Webster & Mertove, 2007); "**The critical event will have challenged the storyteller's understanding or worldview.** The event is likely to have changed their experience and understanding, informing future behavior and understanding. (p.74)"

  Maybe the biggest mistake I made was that I misunderstood the nature of pair-work. It is not something that complements some of teacher's roles. Taking care of the students with some difficulties in learning English is a teacher's job. I just can't rely it on students. Pair-work time is not for less-advanced students to ask some questions to more advanced students. Students want to have more symmetrical partnership. Pair-work time should be more premium; like an unexpected gift of learning.

- **Dialogic interactions on the web**

Discussions with other members, mediation from the teacher educator

Deeper understandings of his stories and narrative thinking

Conclusion

- **Did the conceptual development transform practice and promote further understanding of teaching?**
  - Yes, but still need to think and understand phenomena in more narrative ways; "**through living, telling, and retelling their stories, narrative inquirers begin to think narratively about their phenomena.**" (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007)
  - Also, need to understand (make sense of) scientific concepts as a mediational tool (Johnson, 2007)

- **How can teacher educators encourage teachers?**
  - Getting involved in more dialogic relationships and providing strategic mediation
  - Helping teachers move **from field texts to research texts** (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)
  - Understanding more about narrative inquiry: "**Narrative Knowledging**" (Barkhuizen, 2011)