

# I am NOT just an English teacher: I am a professional educator

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This paper is based on the contents of my doctorate courses at the Institute of Education, University of London, October, 2012.

I have been teaching at Berlitz for over nine years now and I consider myself to be “a reflective, learning, blended professional” (Cunningham, 2008, Guile and Lucas, 1999, Whitchurch, 2009) in the field of education. Through my professional development, I have learnt that educators grow and develop according to the environment in which they work while other educators around them have an impact as well. At Berlitz, the definition of “professional” goes more with the traditional terms (Millerstone, 1964) where “being a professional implied membership of an occupational group that could be distinguished from other (usually lesser) occupational group on the basis of a number of characteristics” (p.144). I would like to explain my teacher development as a professional over the last ten years to further support the core arguments of this paper. To me a professional is an individual who is reflective of one’s work and develops themselves consistently through education and experience.

I shall divide my professional development into three stages: the first being my first three years at Berlitz as an English instructor; the second, the six years teaching both at

university and Berlitz (the beginnings of feeling professional); and the third after teaching at the university and taking on the role of teacher/mentor at Berlitz and the last stage I shall call it plus one stage when I have started my doctorate courses and I went back to teaching at one universities in Kanagawa. I have called it plus one because it is not a full stage yet. It has just began since last October.

## **Stage I - the first three years**

My grandmother is still a professor at a university even at the age of 81 and she was trained as a teacher for children with disabilities when she was studying at a vocational high school in Romania. She has been my inspiration and due to her, I decided to become an educator and develop myself as a professional. When I started working at Berlitz, I was greatly focussed on my academic development and saving money for a post-graduate degree in education. I was not very much motivated in my job even though I liked teaching, until meeting my mentor at work. At that time, I realised slowly that I would like to better myself as a teacher and become more responsible for my students. I started taking my work more seriously and I undertook a month’s intensive CELTA programme. Now, when I look back, that was my first step towards

becoming a professional and reflecting on my own work. After receiving certification from this, I thought that in order to understand my students better I needed to brush up on my Japanese skills and I decided to take the Japanese Language Proficiency test. My lessons at Berlitz were improving and I could apply my mentor's suggestions more into my lessons. I was becoming more flexible and motivated and hence, a better teacher.

Professionals are not created on their own (Cunningham, 2008). There are incidents and people that influence educators on their way to become professionals. The reflective moments in life enable us to develop personally and professionally. The "critical incidents" (Cunningham, 2008) not only create disturbance in the professionals' life but through recognizing the moment educators are able to create a balance in their professional development. Therefore through dialogues with mentors and seniors educators go through an interactive process which leads them to the revelation point: "A critical incident compromises an event in professional life that creates a significant disturbance of our understanding of important principles or of effective practice, and which following a period of focused reflection will be experienced as a turning point" (Cunningham, 2008, p.166).

## **Stage 2 – Teaching at university**

During the six years, in which I taught at university, I began to grow into an educator and a professional. The reason for this is that I started to reflect on and question my professionalism as a teacher. I was teaching both at Berlitz in the evenings and at university during the day. I was starting to feel the differences in teaching styles and students' progress. At university, we, as a team, were designing our own curriculum and implementing it on a daily basis, through trial

and error. The number of students I taught ranged from ten to twenty-four the largest group. This enabled me to learn classroom management and to find ways to motivate large groups of students. For instance there were some students who had difficulty speaking while looking at the teacher since they were shy or intimidated in speaking in English. But gradually through practice and appraisal students managed to communicate effectively with confidence. Teaching the low communicative level of students, I looked forward to every lesson on how the students progressed and what helped them best to learn. Each day was a challenge and it brought something new to my development as a teacher.

During this time I have also realized that teaching is a two way street: teachers and students learn and motivate each other. I was able to exercise my autonomy as a teacher and educator and I could apply some of knowledge from the graduate programme into my lessons. I was beginning to feel like a "blended professional" (Whitchurch, 2009). At Berlitz, I was teaching the direct method to a smaller number of students and also being evaluated differently. At times, it was difficult to switch between teaching at university and at Berlitz.

As my experience grew, my understanding of both of my roles deepened as well. While teaching at Berlitz, I enrolled in a post-graduate programme as well, graduating from it two years later. This was a milestone in my life, being the "lightbulb moment" (Cunningham, 2008), which enabled me to grow closer to feeling professional. This meant that I gained more confidence and autonomy in my practice as an educator. This also established the foundation from where I was able to reflect over my work, development and achievements as a professional educator.

### **Stage 3 – The blended professional/instructor and mentor**

After finishing my contract with the university, I taught only at Berlitz and I took on the role of a mentor. While teaching at university, I was able to gain more autonomy through designing my own curriculum and preparing my own original lessons. Making educational professionals aware of the “blended professional” concept giving them autonomy and knowledge vis training, and creating a space for learning and reflection. When people are able to think and learn on their own, it enhances autonomy (Benson, 2001), which gives educators the power to be in charge of their own decisions and choices. When individuals are allowed to do this, they can be more responsible for their actions and growth. Therefore, through this process of becoming more autonomous, they can reflect on their tasks and responsibilities and eventually see themselves as a “blended professional. According to Barnett as cited in Cunningham (2008), a professional has the possibility of performing, creating and giving service in the field of education and it is entirely up to the individual to be aware of that.

However as a mentor, I have to follow the standardised evaluation guidelines of Berlitz, though I still feel that I have the autonomy to evaluate instructors according to my concept of “a good lesson”. I question where my professional space is and, according to Whitchurch (2009), the blended professional has created this new space called the “third space”, in which they are able to switch identities and knowledge flexibly and easily. Being in this third space, I can see more clearly when I am an instructor and a mentor. This, of course, can be both risky and safe at the same time and instructors need to build a common box of knowledge, which is open and which educators can share. In this way, knowledge becomes more fluid and instructors are able to

deliver better lessons and acquire knowledge from their peers. The risky part of this third space can be the reliability of the knowledge and the professional autonomy. How, for example, can instructors trust each other’s knowledge and stay independent at the same time? In this situation, the need for a standardised criterion of evaluating educators and a strong identity of the teacher as a reliable professional are essential (Ball, 2008). These criteria are measured and evaluated in accordance with the company’s system and the image of the school. Ball (2007) explains that “within institutions – colleges, schools and universities, the logic of education for economic competitiveness transforms what are complex, interpersonal processes of teaching, learning and research into a set of standardized and measurable products” (p.186). Educational institutions provide educational services in a way that a shop or restaurant does, where education is a commodity and can be traded like any other service. Bernstein (1996) argues that “knowledge should flow like money wherever it can create advantage and profit. Indeed knowledge is not like money, it is money. Knowledge is divorced from persons, their commitments, their personal dedications” (p.87). Knowledge should be part of a professional group, from which educators can learn and share.

When making educators aware of their being blended professionals, some factors need to be taken into consideration: the ability of the individual to be a learning professional both at work and home (Guile and Lucas, 1999; Wright, 1970); to be able to act as a reflective practitioner (Guile and Lucas, 1999); and to be aware of the turning-point (Cunningham, 2008) in both their working and personal lives. As an instructor/mentor, I monitor and train instructors in the Berlitz method, but I also listen to their ideas about new ways of teaching and as a team, we aim to implement some of these into the method.

Professional educators need to be able to reflect on their teaching and curriculum. This is an ongoing process where reflection for the educator is very important. Many times, they are not only teaching, but also mentoring, grading papers and designing courses.

A reflective practitioner in any institution tries to expand their skills and capabilities beyond the ones, which they already possess. They are eager to learn more about their skills and interested beyond the practices of their institution. Educators, who are able to reflect on their work, do not feel constrained by their institution and can see the value of improving themselves as individuals and educators (Broadfoot et al. 1993). This, then, leads to the turning-point factor or “incidents” which occur in the life of a professional. “Incidents” are parts of our lives and they happen in order to teach us something or to correct one’s situation. In this way, individuals find their equilibrium both professionally and personally. According to Tripp, 1993: “Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgment we make, and the basis of that judgment is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident” (p. 8). In this way, educators can assess how effective their practices are and what they have learned so far.

A “disturbance” may slow down the individual but it is necessary for them in order Therefore a turning-point is essential for all professionals to undergo in order to evaluate their stance at that certain point in time, move to the next step. The “turning-point” is there and it is up to the individual to see and understand it and then use it: “The processes of reviewing and deconstructing critical incidents encountered in their working lives offer professionals in education very significant increments to the

quality of their understanding” (Cunningham, 2008, p.185).

### **Plus one stage- The blended/ reflective professional**

Going back to teaching at university and enrolling in a doctorate course enabled me to enter a new stage in my development as a teacher. This new phase is giving me the opportunity as an educator and individual to reflect over my work and my studies. In this stage I may able to find my third space (Whitchurch 2009) and be able to recognize and manage the tuning-points in my career and personal life. I am not just an English teacher! I am a blended professional since I am both an instructor and a mentor. I work with both students and instructors. Through this course, I have realised that in order to become an authentic blended professional, three factors are important, namely: being a learning professional, a reflective practitioner and being able to recognise the “turning-point” moments.

Making educational professionals aware of the concept of the “blended professional” is through, I may propose, by giving them more autonomy and knowledge via training and creating a space for learning and reflection. When people are able to think and learn on their own, it enhances autonomy, which, in turn, gives educators the power to be in charge of their own decisions and choices. When individuals are allowed to do this, they can be more responsible for their actions and growth. Therefore, through this process of becoming more autonomous, they can reflect on their tasks and responsibilities and eventually, see themselves as a “blended professional”.

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then it becomes a profession for them. For the Filipinos who find the job rewarding, they build a career out of it and excel in it. Depending on what kind of working environment they teach, their educational background, work experience and how they learned English are significant factors to be considered to measure how competent they are as teachers. An organization called Filipino English Teachers in Japan (FETJ) offers support to become competent teachers. Teaching English in Japan with its financial rewards and stability has also become attractive for some Filipinos to migrate whether permanently or temporarily in Japan. However, with the emergence of more affordable and convenient online English learning taught by Filipinos based in the Philippines but owned and managed by non-Filipinos, there is an income disparity. This, however, proves that the field of English teaching in Japan has become more in demand and English learning can become more affordable due to globalization and will continue to be so now that Japan will host the Olympics in 2020.

## Notes

This presentation and paper are results of my personal experience as a Japanese government scholar for four years and later, as an English teacher for five years. The data are also based on participant observation, discussions with friends and colleagues, and questionnaires answered by 5 respondents.

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