

Out of a Rut: Experiencing Authenticity in Presenting Research

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Introduction

Many non-Japanese English teachers who find themselves working in higher education in Japan arrive at their posts without post-graduate degrees. In such cases, graduate studies can play an important role in obtaining full-time employment and the further development of the teacher's identity as a member of an academic community. Yet, maintaining momentum in such extended studies presents its own challenges. This piece presents a narrative of certain critical events during the latter stages of a research project as part of my own PhD studies. It illustrates at a personal level a coalescence of experiences that moved me out from a rut towards finalising my studies.

Beginnings

It might be useful to firstly provide a little background about my own professional story. Around ten years ago, I obtained a contracted position as a researcher at a small university north of Tokyo. As I settled into my role, I rapidly became aware that the position was less involved with research, and more with teaching English. This suited me fine – I had arrived with no research experience to speak of, and was simply pleased to be able to work with young adults. Teaching the undergraduate students, however, I became curious about the interrelationships between their past and present learning experiences, their evolving identities, and their motivation to mature as English users. I was perhaps predisposed to such an interest through the ongoing development of my own Japanese language identity and coursework Masters studies that had touched upon individual differences. Examining the literature left me dissatisfied with the large body of research into language learning motivation that

utilised surveys. From my perspective, it did little to promote student and teacher voice about perceptions of classroom language learning. I considered that asking for learners' responses to a limited range of set statements could not sufficiently represent the dynamic kaleidoscope of an individual's experiences – certainly not those that I also was experiencing in my own language acquisition. At this time I encountered action research, a process through which practitioners can work together with learners to examine challenges and deepen understandings of their local contexts of learning. I made fledgling attempts at investigating students' experiences in my classroom with qualitative research tools.

Along with becoming progressively more interested in conducting research, my home life had seen the birth of my first child. Suddenly, my employment on yearly contracts seemed overexposed to risk. A turning point in my professional trajectory occurred when I had occasion to talk with a tenured professor at the university. He was aware of my drive to develop myself, and I felt emboldened to inquire as to the possibility of obtaining a non-contract, tenured position. After all, I already had a Masters degree. He bluntly informed me that the university would not even look at an applicant unless they had a doctorate. It was the jolt that I needed to embark on the next stage of graduate studies through an external program with a university in Australia

The professor's comment was also the stimulus that eventually resulted in my leaving the university. I found a post at a Japanese college of technology. Once again, I had to adjust to a new work environment, and I also had the added challenge of the birth of my second child. What fostered pause for thought at this time was that my position at the college was in fact tenured. Despite the

information I had received from the professor at the women's university, I had obtained full-time employment even without a doctorate. Part of me reasoned that I need not impose on myself the added pressure of undertaking doctoral studies. However, I found that the context provided a unique opportunity to work closely with students in exploring the meaning of their English studies. Conducting research and publishing was a further requirement of my role. It made sense, then, to combine these interests and push on with the PhD.

Skip forward a couple of years.

Frustrated authenticity in presenting research

I had finished data-collection, finished analysis. It had all emerged so beautifully. Yet although this study was over but for the write-up, it was the write-up that now made my days truly miserable. I was clearly getting nowhere. While I had written academic articles before, the task of such an extended piece of writing was new to me, as no doubt for many doctoral candidates. After a few initial attempts gone awry, and despite being thousands of kilometres away, my primary supervisor sent me numerous slide-shares and guidelines for thesis-writing, encouraged me to locate other theses online that shared qualities with my ideas, and even offered the first few chapters of her own thesis to act as scaffolding for my endeavours. And to an extent this helped: While there is growing awareness that theses can differ from the traditional structure – introduction, literature review, methodology, results, conclusions – it also appears that in the main theses do not differ much from this pattern (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Naturally, examiners have expectations of what will arrive on their doorstep, and a thesis must conform to many of the literary beliefs of the academy (Yates, 2004). However, I could not mold my thesis into the traditional structure. What I struggled with the most was representing the temporality of the research process. While I had started with one theoretical focus, I had formed a different way of understanding the data later in the study. Naivety perhaps, but the flood of input regarding what a thesis should look like pushed me to try to incorporate this theoretical stance in the literature review at the start of the thesis. But this just did not ring true. It was insincere. How could I position this particular discussion of theory before the methodology chapter? I certainly had not based the design of my study on these revised understandings. I seemed to

be experiencing something along the lines of frustrated authenticity (Vannini & Burgess, 2009), whereby I felt thwarted in my attempts at acting in congruence with my self-values. I felt uneasy and an impostor in my writing.

This internal battle raging inside my conscience was leading me only to near stagnation in pulling my thesis together. My time to write was most often the early hours of the morning. Armed with coffee, thesis examples, and laptop incapable of Wi-Fi connection – in case the latest Internet gossip might distract me – I was ready. I would click my way to the “thesis” folder with all of its colourfully decorated chapter icons, and my finger would stop as I thought about the next click. Surely there was something else that needed my attention just at this moment? Remarkably, even at three in the morning, there almost always was, or at least I found something. At other times I would actually open a file and churn over the same passages endlessly. As my children awoke ready for the new day, I would realise with despair that I had spent the last couple of hours in complete concentration without having moved forward in the slightest.

Things came to a point. I started to think, whether rightly or wrongly, that in all likelihood my supervisors were becoming tired of seeing draft chapters that just did not work. I know I was. I organised a Skype session with them to attempt to explain my ethical hang-ups about representing the research process “out of order”. They listened, while I worried that their wealth of experience with doctoral candidates might incline them to thinking something along the lines of, “Well, just get over this temporality hiccup, and write the thing as if you had started out with that theoretical position!” To my surprise, they encouraged me to write a draft chapter in the way I wanted. Taking my time, I carefully crafted a text that tried to create a bridge between my initial ideas and analysis and the revised analysis. It placed my decision-making front and centre, expressing how the altered theoretical focus was an emergent result of my interactions with the data. This I could write – this was what I needed to write. Thankfully, when I sent the chapter to my supervisors they appreciated my arguments and agreed to a restructured thesis with a clear narrative voice. While I had lost some time, the experience well and truly reminded me of the importance of following internal convictions to experience authentic action. It moreover emphasised the value of

seeking the advice of those who had already been through the process of doctoral studies.

Socially-mediated confirmation of authenticity

Amidst this period of transition, I had also been accepted to present on part of my doctoral investigation at a three-day research retreat. The retreat itself was in a run-down university hostel in a mountain area north of Tokyo. Most of the presenters were, like me, practitioner-researchers from this particular part of Japan. In addition, what had drawn my interest was that there would be three plenary sessions by one of the most renowned international researchers in my field. I drove through landscapes of urban sprawl giving way to rice-paddies and forests, arriving at the rain-soaked retreat with mixed emotions – eager to engage with new ideas and state my own perspective, but also still lacking confidence in myself due to my inability to make progress on my thesis writing until recently.

My session was not until the third day, so I had plenty of time to feel nervous as I listened to the presentations of other speakers. I was fortunate though to have been roomed with a pair of Masters students and their supervisor from a university in Tokyo. We spent a good deal of free-time discussing our research until late at night, even taking our conversations to a nearby hot-spring bathing area. Throughout the retreat, I found that I was looking forward to these interactions with my roommates for their capacity to assist me in understanding my own point of view more clearly. The plenary sessions were also as thought provoking as I had been hoping, and I came to sense that my perspective shared similarities with that of the plenary speaker.

And so my session came around. Now, I am certainly not a presentation expert. For whatever reason, while I can teach with passion, in most cases I find myself hesitantly standing in front of a conference audience. However, the discussions I had had with other participants and the affinity I felt with the plenary speaker (who was in the audience) renewed my conviction to draw on the story of my own research experiences and the voices of participants in my presentation. This was evidently the right choice for me: In spite of my usual trepidation, on this occasion I experienced something approaching flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). I was so intent on the

development of the research story about these particular findings that I lost track of time, and before I knew it I had arrived at my conclusion. “Any questions?” Silence. Were people trying to take in my perspective? Were they not interested? Maybe they had not understood? But I knew now that I understood. Somehow, putting this story into words and listening to myself made something click on inside me. I knew that I could finish this thesis, that this was the direction I needed to take. This approach was authentic for me.

I had another appointment that meant leaving the retreat straight after my session. I bid goodbye to my roommates, and drove home along empty country backroads on a high, adrenaline still flowing from the presentation. Affirmation of my newfound confidence in the direction of my writing came a couple of days later. Out of the blue, I received an email from the plenary speaker at the research retreat. She had been greatly impressed by the form of my presentation and research, and expressed interest in my future endeavours.

Finally, I was getting somewhere!

Conclusion

It goes without saying that the narrative I have presented here is an extremely subjective reflection on experiences during a critical phase of my own professional development. However, I do still feel that there are certain lessons discernible from the narrative that might be useful for others. In terms of authenticity, Vannini and Burgess (2009) contend that an individual may be motivated to maintain a “degree of congruence between one’s actions and one’s core self-conceptions – consisting of fundamental values, beliefs, and identities to which one is committed and in terms of which one defines oneself” (p. 104). The narrative starkly uncovers the affective and motivational consequences of trying to write in a way that was inauthentic for me. Of course, I am not saying that it is advisable to ignore the wealth of experience of graduate supervisors. However, for my own motivation, it was important to find a way of representing my experience of the research process rather than adhering strictly to formalised patterns of presentation. Furthermore, although I had already made the case (thankfully successfully) to my supervisors for a revised thesis structure, attending the conference allowed me to expose my ideas to feedback from peers through both informal discussions and formal

presentation. The narrative points towards the socially-mediated nature of my self-efficacy beliefs – that confidence in my ability to pursue this particular course of action grew through interactions and discussion with others (see Bandura, 1997). In line with the ideas of Vygotsky (1980), it also demonstrates that the very act of verbalising my ideas gave a form to them and contributed to shaping and reshaping my own cognition. These two processes – affirmation of acting with self-authenticity and verbalisation of ideas in interaction with others – appear to have contributed crucially to the maintenance of my motivation to move on to the end of this phase of my professional development.

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