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Authoring Teacher Development in a Graduate Seminar in Vietnam

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Abstract

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore stories of teacher development experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in a graduate seminar in Vietnam. The author was the instructor for the course, entitled *Literature and Language Teaching*. Three types of data were collected: course documents, a professional diary kept by the author, and student portfolios, including diary entries, writing assignments, lesson plans, and group projects. Within a narrative framework, this study reveals the authoring processes underlying professional development in lived experience. Specifically, three narratives are (re)constructed around the theme of expectations—a collective seminar participants' story about overturned expectations, an individual participant's story about revived expectations, and a curricular story about fused personal and professional expectations. Teacher development is thus perceived not as a linear process of skill-building, but rather as a multidimensional process of narrative construction that problematizes boundaries between the personal and the professional and emerges as a story of coming to understand experience in ways that promote teacher praxis.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; teacher development; professional diaries; ESL/EFL; literature; Vietnam; praxis.

Introduction

On a campus of the national university of Vietnam, a single room came to symbolize the surrounding professional development for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers there. The room was the graduate library for M.A. and Ph.D. students in the department. About the size of an American high school classroom—that is, a rectangular room of no more than 75m²—it housed one computer, several wooden tables, a photocopier, a display shelf of periodicals, and several shelves and cabinets of books, theses, and dissertations. Only photocopies tended to be available, as originals were usually deemed too precious to be handled directly. Cast-iron bars over the windows further protected the resources inside. Western academic books and journals were regarded as expensive—what little money could be spent in this direction did not buy much. It was therefore expected that alumni studying overseas, as well as professors attending international conferences, would make every effort to obtain or photocopy as many resources as possible and bring them back to this room for others to use. Indeed, rumors abounded of graduate students spending their last week in Australia holed up in their university's library for this purpose.

The professional development of EFL teachers in Vietnam is the focus of this narrative inquiry. The purpose of this research, which involved keeping a professional diary and gathering students' written work in portfolios, is to explore stories of teacher development experienced by EFL teachers in a graduate seminar in Vietnam. I myself was the instructor for the course, entitled *Literature and Language Teaching*. This project is significant not only because it discusses teacher development in a relatively unstudied context, but also because it reveals personal dimensions within professional development. The interactions among the research methodology of narrative inquiry, the narrative form for reporting findings, and the literary, linguistic, and pedagogical course content create a layered dynamic, which yields fresh perspectives on teacher development. That is to say, this research recounts complex processes of authoring and interpreting engaged in by the researcher and participants as a key dimension of professional development, and suggests that such authoring may well be inherent in teacher *praxis*. These interweaving strands of narrative construction reflect teacher development in lived experience in ways that problematize and make permeable boundaries between the personal and the professional.

Literature Review

Teacher development

For the purposes of this study, a basic definition of teacher or professional development suffices: “a process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth” (Lange, 1990, cited in Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001, p. 4). Such growth is:

[N]ot focused on a specific job. It serves a longer-term goal and seeks to facilitate growth of teachers’ understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers. It often involves examining different dimensions of a teacher’s practice as a basis for reflective review and can hence be seen as “bottom-up.” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 4)

Teacher development can also be described as “a process of lifelong learning...giving teachers opportunities to reflect on classroom practice, gain insight into teaching experiences, view education as a long-term process, and deal with change and divergence” (Pham, 2001, p. 1). Admittedly, this conception of teacher development is idealistic, not in the sense of being unrealistic, but in the sense of framing the process in optimistic and open-ended terms.

In language education, teacher development is typically framed in terms of skills or activities that either flow from or result in innovations in practice (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005). These include self-monitoring, observation, reflection, keeping a teaching journal or diary, analyzing cases or critical incidents, conducting action research projects, and learning a new language oneself. There is often an explicit or implied order to these skills and activities over the course of a career. A teacher begins with the basics of self-monitoring and reflection, moves on to more complex activities such as action research or assembling a teaching portfolio, and eventually matures into other professional roles, for example, materials writing or mentoring relationships.

Johnson and Golombek (2002) argue that narrative inquiry is itself a form of professional development. While specifically disavowing a linear perspective, they highlight the process of reaching new understandings of actions in context:

[N]arrative inquiry, conducted by teachers individually or collaboratively, tells the stories of teachers’ professional development within their own professional worlds. Such inquiry is driven by teachers’ inner desire to understand that experience, to reconcile what is known with that which is hidden, to confirm and affirm, and to construct and reconstruct understandings of themselves as teachers and of their own teaching. (p. 6)

Similarly, Tsui (2007) sees narrative inquiry and professional development as dynamically intertwined in ongoing processes of teacher identity formation. Her study reveals interrelationships and conflicts among personal, sociocultural, and professional conceptions of “good teaching,” which she acutely interprets as tied in part to access to and acceptance by professional communities and legitimization structures.

Narrative inquiry

This study situates its research methodology and interpretive pathways within a narrative inquiry approach (Barkhuizen, 2008, 2011; Bell, 2002; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Norton & Early, 2011; Webster & Mertova, 2007). At a fundamental level, “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 20). Bell (2002) elaborates:

Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures. That is, we select those elements of experience to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect the stories available to us. (p. 207)

Narrative inquiry is concerned with story elements such as plot, character, and setting, as well as conflicts, turning points, images, and metaphors. It often takes up the story of a single individual (as in Tsui, 2007), although this is not the case in the present study. Narrative researchers do not bend their efforts toward finding unitary or all-encompassing truths but rather accept multiplicities and gaps (Creswell, 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007). For this reason, narrative inquirers may choose not to frame their writing in terms of “research gaps” that their work then fills (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). This is the orientation adopted in the present study, indicating that the primary purpose of this literature review is thus to establish a theoretical context and to situate the research within relevant disciplinary landscapes.

Diary studies

Diary studies are a well-accepted form of qualitative research in language education (Appel, 1995; Bailey, 1990; Krishnan & Hoon, 2002; McKay, 2006; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Bailey (1990) provides a succinct description: “A diary is a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events” (p. 215). Professional diaries (or journals) have been required of pre-service teacher education students (Numrich, 1996), as well as used as part of in-service teacher development programs (Woodfield & Lazarus, 1998) and action research projects (Sá,

2002). As with narrative inquiry, professional diaries can help teachers explore experience in ways contributing to their development (Porto, 2008; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Stewart & Lokon, 2003).

Such diaries need not be kept by individuals only, but might also be done interactively or collaboratively. Matsuda and Matsuda (2001) recount how four graduate teaching assistants formed a cross-cultural community that voluntarily kept and shared reflective professional diaries. They responded to one another in writing and occasionally met to discuss specific diary entries, an experience which fostered teacher development. Alterio (2004) similarly reports on a collaborative professional diary project, involving nine teachers and practitioners from four disciplines, which also promoted professional development. She found that her participants used professional diaries to pose questions, discuss ideas, and share stories, among other purposes (p. 325, Table I).

Interrelationships among research methodologies and course content

The interrelationships among teacher development, narrative inquiry, and diary studies rest upon their shared emphasis on human experience (Crites, 1971; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Tsui, 2007; Xu & Connelly, 2009). Richards and Farrell (2005) explain:

For teachers, a journal can serve as a way of clarifying their own thinking and of exploring their own beliefs and practices...By writing down one's observations, thoughts, and stories over time, one can see patterns emerge, and when interpretations of these patterns are made, one often also sees growth and development. (p. 70)

Similarly, Golombek and Johnson (2004) suggest that narrative inquiry opens up an emotional and cognitive "mediational space" within which new understandings of identities and activities can be reached. It also highlights the individuality of each teacher's growth:

Narrative inquiry does not provide a simple, linear resolution to any teacher's professional development.... [D]evelopment is a highly individualized and recursive process. Narrative inquiry provides teacher educators and teachers alike with a way to recognize and nourish the unique path of professional development that each teacher pursues. (p. 325)

In this study, the content of the *Literature in Language Teaching* seminar is another thread in the tapestry. Imaginative literature, namely, fiction, poetry, and drama as material for language learning, can be both stimulating and daunting for language students (Baurain, 2000; Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2006). It can be daunting because of the

high levels of vocabulary and reading skills needed, as well as the ways in which meanings tend not to be delivered with dictionary-explicitness. On the other hand, literature can be stimulating because of students' strong desire to comprehend the culture(s) of origin, the feeling of accomplishment upon grasping an authentic and high-quality text, and literature's connections with and incarnations of shared and diverse human experiences. Within language education, literature is seen in a variety of ways, from source material for stylistics, linguistics, and discourse studies (Hall, 2005), to a subject in its own right, concerned with issues of genre, interpretation, criticism, and response (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000), to a springboard for lively communicative activities (Duff & Maley, 2007). From my perspective, literature can and does do all of this, with the key concept being *engagement* (Baurain, 2000). Increased language proficiency is often too small a goal to keep students fully engaged; they are whole learners who are best served by material that engages them as whole persons. Literature has the potential to engage minds, hearts, wills, and souls, and to fire imaginations, so reading and exploring literature can help all of us to discover, author, and interpret our own stories, the plotlines and themes of our lives. As Taylor (1996) reminds us:

The desire for meaning is the originating impulse of story. We tell stories because we hope to find or create significant connections between things. Stories link past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going. (p. 1)

In this article, I navigate the currents and cross-currents among teacher development, narrative inquiry, and diary studies. These are ideas and activities which themselves imply ongoing journeys and evolving stories, set in the context of a graduate seminar built around stories and creativity and human experience, and from the vantage point of having myself been a character in the seminar's story as well as of being a character—the same, yet different—in other stories that have since unfolded. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, we are always “in the midst” of a “nested set of stories” (p. 63).

The Study

The central research question in this study is: *What can be learned about teacher development from the stories and experiences of participants in a graduate seminar in Vietnam? Several sub-questions further guide the project: What stories about teacher development are told or experienced by the participants? What professional development themes emerge from these stories and experiences? How do the processes of narrative construction and teacher development coexist and interact?* The starting point for

answering such questions is the belief that there is an intrinsic value to learning the meanings of experience through story (Barkhuizen, 2011; Chan, 2006; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crites, 1971). Within reflective recountings of experience can be found understandings of the inseparability of personal and professional growth and transformation in day-to-day teacher praxis (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Chan, 2006; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Norton & Early, 2011; Xu & Connelly, 2009).

Participants

This study was conducted on a campus of the national university of Vietnam, which consists of a number of colleges and professional schools located in several of Vietnam's largest cities. *The Literature in Language Teaching* course was an elective in a master's degree program in teaching EFL and applied linguistics. Students in the program taught at all levels of the educational system and in all types of institutions. The course met weekly from September to December 2005, with assignments and papers due as late as April 2006 (a normal timeline within the program). Students in the program were required to have a minimum of two years of English teaching experience. During the Fall 2005 semester, eight of the nine course participants had between two and ten years' experience (the one exception was a journalist contemplating a career change). These eight students continued as full- or part-time teachers in high schools, universities, and language centers, while simultaneously enrolled as full-time students in the graduate program.

The university did not have a research review board or approval process; however, my data collection was approved beforehand by two key administrators. In addition, I followed ethical research guidelines provided by the TESOL International Association (<http://www.tesol.org>) for situations in which institutions do not have research guidelines or policies. The students in the course were made fully aware of the implications of participating in the research and of making their portfolios available for the instructor's research. Their rights as participants were also explained to them, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. They indicated their voluntary participation and agreed to allow the instructor to use their portfolios as part of his research by signing brief informed consent statements. At the time, data was gathered without a specific research question, which was made clear to students and might be considered a limitation of the present study. Nonetheless, all nine agreed to participate on an open-ended basis. All names of participants in this article are pseudonyms.

Setting

While this study does not aim to reach generalized conclusions about EFL teacher development in Vietnam, context does matter and is part of this study's significance (Barkhuizen, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Xu & Connelly, 2009). A brief overview of EFL education in Vietnam is thus provided as essential background for the experiences this study explores (as is done in Tsui, 2007).

While the focus is on one course and a handful of teacher-participants, the national setting is implicated and embedded in the particular stories. The fact is that the enterprise of EFL teacher education in Vietnam is relatively new (Duong, 2003; Le, 2007; Pham, 2001). After the Vietnam War—or American War, in Vietnamese accounts—ended in 1975, Vietnam built close ties with the former Soviet Union. The leading foreign language taught in Vietnamese schools was Russian. In 1986, the government of Vietnam approved a transition to a *Doimoi* or “open door” policy, that is, to a centralized market economy along the lines of what China was beginning to do. Progress in this direction was slow until U.S. President Bill Clinton lifted the American embargo in 1994, at which time the national language priority shifted decisively to English and the demand for EFL teachers skyrocketed. Russian teachers hurriedly converted to English instructors in order to remain employable. Young teachers began receiving scholarships to study for graduate degrees in Australia and elsewhere. Private language centers, state university extension programs, and, more recently, joint venture and private universities multiplied across the country (Harman, Hayden, & Pham, 2010). Despite these efforts, evaluations of EFL education in Vietnam are generally low:

[T]he quality of English language education remains unsatisfactory for everyday communicative purposes as well as for specialized use. After six years of learning English, secondary school students get nowhere in communicative English even at the survival level, while most university students are not competent enough in English for their academic purposes. (Le, 2007, p. 175)

Under these circumstances, intentional EFL teacher development in Vietnam is often wishful thinking or dependent mostly on individual initiative (Duong, 2003; Pham, 2001). Barriers include low teacher salaries, inadequate higher education budgets, large classes of 50-100 students, heavy teaching schedules, a lack of materials and technology, and a relative lack of access to contemporary scholarship in applied linguistics and education. Many of these factors are improving rapidly, but this in turn has led to a generation gap between the first wave of EFL teachers who filled this need and younger teachers, whose professional preparation has mostly been much better (in that a much higher percentage of them have graduate degrees) and whose professional expectations

tend to be much higher. In addition, debates are ongoing in Vietnamese educational contexts about the cultural appropriateness and efficacy of current language teaching methodologies, which are often seen as Western imports (Harman, Hayden, & Pham, 2010; Hu, 2002; Le, 2007).

Data Collection

Three types of data or field texts were collected for this study: course documents, my own professional diary, and student portfolios. Course documents include the syllabus, lesson plans, the course reading packet, assignment handouts, PowerPoint slides, and written feedback on student work. My professional diary totaled nearly 13,000 words composed over ten months' time, from July 2005 to April 2006. I began keeping the diary on a computer over the summer while preparing the syllabus and continued until grades had been submitted. I wrote in it during lesson planning and following each course session, as well as when other relevant occasions arose (e.g., after receiving a student email or meeting with an administrator). Student portfolios include diary entries, written assignments responding to literary and critical readings, lesson plans for teaching literature, small group work, and a final paper synthesizing and reflecting on what had been learned during the course. Course participants had no previous experience with portfolios or diaries as learning tools, so for the diary entries I provided general prompts, for example, "Write a letter to a friend about what you've learned in this course so far" or "Tell a story about a moral dilemma you've experienced in your classroom." In the end, almost every portfolio contained close to the maximum of 17 total items, including six diary entries, three writing assignments, an original diagram, three lesson plans, three small group projects, and a final paper.

While triangulation and validity are not necessarily concepts that apply formally to narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology, the variety of data collected for this project and the rigorous techniques applied in data analysis and interpretation (see below) adhere to comparable standards (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation were conducted following typical principles and procedures of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; McKay, 2006). The entire process might be described as deconstruction (breaking data down into main topics) followed by reconstruction (building data up into narratives). To begin, I coded my professional diary for general themes with the purpose of identifying a central phenomenon to be analyzed more fully. Next, with the same goal and in the same manner, I coded diary entries and final papers from the student portfolios. The two lists were then compared for common topics, and finally merged into a single shortlist of

potential main topics for additional analysis. From this process, *teacher development* was identified as a promising theme or lens through which many experiences in the graduate seminar could be explored. Once the central phenomenon of teacher development had been identified, I continued the analysis by examining all field texts and data sources for sub-themes and narrative threads related to teacher development, relying mainly on “relentless rereading” and note taking, while also making use of narrative coding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). Narrative coding assigns codes according to story elements—mainly plot, character, and setting—and discovers “story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). This approach to data interpretation facilitated multifaceted understanding and restorying.

As in any qualitative project but especially in narrative inquiry, the goal of data analysis is the making-sense-of and re-presentation of events, actions, and experiences. Therefore, a final movement in this study’s interpretive process was to identify specific stories around which to organize meaningful, data-grounded analyses and discussions of teacher development. Three such stories or storylines, as reported in the next section, were identified and reconstructed from the field texts by virtue of their prominence in the data, their connections with one another and with the theme of teacher development, and their unusualness or the unexpected ways in which they constructed, embodied, and illuminated the theme of teacher development.

Findings

Narrative constructions of teacher development

The *Literature in Language Teaching* seminar met in a classroom which, apart from being a bit smaller than most, was typical of the campus. The room featured bare concrete floors, yellow or aqua green paint peeling off the walls, cast-iron bars over open windows, wooden desks, a chalkboard, and a ceiling fan. A multimedia projector and screen were provided. Students parked their motorbikes and bicycles in front of the classroom building or in a crowded nearby lot, accepting a claim ticket from one of the attendants on duty. Across from our building was a student canteen, where we often spent our breaks chatting and drinking fresh lemonade or orange juice. In a small class, it did not take the ten of us (including myself) long to form a community within which we shared many of the ups and downs of our personal and professional lives. This growth in trust was certainly among the dynamics driving professional development in the three narratives below—or in traditional academic terms, the research findings. While constructed as narratives, these research findings share in common with more

traditional framings the fact that they result from data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Every detail in each of the three narratives comes from the data.

These three narratives are (re)constructed around the theme of expectations—a collective seminar participants’ story about overturned expectations, an individual participant’s story about revived expectations, and a curricular story about fused personal and professional expectations. These findings or storylines are the narratized or “restoried” forms or results of the process of data collection and interpretation described above. They are the answers to this study’s central research question of what can be learned about teacher development from the stories and experiences of the *Literature in Language Teaching* course participants. The interplay among narrative inquiry as a research approach, narrative as a form for reporting findings, and the authoring and interpreting processes underlying the research and writing suggests the practical impossibility of maintaining strict boundaries between the personal and the professional in teacher development in lived experience.

Overtuned expectations – A collective story

The seminar participants did not expect to find the *Literature in Language Teaching* seminar interesting. Their low expectations for course content were based primarily on their previous experiences in literature classes, including ones taken as undergraduate English majors as well as Vietnamese literature as a school subject. “When I was a student,” wrote Ngoc, “all literary lessons were very tedious and dull.” Hanh asserted, “Learners feel frightened when they think of attending a literary course.” Kien explained, “It is not the fault of the literature or the learner, but rather of the teachers and their strategies and approaches.” Their literature teachers had mostly used a traditional approach featuring lectures about authors’ biographies and historical backgrounds, explanations of allusions to past literature, and interpretations by famous critics. On exams, students regurgitated the lectures; in fact, they could be penalized for venturing independent understandings. Such techniques, as Ly wrote, “kill students’ interest and motivation.” Due to my previous teaching experience in Vietnam, these attitudes and realities were not surprising. Before the first day of class, I wrote: “Discussing with them what literature can do will be so important in setting the tone—to get away from the dry linguistic stuff into what really makes language and human communication tick and matter.”

Nonetheless, participants’ low expectations of literature as an academic subject did not reflect their positive attitude toward literature in general. They found literature beautiful, refreshing, and inspiring. Minh wrote, “I couldn’t imagine how my childhood would have been without fairy tales, fables, or even stories of great authors, [all] told by

my mother.” Kien called his personal reading of literature “spiritual food.” Ly credited literature with giving her a feeling of hope and stated, “It helps me to escape from the boring, dull, competitive, cold reality and takes me to a new horizon...[It] brings me a sense of newness and adventure.” Hanh added, “While reading, I follow the characters and go into their world, touch their feelings, and see life with their eyes.” When she was in second grade, her uncle gave her a book of fables. The first story in the collection taught her to “be ready to offer help to others, then you will be helped when necessary.” The book made such a deep impression on her that she gave it to her own children when they reached second grade. So what is it that deflates literature in an academic setting? She explained, “Students read a literary work mainly for pleasure and enjoyment, but at school the teachers usually employ the work for language exercises, so they barely find the beauty of the work.”

Gradually, the seminar participants brought their personal pleasure in literature into our classroom and into their own pedagogy and began to envision new ways of teaching and learning. In a lesson plan she wrote on a short poem, for example, Hanh focused not on linguistic elements alone but also on the perceptions and responses of the learners. To start, students are asked to close their eyes, listen to the poem being read aloud, imagine clearly the pictures in it, and discuss how those pictures make them feel. Minh said that literature could help introduce her students to a “wider world of language, i.e., they can have opportunities to feel the beauty of the language [and] experience what has never been in their spiritual world.” During the course, Kien, the only participant who was teaching an actual literature course at the time, came to see his teaching in a new light. He stated, “I’ve realized the shortcomings in my teaching and the ways to overcome them and make my students more motivated in class.” I observed that “he wants to learn to teach literature differently, and is so far the most dedicated participant in the seminar. Nonetheless, watching him teach part of his lesson [in a teaching demonstration] was like watching someone learn to walk all over again.” Kien worked hard and his revamped approach was on full display in his final paper, in which he crafted an extended narrative on teaching a nature poem. Whereas before he would have given a traditional lecture to passive students, his new ideas included using visual aids, making connections with personal experience, turning the lyrics into a pop song, rewriting the poem from a different point of view, and comparing it with a similar poem in Vietnamese.

One of the thematic movements in the seminar’s story, then, is that the teacher-participants transformed an inert academic subject into an engaging one. They carried their personal reading habits and motivations into their professional lives. Conceptions of classroom teaching as top-down or authoritative became more open to the bottom-up

and interactive. This teacher development process or plotline was genuinely cooperative. After nine years of teaching in Asia, I tried to resist the temptation to masquerade as an all-knowing Western “expert”, who was eager to peddle the latest (and therefore best) teaching methods. In Vietnam, Western language teaching methodology can be viewed negatively, as a forced import or as a form of pedagogical post-colonialism.

With reference to China, which in this regard may be seen as a close parallel to Vietnam, Hu (2002) describes resistance to communicative language teaching (CLT) as an imported methodology. He argues that the priorities of CLT clash with a Confucian culture of learning in areas such as the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students and the types of learning strategies promoted. For example, a Confucian approach to learning as a serious endeavor leads to a mistrust of language learning games (commonly found in English language learning coursebooks), since fun or entertainment is separate from studying. Similarly, Confucian hierarchism and the value of high respect for teachers lead to a mistrust of peer reviews, since only the teacher can give meaningful feedback. In addition, Confucian education tends to fuse the intellectual and the moral, leading to a mistrust of the highly utilitarian and pragmatic emphases of CLT and EFL as typically formulated and implemented by Western language educators.

Despite my previous experience, as well as my admiration for certain elements of a Confucian approach, negotiations and mutual adjustments in our cross-cultural situation were inevitable. Expectations were overturned on all sides. As part of this process, I worked to place responsibility and freedom in course participants’ hands, spurring them to critique and evaluate my teaching and the course readings for elements they could localize, digest, adapt, or reject. My aim was for them to take authority as the final arbiters of course content (Krishnan & Hoon, 2002). This took place in increasing measure in classroom discussions and small group projects, as well as emerging as a major feature in how they conceived and accomplished their final papers. As an example, whenever I did one of the brief teaching demonstrations, I appointed one or two observers (teachers themselves) to give oral comments afterwards. While this created some dissonance with a Confucian ideal of respecting the teacher, it also helped break down assumptions and create spaces within which participants could negotiate, play, discuss, and take ownership of the seminar’s purposes and content. Learners took responsibility for the dynamic processes of shaping and responding to course content according to their own teaching philosophies, orientations to cultural traditions, various professional contexts, and evolving professional and personal identities.

Revived expectations – An individual story

Thom walked into the *Literature in Language Teaching* course with the same low expectations as her fellow participants. In her first diary entry, she recorded a memory:

“Class, this is a very interesting poem. Prove it.” The teacher spoke to the students as soon as he finished writing the poem on the blackboard.

“This poem is ugly and stupid. I can never see the beauty out of it for a thousand years,” one of the girls in the class whispered to her friend sitting beside her. “Shut up and write. We have only 30 minutes. And who cares?”

I was one of the girls in the conversation above 10 years ago. Things haven’t changed much.

Literature was to her a dreary academic subject. How could it be improved? She answered, “Not until literature is treated as something beautiful, not a dead frog.”

When Thom was a young girl, her mother encouraged her to write a poem for her teacher in honor of Teacher’s Day (November 20, a national holiday in Vietnam). Her mother was so pleased with the poem that she boasted to all her friends about her daughter’s writing talent. Thom hated the pressure and eventually abandoned creative writing in favor of studying English. She told her mother she preferred English, but she was lying. As the course instructor, I knew none of this at first. What I saw in the early weeks of the course was a young woman who could be lazy and unengaged, but who could also in a moment show up as intelligent and creative. I worried about her attitude and wrote, Thom “remains contrary about everything...I think she has been disappointed with every article and every literary text so far (and probably by every mini-lecture and classroom activity as well). What could be the reason for this negativity?”

In time, I learned that I was wrong. I had misinterpreted her. She had been enjoying the course, but her efforts had been directed not toward academic performance but instead toward personal renewal. Thom eventually shared that two months before the course began, she had been forced to give an essay she had written to a powerful person’s daughter, who entered it as her own in a contest and won. Suffering from a “dry soul,” Thom took the course hoping to reawaken her love of creative writing, “to get back the inspiration.” Thom’s plan worked, and she started reading novels and poems again for pleasure; before long, she bought a notebook and once again began writing creatively (in Vietnamese). As an unanticipated bonus, she gained a new vision for how to use literature to bring her refreshed imagination and passion into her classroom. She reported, “I never thought fairy tales could have any value to aesthetic emotion or to

teaching in class. I was wrong. I am going to bring a fairy tale to my class next week.” These realizations and rediscoveries turned her into a “different person,” one who was once again able to enjoy learning and teaching as well as creative writing.

Reflecting on Thom towards the end of the semester, I recognized that she shared many characteristics with her classmates. I queried myself for a general impression of the group and came up with the word *refugees*: “Weary of heavy teaching loads, disgusted with bad course and materials design, wondering why education is such a burden for all involved.” Two participants did not have full-time teaching jobs and were struggling financially. Two more were considering leaving the teaching profession altogether, even as they neared the end of their graduate program. Most were unsatisfied both professionally and personally with who they had become and the relentlessly difficult lives they led. I observed: “They are weary of education, bedraggled with linguistics, cynical about their postgraduate teachers and classes.” Thom, though, gave me hope. If she could regain her passion for language and teaching, then perhaps others could do so as well.

Months after our final seminar meeting, the deadline arrived for the final paper, but I had not received one from Thom. She sent me an email to explain why she felt unable to complete the course. She wrote, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. My energy to write is gone. Can’t [get] it back.” Just before Tet (the lunar New Year), her adviser had rejected her thesis proposal and assigned her instead to work on a topic of his choosing, one in which she had no interest. She closed the email, saying, “I am still in the middle of nowhere...I have hated myself a lot already. Don’t hate me, too, my teacher.” I wrote back a few words of encouragement, but even as I hit the send button I knew how feeble they sounded. What does one say to an apple caught in a cider press? Even so, I could not bring myself to label this section “Dashed expectations.”

Fused expectations – A curricular story

In conventional conceptions of teacher development in language education, professional and personal dimensions are often compartmentalized. Many in fact see separating the personal from the professional as a prerequisite of “professionalism” (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Pham, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005). “Being professional” carries the implication of leaving one’s personal life out of it. It is not supposed to “intrude.” Such assumptions are not made within a narrative inquiry orientation; rather, it is quite the opposite (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the *Literature in Language Teaching* seminar, we made progressively fewer distinctions in this area. The literary course content, the activities of teaching and learning, our identities as teachers and learners, the cross-cultural dimensions of the course materials and our interactions, and

the multifaceted, holistic ways in which all these interrelated made the drawing of boundary lines all but impossible. How could we say exactly where the professional left off and the personal began? Throughout the course, the personal and the professional merged and blended in ways like those seen in the two stories already told, and in the end they seemed permanently fused. This fusion was an integral dimension of our individual and collective teacher development.

The fusion of the personal and professional became increasingly evident as the course progressed and especially during two sessions when we took up literature about death. The focus for these two sessions was on using literature in EFL reading and writing skills courses. For these sessions, I assigned two short literary texts: Virginia Woolf's (1997/1942) personal essay, "The Death of the Moth," in which she watches a moth beat against her window trying to escape and meditates on the significance of its death, and a translated Nepalese folktale entitled "The Woodcutter and Death" (Gersie, 2003), in which an old man imprisons Death in a tree in order to avoid dying but eventually learns that death is part of the balance of nature. While death is to some extent a taboo topic in Vietnamese culture, I knew the course participants appreciated literature's role in raising life's larger issues. Though it might stretch their ideas of language pedagogy, I believed the subject of death would not in itself frighten them away from meaningful discussion and interaction.

For "The Death of the Moth," I invited students to write a dialogue with Virginia Woolf while listening to a recording of Mozart's *Requiem Mass in D Minor*. The purpose of the music was to create an environment appropriate for the topic and to stimulate their writing. The first line of the conversation was to be a question, "Why didn't you help the moth?" The learners' written dialogue became more than a pedagogical-linguistic exercise and demonstrated the interwovenness of the personal and the professional. For example, Ly had Woolf answer the opening question with an excuse and stated:

I just strongly wanted to see how such a tiny, fragile creature struggled for life. Thus it can be said that my curiosity is stronger and louder than my tolerance and helpfulness. Inside me, there is a battle between help and not to help and my selfishness won.

This was not to say, though, that Ly's Woolf regretted her inaction. Ly had the author explain further that the moth's death was a fair price to pay for the "beautiful" lesson she learned: "life's worth struggling and dying for."

The participants' impulse to draw a moral or spiritual lesson is also seen in Ngoc's dialogue. She had Woolf describe the moth as enjoying life, living "with all its energy, with all the zest." The author felt she had no right to interfere: "And do you think I

should trespass on its dignity and pride?" As Thom similarly wrote in her dialogue, "What qualified me to touch that sacred beauty?" In the end, Ngoc agreed: "[T]he moth doesn't need our pity. It deserves our admiration and respect, and makes us look [carefully] at the way we are living." Kien, on the other hand, had Woolf answer the initial question with sad resignation, saying, "Well, it's his fate. Let nature take its course." He pointed out to her that she could have changed the moth's fate. His Woolf explained that she needed to tell her readers "the truth," to which he responded, "Life isn't a bed of roses, of course. But is it just a sea of sufferings?" He went on to argue that younger readers might be depressed or discouraged by her essay, implying that giving hope should be among the purposes of literature and education. After the in-class time spent writing the dialogues, the student-initiated talking points in our follow-up discussion ranged freely from what teachers can do to shape classroom atmosphere (as I had done with the music) to the best attitudes for facing the inevitability of death. Literature acted as a catalyst for these boundary crossings between the personal and the professional.

For "The Woodcutter and Death," I asked students to work in two small groups to plan a classroom EFL reading and writing lesson using this text. One group put together a lesson that included such typical language learning emphases as reading comprehension, vocabulary practice, and summary writing. Blended in with these professional pedagogical concerns, however, were more personal approaches, such as orally describing or drawing a picture of Death, sharing emotional responses to the reality of death, and pondering the reasons why the woodcutter agreed to release Death from the tree at the end of the tale. The other group designed a lesson that while different in many ways also reflected this combining of the personal and the professional. On the linguistic or professional side, their lesson included a vocabulary association brainstorming activity and an interpretive task involving Vietnamese proverbs. On the more personal side, they asked their learners to analyze how and why the woodcutter's attitude toward death changed from the beginning to the end of the story, and to discuss and debate the tensions between the reality of death and the human desire for immortality.

The blending of the personal and the professional in our graduate seminar testifies to the fact that while we were studying stories we were also living stories. We brought our own developing narratives into the classroom, where we encountered, created, and experienced additional literary and pedagogical narratives. What we learned we took back out into the ongoing stories of our larger personal and professional lives. To conceive of professional development as a linear process or cycle or as a set of tools or skills is to fail to do justice to the "messy" qualities of lived human experience.

Discussion

As a researcher, I was positioned as a participant-observer because I was the course instructor and my professional diary is one of the main sources of data. I was thus a full participant in the overall course narrative of teacher development, not least by writing this article. At the time, I had been living and teaching in Vietnam for seven years, so I was relatively familiar with the country, culture, and educational system. With an M.A. in English, I had taught literature in two other countries, in addition to EFL teacher education undergraduates at two other universities elsewhere in Vietnam. In addition, I had pioneered this *Literature in Language Teaching* course the previous year and through it explored the process of course design (Baurain, 2010). While framing the present study, I thus counted myself as a person with some insider knowledge and embraced this positioning as a valuable resource for interpreting and re-presenting the narratives. This kind of reflexivity is in line with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) axiom of embeddedness, "We are implicit in the world we study" (p. 61).

What conclusions can be reached in this study about the narrative construction of teacher development? When teacher development is narratively framed so as to explore the layers and thicknesses of lived experience, borders between personal and professional reveal themselves as permeable. This is not to say that distinctions cannot or should not be made between personal and professional aspects of teacher identity and growth, but that compartmentalization is assuredly inadequate to describe actual teacher development. Through the research approach of narrative inquiry as well as the narrative framing of the findings, professional development in lived experience is seen in this study to be shot through with the personal. In the findings, the first story describes participants discovering freedom to bring their pleasure in reading literature from the personal into the professional spaces of their lives. This movement contradicted their original expectations. The second story reveals that for one individual the professional activity of taking a graduate seminar had the primary effect of refreshing a personal love of creative writing. This outcome also reinvigorated her faded expectations of enjoying teaching. The "conclusion" of this story is uncertain or open-ended, revealing the limitations of any narrative framework—that is to say, all stories began before their "beginnings" and continue past their "endings." The third story manifests the intermingling of the personal and the professional from a curricular perspective by examining two classroom sessions organized around literature on death. These sessions highlighted the fusion of personal and professional thinking that had progressively come to characterize the seminar and participants' professional development during the seminar. Authoring teacher development in lived experience is

thus found to be “messy” in ways that problematize conventional categories of “personal” and “professional” while enriching both.

Furthermore, processes of authoring or narrative construction appear in this study to be inherent in teacher development and praxis. “Teacher” indicates a person or persons (characters), and “develop” is a verb (plot), so any conception of teacher development must account for persons doing things in time, that is, characters taking action in plot sequences. Not coincidentally, “persons doing things in time” is a basic definition of story. Stories require character, plot, and setting (because the “persons doing” are located somewhere). When professional development is abstracted out into a linear, decontextualized process of skill-building, as has generally been the case in language education (see above), this core quality of narrativity can be obscured or lost.

Narrative inquiry thus serves to recover a meaningful concept of teacher development as part of teacher *praxis* (Latta & Kim, 2010). Kemmis and Smith (2008) remind us that *praxis* is “action that is *morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field*. It is the kind of action people are engaged in when they think about what their action will mean *in the world*” (p. 4, italics in original). In this study, teacher development emerges as a story of coming to understand experience in ways that promote praxis. Praxis in turn makes reciprocal connections with and gives more complex meaning to stories of teacher development. As Golombek and Johnson (2004) recognize:

Narratives by their very nature are not meant to describe phenomena objectively, but rather to connect phenomena and infuse them with interpretation. Narratives situate and relate facts to one another, and the essence of ‘truth’ is how phenomena are connected and interpreted. (p. 308)

There is no doubt, for example, that the three teacher development narratives reported here are not “finished” but continued on in the classrooms and subsequent experiences of the participants. The stories they lived and experienced in our course enabled them, in concert with their own students and colleagues, to begin to create new plotlines and to work toward new interpretations of their ongoing personal and professional experiences.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore stories of teacher development experienced by EFL teachers in a graduate seminar in Vietnam. Based on the data, a theme of expectations regarding teacher development emerged from multidimensional personal and professional narratives, which were authored (re)constructions that presented teacher development not as a linear process of skill-building but as a multifaceted

process of mixing and matching personal concerns and priorities with professional issues and commitments. Teacher development here showed itself to be a process of authoring and interpreting lived experience, along the way revealing itself also to be integrally connected with the concept of classroom *praxis*.

At least two directions for future research are suggested. First, it is hoped that narrative-based research methodologies will continue to be used to explore teacher development in language education, as was the case recently in a special topics issue of *TESOL Quarterly* edited by Barkhuizen (2011). There is much that narrative inquiry can do to enrich our conception of professional development, especially in cross-cultural settings. Second, future research that continues to explore local approaches to teaching English, given English's status as a global language, would contribute to an important evolving plotline in the field of language education. More research is needed on issues surrounding how cultures, pedagogies, traditions, beliefs, values, and alternative practices merge and interact with one another in language classrooms.

I began this article by describing a room in an attempt to make the challenges of teachers pursuing professional development in a Vietnamese context concrete to readers. But even as part of the story's setting, the room is an inadequate image; it is too fixed, too static, and too impersonal. Most of its deeper meanings are to be found in the teachers and students who walk in and out its doors. Each person is crafting a narrative, or recovering from one, or imagining a different one, by turns encountering surprise, sadness, or delight in the motions of their journeys. What can be learned about professional development from their stories and experiences? Plots have twists. Characters reach insights. Setting is always more and less than it seems. Themes and meanings emerge from interpretations and responses. Teacher development is a story of authoring.

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