

Overcoming Professional Self-Doubt

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Vignette

In February 2020, the biggest worry on my horizon was planning for my new graduation seminar course (known in Japan as a 'Zemi'). Zemi are often considered to be a uniquely Japanese practice, involving professors mentoring students over a longer period (in my case, three years) to pursue research into their academic specialization, culminating in a graduation thesis. They typically also have a strong social or pastoral element, with some offering group trips and even introductions to graduate recruiters.

Although I had designed and taught content-based courses before, this time I was finding it challenging to get down to details. Like many non-Japanese faculty, I had no personal experience with the Zemi system, and I could not visualize what went on in the classroom. I was aiming to help students produce an academic thesis informed by research, in their second language, but I also wanted them to identify with topics, enjoy discussion and build productive relationships. I wasn't sure how to strike a balance between freedom and oversight; how to be both teacher and mentor in the Japanese cultural context.

What's more, as a language teacher seeking to mentor students in the content area I had not studied since undergraduate level almost twenty years earlier, I felt underqualified in the field I had chosen to teach. I tried to remedy my perceived deficiencies by reading everything I could get my hands on, filling my hard drive with articles and lesson materials, but I was failing to put the pieces in place. When I asked questions, I kept hearing the same phrase: "it's up to you". What worked in one context, for one teacher, might not be the right answer for me.

In March 2020, everything changed. In response to the spread of COVID-19, my university moved all courses online, where they remained for two years. I no longer had the luxury of spinning my wheels, so I got on with teaching, combining task-

based learning, group work and reading discussions with individual research and mentoring. The pandemic forced me to stop worrying about what I couldn't do and start doing what I could.

Objectives

- To explore the balance of constraint and freedom in guiding professional decision-making.
- To consider the importance of professional self-image.
- To reflect on your strengths as an educator.

Practical Implications

Consider the following questions, either individually or in discussion with other teaching professionals:

1. Do you prefer to work within clear guidelines, or for most decisions to be "up to you"? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
2. Have you ever experienced professional self-doubt, or a daunting challenge? What happened? What was the outcome?
3. Consider the following questions suggested by Tarr (2021):
 - a. Who are five role models that you admire?
 - b. What do you have in common with them?
 - c. Why do they inspire you? (In particular, what actions do they take that you admire?)
 - d. What similar actions have you taken in your own teaching practice?
4. Based on the actions you have listed in question 3.d., make a list of what you feel to be your strengths as a teaching professional. Consider how you can apply these strengths to a professional challenge you are facing.

Reflective Conclusion

Two years on, I am preparing to guide my first Zemi cohort through their graduation theses, and to welcome my third intake. While some course elements need fine-tuning, and content will change

along with topical issues, I feel happy with the framework I have created, and satisfied with student engagement. I am looking forward to returning to classroom-based teaching and beginning to develop the social aspects of the zemi.

I suspect that the materials and course I developed online will transfer quite smoothly to the classroom. With the move to emergency remote teaching, I had to focus explicitly on what I wanted to achieve in the course, and how to teach in a way I was comfortable and confident with. Thinking that the situation would be temporary – a few months, I thought! – I approached new tools and platforms as ways to replicate the kind of teaching and interaction that I would plan for the classroom.

Frustrating as it sometimes felt at the time, I realized that the response “it’s up to you” was well-intentioned, and empowering. I had been asked to teach the course – to choose topics, pedagogy, activities, assignments and to recruit students – because my institution and colleagues believed that I could. If they had wanted someone else, they would have hired someone else! The same is true of students: since zemi courses are electives, and teachers select applicants, they offer the chance to work with a small group who are highly motivated to learn with you. I have come to appreciate the freedom granted to me, and the chance to develop the course flexibly in conjunction with my students.

The pandemic and shift to online learning led many experienced teachers to question their established practices, and even their competence as educators. Even without the pandemic disruption, self-doubt can strike at any stage of a teacher’s career, particularly when taking on new responsibilities or positions. Tarr (2021) suggests that to combat self-doubt, “Reaffirming what we believe in and reminding ourselves of evidence of past success can be a reliable way to dissolve the fear” (para. 8). The sudden change to remote learning forced me to identify the essence of what I wanted to achieve, and what had worked in the past. Next time I encounter self-doubt in my teaching career, I hope to be better armed to tackle it with intention.

References

Tarr, T. (2021, May 31). Here are four questions to ask that stop imposter syndrome every time. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tanyatarr/2021/05/31/here-are-four-questions-to-ask-that-stop-imposter-syndrome-every-time/>

Author Bio

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Link to Presentation on YouTube:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvNwQS6EEaA>>

