Featured Speaker, EFL Teacher Journeys Conference, June 2013
Conference Presentation Paper

Secret Agents of Change: Or, Life is a Cabaret

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(An edited version of the talk delivered at the EFL Teacher Journeys Conference, June, 2013, Tokyo, Japan)

This talk grew out of a few different points of inspiration. One was a conversation I had with some students recently. We were talking about the formatting and presentation of a class assignment: I was critical of the slapdash preparation of the document, and one student argued that it was the content that mattered. Inside my head, I unexpectedly heard my first TESL role model and professor, Richard Yorkey, speaking: "Sure, I guess you can prepare sloppy work," I heard him say, "but it's like getting dressed in the morning. Don't you always want to look your best?" Wow. That was a surprise. I hadn't heard Dick's voice in years; specifically 23 years, since he died in November of 1990. Who knew that I still had a mental tape recording of that distinctive, elegant voice? If anyone here knew Dick Yorkey, you certainly remember that he was a natty dresser, right down to the wildly colorful neckties he always wore: "The only thing that a man can go crazy on," he used to say.

A second inspiration is my abiding interest in Vygotskyan, or sociocultural, theory and how it continues to help me understand and explain growth and change in the classroom and in professional life. For today's talk, I found myself going over such key Vygotskyan concepts as inner speech, intersubjectivity, appropriation and internalization, the principle of recursive access, and the nature of expertise (Verity, 2005).

And the third is perhaps the most obvious jumping-off point is this: recently, my own professional journey took a sharp lateral turn that has resulted in my re-examining certain aspects of my own principles and practice. Who, what and where am I now and what contributed to my getting here?

So, in a nutshell, and I choose the term advisedly, I would like to talk to you today about the people inside my head. I call them the Secret Agents of Change. Why secret? After all, the people who mentored us are definitely not secret. When we bother to, we certainly express our gratitude and appreciation directly and consciously. Most of us are proud to be associated with our mentors; we don't want to keep them secret, from ourselves or from others. So why did I decide to call this talk "secret agents of change" instead of just "Mentors: Agents of Change"?

Those of you who know me won't be surprised to learn that my answer comes from Vygotsky, specifically, the Vygotskyan notion of inner speech. As many of you know, a basic principle of Vygotskyan theory is that the origins of individual cognition are social: this means that what we think inside our personal minds

came originally from our social interactions with other people. But thought is very different from interactive speech: one of the main differences is that thought is almost entirely form-free. It is, however, incredibly dense with meaning. Compared to audible, or social, speech, the language of thought is asyntactic—nearly without syntax, or structure. For example, when we see a snake, we don't tell ourselves: "Oh, that animal that I see lying on the path in front of me appears to be a member of the class of poisonous serpents." No, our brain screams, in one unbreakable chunk of meaning: SNAKE!DANGER!FLEE! And even that three-word version is relatively atomistic compared to actual thought.

This dense, unanalyzed, structure-free version of language allows us to function automatically most of the time, in most familiar circumstances. Life would be way too arduous if we had to express everything explicitly, both to ourselves or to others. Think how you talk to your spouse or your sibling or your close friend: much of what you "say" is not really said at all: your frequent interactions over the years have resulted in a mutual understanding—an intersubjectivity—that allows you to communicate with an "other" almost as asyntactically—as fluently, as automatically, as implicitly—as you communicate with yourself.

On Becoming a Mentor

So how does it happen, this move from outside (fully external, alien) to inside (fully internal, completely appropriated)? Vygotskyan theory posits that the individual mind is a result of numberless social interactions which become internalized, appropriated and re-constructed. In brief, we all have lots of people living inside our heads (Verity, 2006).

So far, the connection to mentoring is probably fairly clear: a mentor starts out as an external, separate, "other", an external source of knowledge and wisdom whose words we hear, accept, and seek to appropriate (though of course not all mentors are consciously chosen or even sought). As we engage with the mentor, and the words of the mentor, and the knowledge and expertise of the mentor, we transform them—what started as entirely separate become our words, and our thoughts. Finally we can no longer disentangle what is ours and what was theirs. The mentor is now secret in the sense that we have hidden them, for all intents and purposes, inside our own mind. What we have taken from them is fully appropriated into ourselves.

One way of looking at this process is to use the commonly-accepted metaphor for the appropriated voice: we become ventriloquists. Ventriloquation is not limited to Vygotskyan theory, of course. It was also central to the work of the Soviet literary philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas are often discussed in association with Vygotsky's. While putting this talk together, I came across a very interesting article in the International Journal of Dialogic Science about Bakhtin's ideas and mentoring. In fact, I found this quotation, which pretty much sums up the main point of my talk so far: "Bakhtin's theory of language helps us recognize that the voices of our philosophical mentors and others who have influenced our teaching are ever-present and inform instructional choices….." (Stewart & McClure, 2013, p. 92).

For both of these scholars, the central idea is similar: what appears to be unified and solo is in fact varied and interdependent. Vygotsky, the educational psychologist, focused on conceptual development. Bakhtin, the literary critic and philosopher, took a slightly more artistic perspective and proposed a musical metaphor: what seems to be a unitary mind is actually a polyphony of voices: from many, we become one.

Vygotskyan theory helps us pin down the cognitive aspects of appropriating other people's ideas, taking and then making our own the wisdom of our mentors. Bakhtin's approach, on the other hand, reveals something more unexpected about the mentoring process: it creates a deeply emotional relationship. Like a parent, the mentor is both adored and rejected. Like a child, the mentee, in order to complete the transformation, must break free. The process of appropriation is constructive but at the same time, paradoxically, it destroys. The voices of change are potentially transgressive and revolutionary: we are the product not only of polyphony, but, importantly, also of cacophony: the discord of opposing and hedonistic energies that work against the structured legacy of the past, that seek to dismantle the stable authority of the mentor, and aim to create a new potential for the future. Bakhtin summed up this claim in his concept of "carnival."

Listening to your own mentors

As part of my preparation for this talk, I spent a couple of hours on the phone with an old friend of mine, a librarian who has created one of the largest mentoring networks for young librarians in the New York City area. It was really interesting to hear what she said when I first told her about my talk: "It's really hard, because they always insist on doing it their own way. No matter what you tell them." I thought that it was humbling of her to admit this inescapable point first: despite many successes as a mentor, she still hasn't quite gotten her head around the fact that the people she is mentoring have their own agendas.

Mentoring is a balance between wielding authority and having none to wield: As Bakhtin explains, participants in carnival adopt many roles, referencing both real life and its stable hierarchies, and a projected, fantasy, life in which those hierarchies are overturned: "Today you may be the expert, but you know what? Tomorrow it's my turn."

Acknowledging and taking on these new roles, whether in costume or just in conversation, means shaking up the authoritative version of language and values, and making room for a new set of meanings. Where Vygotsky privileges the agency of the learner who seeks paths towards development, Bakhtin privileges the disruptive energy of novicehood itself.

To engage with the polyphony within is to risk the reversal of stability and closure and to open oneself to constant possibility. Though exhausting, this engagement allows for renewal and change. So this is where my new job comes in. I now work in a position where what I am is a mentor. What I do is mentor.

When I was preparing the talk I knew that I wanted to reference Bakhtin's carnival, and I knew at the same time that talking about carnival in central Pennsylvania doesn't really fit: Amish Pennsylvania doesn't really "do carnival" so I looked around for another, perhaps familiar, image to represent this sense of 'anything goes': what came to mind is the notion of "cabaret" which is at least familiar to people who may not attend Carnival and its yearly excesses. Most people (well, maybe not the Amish, again) know the words to the song: What good is sitting alone in your room, come to the cabaret…..Life is a cabaret, old chum, come to the cabaret.

Professionals are never alone

I guess my first point today is that as TESL professionals, as experts, we are never alone, even when we are sitting in our room. We always have company: the mentors who words, voices, and ideas live on inside our heads. As my "flash memory" of Dick Yorkey's voice illustrates, as I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, those people we carry around inside our heads are still

there, available for reference and retrieval. Like most everyone here, I am lucky to have had great mentors in my life. It's thanks to them, as much as to my own efforts, that I have become in many ways an expert, and perhaps excellent, classroom teacher. As a language teacher and teacher educator, I've had plenty of time, and plenty of opportunity, to provide what I hope has been primarily a positive influence in the cognitive, affective, and professional development of many—most?—of my students. I love teaching, and I appreciate what a good teacher can do for a learner.

So where did all this expertise get me? Well, it's really interesting. I moved sideways. Not really up. Not really down. But into a new set of hierarchies and a new constellation of roles. I think I was hired for my expertise. But I'm actually being asked to do things which are not part of that expertise, at least not directly. In my new position, I supervise a writing program for international undergraduate students, teach in the residential MATESL program, and coordinate the online TESOL Certificate program, serve on doctoral committees and support graduate teaching assistants. That's about it, I think. In embodying and concretizing these duties, I've had to confront, interrogate, and to some extent, restructure my expertise in ways that have been somewhat unexpected. I do "teach at Penn State." But I am no longer primarily a classroom teacher. I have become, somewhat surprisingly, a full-time mentor.

The diagram (Figure 1) illustrates some of the easily-identifiable relationships I participate in every day now: I supervise our funded graduate teaching assistants who teach and tutor in a program for international first-year students (plus a couple of classes for international graduate students who want extra help with writing). I also teach in, and help supervise the practicum teaching program, for our MATESL program.

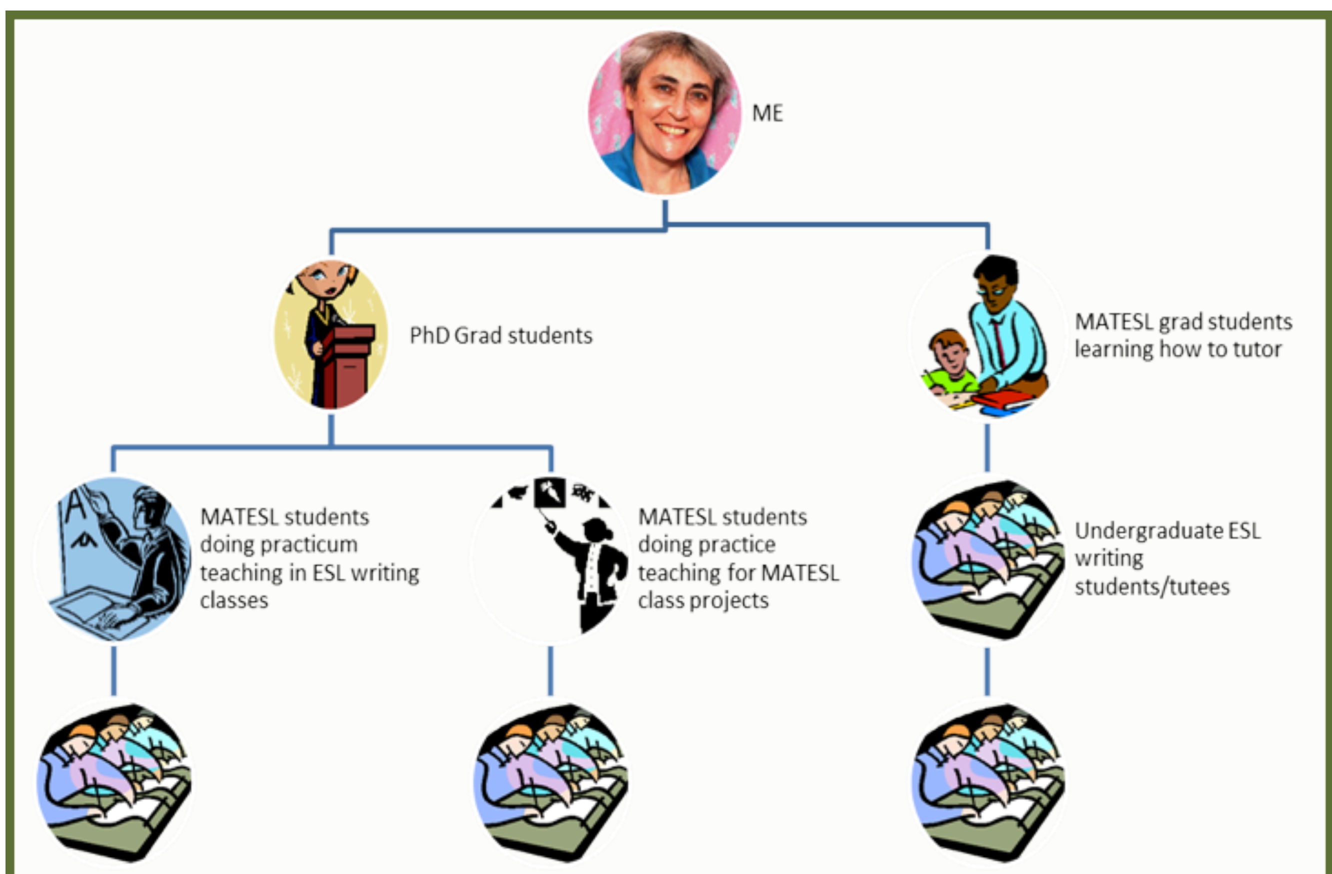

Figure 1. Some of the easily-identifiable relationships I participate in every day.

Within these teaching and tutoring opportunities, we encourage peer tutoring, peer editing, and peer-to-peer mentoring, as well as informal apprenticeships, observations, and assigned microteaching.

None of it is exactly new to me. But in a way, it's all new. Unlike the first three decades of my career, it's no longer about me. Each time I've faced a new challenge in this job, I've found that I do know something that helps me find an answer, a solution, an approach. But the knowledge that I have is not structured to fit the new situation, so I need to bring it out, piece by piece. Examine it. Re-label and re-purpose it.

Expertise is great. But expertise is, like all activity, deeply situated and contingent. Give me a classroom and I'm able to find strategic tools, affordances, to solve almost any problem. Give me a program, and I'm a novice again. Kind of. To fall back on yet another metaphor, I'm learning how to participate in the delicate alchemy, the polyphony, as Bakhtin would have it, that involves helping novice teachers turn the lead of their incomplete knowledge into useful lumps of gold.

Those who can, teach; Those who can teach, mentor.

So my second point is a reversal of that old, and insulting, cliché: those who can, do; those who can't, teach. Of course I don't buy into the cliché at all. Rather, I embrace a slightly different version: Those who can, teach; and those who can teach, mentor:

- A young writing instructor comes to me about a student who appears to have plagiarized: our plagiarism-checking software suggests that the paper is 96% original, but my instinct, and hers, suggests that the student totally copied. We plan a strategy that would both catch the cheater and stop the cheating. Everybody's face is saved, nobody has to fail, and everybody learns something new and important. Especially me.
- Another TA comes to me to ask about what to do with a group of girls who chat and giggle throughout all her lessons. I visit the class. I ask the students for their input. I listen to one of the students, who insists on meeting with me separately to tell me about the "terrible" things that this instructor does: calls on her by name! Asks her to be quiet! By the time we all finish working that one out, the most disruptive student is writing thank-you emails to the instructor for her "great teaching."
- I listen to the job hunting travails of one of my best young instructors: to me, this extra personal attention just part of what I do. I've been in the field for a long time and she hasn't. To her, it's a huge gift—none of the other faculty members quite see it as their role to be a sounding board about an instructional career. "Should I go to China to take a job I don't really want, or try my luck in Virginia, where I have only a short-term contract?" To me, thirty years in, the choice is clear: don't take a job you don't really want in a place where you don't really want to live. To her, this is a nugget of wisdom. I'm happy to give it away: it was a hard-earned lesson at one point in my life.

Maybe that's my third point today: these nuggets of knowledge, pearls of wisdom, chunks of advice—they seem so concrete and so practical, so easy to pass on with a kindly smile and an encouraging word. But in fact it is no less difficult to figure out what to pass on than it was to learn it in the first place. Expertise that is formed through the energy of contemplation, trial and error, risk-taking and judgment, in other words, through life experience, is like the formless thought that I described earlier in the talk, dense and meaning-rich and hard to tease apart, to taxonomize, to give structure to. I have

become an expert not because of how MUCH I know but HOW I know: a mixture of lived experience, theoretical information, practical application of the wisdom I received . . . it is not an accumulation of gold bars, this expertise: it is a condensation and a conversion of life into lessons.

Being a mentor is not the same as being an administrator. There is a minimal amount of paper I am expected to push. No, being a mentor is being a role model and a questioner of roles; a sustainer of a legacy and an interrogator of traditions. Even more than being a teacher, being a mentor is something like being a parent: my job requires me to love and to let go. Twenty years ago, in my doctoral dissertation, I compared the classroom instructor to a director in rehearsal of a play: ultimate success lies in becoming invisible, redundant, absorbed into the performance to the extent that one disappears from the stage. As a mentor, my role is more complex; I remain, somewhere, a secret catalyst, an agent for change. But at the same time I must agree to become a bit player in another person's story. The cabaret of their life will, in fact, MUST fictionalize me to some extent. At best, I become a silent partner; at worst, a half-told story.

By chance, about two weeks before delivering this talk in Tokyo, I found myself unexpectedly at a live cabaret performance. The singer was doing a one-man show about music from the years referenced by the musical *Cabaret* Ebb, 1966): he wove together songs, historical facts, family myths, and personal stories into a seamless and original construction that was both fact—he brought in historical figures from Gershwin to Freud—and art—he sang songs from Hollywood, the Weimar Republic and 1950s America. His show was both a tribute to, and a re-appropriation of, many of the people who mostly closely influenced his life and this work, a roll call of activists, composers, performers, and ancestors. Watching him perform, and thinking ahead to the talk I was preparing to give here today, I realized that my chosen metaphor—the collection of voices as a cabaret of expertise—was more apt than I knew: being expert is how we get to spend our lives in rooms with lots of other people, even though some of them can't really see or hear us directly. We have become integral to the stories that other people will tell one day.

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