# A Pedagogical Mythology for Possible Selves

## Brian Rugen

*Meiji University*

Research in academic fields from adolescent psychology to education has shown how an individual's imagined identity, or future-oriented possible selves, influence motivation and investment in the practices of a particular community of practice. Less attention, however, has been paid to the elements of the social and developmental context associated with the nurturing of those visions of possible selves and imagined identities. This article considers one such contextual element from the field of language teacher education: stories of success. It is argued here that the stories of success from L2 teachers of English can be used as inspiration by students to help create what artist and educator Amy Brook Snider calls a "personal mythology of teaching." This article details three suggestions for using stories of success in language teacher education in order to support students in the creation of their own personal mythology of teaching.

Several years ago, shortly after a new semester had begun at the private university in the U.S. where I worked, a new Japanese student in our MA TESOL program, Yumiko (pseudonym), came to my office in tears. I was her teacher in an "Introduction to TESOL" class for the new cohort of M.A. students in the program. Yumiko was experiencing a range of difficulties, including unfamiliar academic demands of graduate school, a recent move to a foreign country, and her own reservations about her English language proficiency. She had just made a career change and was pursuing a new degree in order to become an English teacher. However,

at that moment in my office, she was distressed and upset, experiencing what I imagine were complex emotions tied, in part, to new and evolving identities. In particular, she spoke about her struggles with an emerging identity in English. She was feeling "tired" and "uncomfortable" in this new identity taking shape through the more frequent use of English now. Somewhat at a loss for words, I just listened and tried to empathize. Then, I remembered a book I had referenced when writing my own doctoral dissertation: Negotiating Bilingual and Bicultural Identities by Yasuko Kanno. I took it off my shelf and lent it to Yumiko in the hope she might be able to relate to some of the experiences in the book.

Several weeks after Yumiko's visit to my office, in our Monday evening class together, something that I had never seen before occurred during the student presentations. Students in the class were giving brief PowerPoint presentations about particular language teaching methods from one of our course texts. At the end of Yumiko's presentation, she turned to me, while still standing in front of the class, and asked if she could talk about something unrelated for "a minute or two." I said of course, and she turned back to the class and told them that she wanted to introduce three people —three important individuals that had helped her a lot through the first 1-2 months of her new life in the U.S. She

showed three slides with the names and pictures of three different individuals. For each slide, she told a story—a story, essentially, about that person's success. One was Japanese student who had recently graduated from our program and was successfully teaching English at a local language school. Two others were international students in the program, close to graduation. One of these international students was "very positive" and was quite active with organizing program activities and social events; the other international student was a "very serious" student who had published a paper, in English. I had never seen anything like that—an unprompted deviation from a presentation to share the stories, and her respect, for particular individuals. It seemed that sharing these stories of success was a sort of cathartic experience for Yumiko.

Yumiko's use of these stories of success, here, brought to mind what artist and educator Amy Brook Snider calls a "personal mythology of teaching" (Snider, 1989). A personal mythology of teaching includes stories populated with "heroes and heroines" and plays an important role in the nurturing of an individual's imagined identity and positive images of the self. Snider (1989) notes: "When we are adolescents, we begin the process of consciously shaping our identity. We look for people who embody the beliefs and values that we are beginning to weave into a system of ideas that will shape our perspective on the world" (p. 46). This quest,

writes Snider, continues into the professional development of teachers — in fact, it is one of the most important aspects in teacher development.

Research in adolescent psychology (Bi & Oyserman, 2015; Morgenroth, Ryan, & Peters, 2015) as well as language teacher education (Dafouz, 2018; Kubanyiova, 2017), has shown how an individual's imagined identity, or future-oriented possible selves, influence motivation and investment in the practices of a particular community of practice. Wenger (1998), in his theory of situated learning and communities of practice, highlights the importance of imagination, too, as a way in which "we can locate ourselves in the world and history, and include in our identities other meanings, other possibilities, other perspectives" (p. 178).

Other possibilities and perspectives are exactly what the heroes and heroines in these stories of success provide. As everyday people who have achieved success as bilingual teachers and speakers, they are excellent examples of what is possible and attainable. Furthermore, as Beggan (2016) notes, "heroes provide an energizing function by serving as aspirational models" (p. 2).

Stories of success, then, allow for the identification of particular heroes and heroines that can become part of the developing personal mythologies of teaching for pre-service teachers of English. The stories of success that

Yumiko introduced in our class can be seen as examples of heroic characters playing a role in her own personal mythology. In Yumiko's case, these stories were of second language speakers who had become either fully employed English language teachers in the U.S. or who were experienced graduate students engaged in publishing and extracurricular activities. The importance of these success stories has been recognized in other fields as well, not only teacher education. In the field of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), for example, the sharing and use of what are called "role model biographies" have been shown to be effective in raising students' interest in the field, as well as in supporting possible and developing identities as members of a STEM community of practice (Shin, Levy, & London, 2016).

Therefore, I argue that those involved in language teacher education can support students in the creation of their own personal mythology of teaching by providing opportunities and exposure to different stories of success. The following three suggestions are ones that I have found useful, and that I recommend, for providing these opportunities and exposure.

First, it is very important to consider establishing a peer mentoring program in any kind of teaching training context. Faculty mentors and advisors are, of course, important for students in that they can offer advice with deadlines, forms, and important requirements and prerequisites. Peer mentors, however, add an additional, social aspect to the mentoring experience for new students. This social aspect offers unique levels of empathy—different from faculty mentors and advisors—that accompany the support, guidance, and encouragement that peer mentors offer. Furthermore, as Stanford educator Morris Zelditch explains, one of the important purposes of mentoring is to offer "models of identity" for students (as cited in Powel & Piyo, 2001). In other words, as models of identity, peer mentors can make available their own stories of success that can, in turn, be used by beginning teachers in creating their personal mythology of teaching.

Second, teacher educators should share examples of literature and narratives by and about bilingual speakers and bilingual teachers. In the case of narratives in print, sharing like this can be quite useful, especially for second language pre-service teachers of English, as "written texts may represent uniquely safe spaces in which new identities can be invented and new multilingual voices 'tried on'" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 678). Examples of narratives like the ones of the Japanese returnee students in Kanno's (2003) book that I shared with Yumiko, then, can be integrated into a course and a program, rather than simply gathering dust on a shelf in a teacher's office. Another useful reference is Barkhuizen (2017), a collection of essays from language

teachers and scholars discussing their work with, and conceptualizations of, language teacher identity within the context of their own personal and professional development. In addition to narratives in print, multilingual speakers from one's own school or local community may be invited into a class as guest speakers in order to share their own stories. This will expose pre-service and beginning language teachers to additional stories that may subsequently become part of their own personal mythologies of teaching. For example, in one recent study, the researchers experimented with several different methods for helping EFL high school students visualize and develop their ideal L2 selves. They found that the most successful method was inviting former graduates into class to tell their stories of success. Al-Murtadha (2019) explains: "The students found the 'stories' told by past graduates from their school to be the practical connection that made future selves seem achievable. Using volunteer graduates can be adopted to raise students' hopes and help them visualize their ideal L2 selves and imagined communities and set future goals, thereby enhancing their interactions in the EFL classroom" (p. 153).

Finally, teacher educators need to share their own stories with students. In making her arguments for a personal mythology of teaching, Snider (1989) describes how she shares her own story of becoming a teacher with students. In sharing her success story, important details regarding failures and missteps are also included. The stories are honest and relatable for students. Snider (1989) notes: "My students need to hear my story and they need to hear the stories of other teachers. We all need these stories" (p. 51).

In conclusion, these are just three examples of ways to help pre-service teachers gain access to potential heroes and heroines. As explained above, the creation of a personal mythology of teaching can play an important role in the development of future-oriented selves and in becoming a member of a community of practice. Reflecting back to Yumiko's first visit to my office, I have come to realize the importance of sharing stories about the possibilities for success in a second language and in second language teaching. As Joseph Campbell—a leading authority on literature and mythology—says: "The big problem of any young person's life is to have models to suggest possibilities. Nietzsche says, 'Man is the sick animal.' Man is the animal that doesn't know what to do with itself. The mind has many possibilities, but we can live no more than one life. What are we going to do with ourselves?" (Campbell & Moyers, 1991, pp. 185-186).

## References

Al–Murtadha, M. (2019). Enhancing EFL learners' willingness to communicate with visualization and goal–setting activities. *TESOL Quarterly, 53*(1), 133-157.

Barkhuizen, G. (Ed.). (2017). *Reflections on Language Teacher Identity Research (1st Ed.)*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Beggan, J. K. (2016). Monomyth, transformation and inspiration: The hero's journey in the extreme fitness exercise infomercial. *Heroism Science, 1*, 1-12.

Bi, C., & Oyserman, D. (2015). Left behind or moving forward? Effects of possible selves and strategies to attain them among rural Chinese children. *Journal of Adolescence, 44*, 245-258.

Campbell, J., & Moyers, B. (1991). *The power of myth*. New York, NY: Anchor.

Dafouz, E. (2018). English-medium instruction and teacher education programmes in higher education: ideological forces and imagined identities at work. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 21*(5), 540-552.

Kanno, Y. (2003). *Negotiating bilingual and bicultural identities: Japanese returnees betwixt two worlds*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kubanyiova, M. (2017). Understanding language teachers' sense-making in action through the prism of future self guides. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on Language Teacher Identity Research* (pp. 100-106). New York, NY: Routledge.

Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., & Peters, K. (2015). The motivational theory of role modeling: How role models influence role aspirants' goals. *Review of General Psychology, 19*(4), 465-483.

Pavlenko, A., & Norton, B. (2007). Imagined communities, identity, and English language teaching. in J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 669-680). New York: Springer.

Powell, R.C. & Pivo, G. (2001). *Mentoring: The Faculty-Graduate Student Relationship*. Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona.

Shin, J. E. L., Levy, S. R., & London, B. (2016). Effects of role model exposure on STEM and non–STEM student engagement. Journal of *Applied Social Psychology, 46*(7), 410-427.

Snider, A.B. (1989). Towards a Personal Mythology of Teaching. *Canadian Review of Art Education, 16*(1), 45-51.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
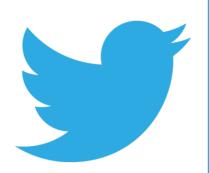
## Author Bio

**Brian Rugen** is an associate professor in the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University. His teaching and research interests include: discourse and identity; curriculum/materials development in TESOL; language teacher training; and discourses of sport in literature and film. In his spare time, he enjoys long-distance running.

bdr@meiji.ac.jp

## Follow us on Twitter

Follow the conversation (and participate) on Twitter by following our handle. We share information on upcoming SIG events, reports of past workshops and sessions, JALT activities, language teaching conferences throughout Asia, special member requests, and more…

## @jalt@_TD_SIG