

Teacher stories to improve theories of learner/teacher autonomy

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In his article in Issue 42 of *Independence* Lienhard Legenhausen writes “research, theory and practice can be said to stand in a triangular relationship in which each construct has an impact on and is influenced by the other two constructs” (Legenhausen, 2007: 18). He also says “The ultimate aim of both theory and research is to improve control of practical issues, which means improving practice” (ibid.). In this article I would like to make a case for an influence in the opposite direction: practitioners, i.e. teachers, taking control and helping researchers and theorists improve their work by telling stories.

An issue

According to Clandinin and Connelly (1995) teachers tell three kinds of stories. Sacred stories have their basis in theories that are unquestioningly thought to lead practice. They are “elusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told, because they [...] lie too deep in the consciousness of the people” (Crites, 1971, p. 294, cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p.8). Cover stories are told by teachers outside their classroom in order to prove their competence and hide any uncertainties. They are often affected by new prescriptions, new mandates, and new policies that “are dropping from the conduit to litter the professional knowledge landscape [of teachers]” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 32). Secret stories are the stories teachers live out in the safety of their classroom. They are only told to others in safe places where teachers do not feel they have to defend themselves.

Learner autonomy practitioners used to be a fringe group who did strange things in our classrooms. Learner autonomy, whatever it meant to each of us, was part and parcel of our secret stories. As the term became a buzz word, however, it has crept into the realms of sacred stories and cover stories. If Turid Trebbi is right in saying there is so little autonomy in our classrooms (Nicoll, 2007), that is probably because teacher educators have so far failed to facilitate the integration of the idea of learner autonomy in teachers’ secret stories on any large scale.

A possible cause of the problem

Why have we failed? Of course, with the complexity and diversity of a phenomenon like teacher development, it would not be possible to pinpoint one single cause of the problem. A possible cause that is perhaps relatively pervasive is, however, a mismatch

between theoretical and pedagogical assumptions of teacher educators and how teachers actually learn and change. Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 3) noticed while they were trying to study teachers’ professional knowledge that “teachers were more inclined to ask questions along the lines of ‘Who am I in this situation?’ rather than ‘What do I know in this situation?’” If identity is the central concern of teachers, learning to support learner autonomy may not be about acquiring knowledge or even generating knowledge as assumed by advocates of reflective practice but about transforming identity. In other words teacher educators should ask themselves ‘who do I want teachers to become?’ rather than ‘what do I want teachers to know and to be capable of?’ In the learner autonomy literature Little (1995, p. 178) observes that “the teacher cannot but teach ‘herself’.” Thavenius (1999: 159) claims that learning to support learner autonomy “is not just a matter of changing teaching techniques, it is a matter of changing teacher personality.” Unfortunately there has not been much work to follow up on these very important insights. Research and theories fall far short of the mark to improve practice.

How teachers can help to remedy the problem

Researchers and theorists do not know how learner autonomy becomes part of teachers’ secret stories, what kind of identity transformation is required for it, or how that transformation takes place. But each of us, as a learner autonomy practitioner, remembers how we encountered the concept of learner autonomy, how it has affected our sense of who we are and our aspiration of who we want to be, how our secret stories have changed over the years, and how these stories have come to reflect our understanding of learner autonomy. These memories are likely to include our experiences outside the immediate context of our classroom and workplace because teachers’ practice is influenced by both professional and personal experiences (Aoki, in press). They constitute our life store, as it were. Telling it as a whole or even partially to researchers and theorists would greatly help them to come up with a better notion of how pro-autonomy teachers may develop.

A required paradigm shift

For researchers and theorists to benefit from teachers' life stories they have to change their frame of mind. The criteria of good research they are so well accustomed to do not apply to stories. First, stories are not objective. They are representations of teachers' subjective experiences. Second, they are not reliable in the sense that each story is told here and now with a particular audience in mind. With a different kind of audience in a different place at a different time teachers are likely to tell a different story. Third, stories defy generalization. Each story is unique. If you try to chop stories up and categorize the pieces you will lose sight of the continuity in each teacher's unfolding life and the complex interrelatedness of his/her experiences. And "categories leak" (Clandinin, et. al., 2006, p. 113) anyway. If you reduce teachers or their stories to a bundle of a limited number of variables you will lose "the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs" (Carter, 1993, p. 6) that stories capture. Last but not least important, an exact definition of learner autonomy cannot be a starting point. Teachers will not tell their secret stories if they sense they will be judged against predetermined norms. Each teacher's interpretation of learner autonomy must be accepted as is. This shift from the objective to the subjective, from a solid single reality to fluid multiple realities, from the universal to the specific, and from a theory-driven to a data-driven approach more or less corresponds with a shift from a positivist to a constructivist research paradigm (Hatch, 2002). The turn in your mind won't come about instantly like changing clothes. It will take a while and it will sometimes be an uphill struggle. But it is worth the effort. Once you get there you will have a whole new horizon opening up for you.

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