

# Forum

## PANSIG 2025: Notes from the Teacher Development SIG Forum (Saturday May 17)

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It was a small, intimate vibe at the gathering of the Teacher Development SIG Forum late on a rain-swept Saturday on the Kanda University International Studies (KUIS) Campus for PANSIG 2025. The morning had started strong with a thorough presentation from Dr. Johnmarshall Reeve on facilitating autonomy-supportive teaching, agentic engagement, the importance of invitational language, and success as defined as 'thriving'. It was great to see in the TD SIG's two presentations some of Reeve's key themes become actualised in real time and in workshop form. This forum happened to be the only workshop-style session I attended that weekend, reflecting that TD is all about developing through doing and, most importantly, doing together. A feeling of togetherness seems to be at the heart of the SIG and, as it turns out, autonomy-supportive teaching.

Throughout her presentation "Developing Teacher Autonomy Through Reflective Practices: Intersubjectivity and Communication", Joan Kuroda spoke effervescently about her love of mentorship training (and what it could do for autonomy), shared reflection, and John Dewey (whom she dubbed "the godfather of reflection"). Behind all of this, sometimes explicitly stated but deeply imbedded, was a deep respect for the chance of learning, developing through recognising mistakes, and vulnerability. Evident throughout her talk was a study of reflective practices, being ensconced in approaches such as Max Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology. However, she said she was tired of only studying about this and how for the last couple of years, it had truly been time to "get going" with reflective practice. She detailed her experiences with a small reflective group of educators, which I later learned had morphed over time but was happily charging along in a very intentional and purposeful way. At the heart of her presentation was an incident about three high-energy boys, seemingly off-task and overly jocular in a classroom that was otherwise on point. The crux of the issue, however, was being addressed with the possibly over-familiar diminutive '-chan', which caused the teacher quite a bit of distress. Taking a phenomenological approach to analyse this incident, the reflective approach used begins with a teacher collecting data about an incident, creating a narrative about it, and then beginning a line-by-line analysis of this narrative in what Joan called a "crafted story". The word choice here is key—it is not a retelling or description of events: it is a creative act and what Joan called "the making and re-making of reality". Reflection is not a one shot and you're done act—it is built on the foundation of plausibility, a "suspension of judgement", empathy (with the students and with other teachers), and it is a creative act defined collectively.

The small groups of reflecting teachers were then further guided to wonder about what might have been happening in that classroom, what could the teacher do, and the teacher's own decision for what could be done. In our own particular group, we spoke of the possibility of under-challenged students, why some teachers have thicker skin than others, why this seeming incident of disrespect would be bothersome (or not even disrespectful) to some teachers and not others, and the likely previous experiences some students had with ALTs. It was curious to hear that, in the end, the teacher approached the students directly to find out about the issue, which

was a student desire to be closer to the teacher. As it also turns out, following on from this chat with the students, the classroom rapport and performance was enhanced. I would have loved to enquire more about the wording of that chat with the students, for I assume that it involved quite a lot of emotional vulnerability on the part of the teacher in admitting his/her taking offense at the use of the diminutive. I also wondered about the value of reflecting 'what if' and 'what could' (phrases Joan instructed us to use when attempting our own reflections) if you could just get the 'real' answer straight from the students' mouths. However, while Joan did not say this explicitly, I'd like to think that the process of collective and reflective exploration of events (with other teachers prior to consulting the students) prepared the teacher for open-minded discussion and for a potential answer that a student may give. In a word, it gave the teacher the confidence to be vulnerable in a safe space with other teachers first and thus hopefully recreate that safe-space with the students in a similar conversation.

Later in the session, Joan and I wondered about how often teachers do the tasks that we ask of students, and we agreed that the frequency is probably a lot lower than we would like to admit. I also asked Joan why she insisted that this reflective process had to be about a 'problem', rather than a win. Joan contended that you could use this process for wins, however it was problems that brought about vulnerability, and it is vulnerability that brings teachers together, which is the training ground for bringing teachers and students together. In this sense, this reflective practice linked back nicely to Reeve's contentions in the morning session about how, in an autonomous supportive environment, more invitational language is needed ('you may want to/you could', as opposed to 'you must/you should') and also, that it is equally important, if not more important, for the students to reflect on their autonomous actions with each other, as compared to explaining their autonomous decisions to the teacher. Autonomy is an act defined by sharing with equals. It was here that I was very much reminded of the first TD SIG Forum I attended at JALT 2023, in which current TD President Jon Thomas gave a deeply personal talk about how, in the classroom, there is no 'them and me' when it concerns the teachers and the students, despite how often teacher-talk contains notions about how 'they' (the students) didn't get it. It was a truly motivational speech, so it was great to see some of these unifying themes come together in a TD Forum once again.

The proceedings then moved from reflecting collectively to creating collectively with Anthony (Chuck) Glovia's "Lyrics as Language: Collaborative Songwriting for Expressive Agency in the Classroom". Chuck opened the presentation with the think-pair-share on the question "Why do lyrics stay in our memory?", before outlining the agentic elements of creating music in class. Namely, he highlighted how students choosing lyrics demonstrated an expressive side of autonomy, the cultural agency of choosing themes, and also how the performative element in lyric creation demonstrated linguistic competence. This was a great verbalisation of some of the agentic themes of the conference, but it was the subsequent stages that made for an interesting experience. After demonstrating a sample 3-line verse song in a blues format, Chuck then had TD attendees gather into small groups to make a similar song. Themes were suggested and attendees were invited to collaboratively create a 3-line verse. Thus, we are returned to the former question concerning how often teachers do what they ask their students to do. What followed revealed some curious sensations about creativity, anonymity and collaboration. It felt far easier to create the 3 line-songs as a group than individually. As a group, the sense of pressure and accountability seemed far less, even though we all contributed one line. This reminded me of the plenary session in the morning; in a brief comment, Reeve talked of the value of anonymity in autonomy when asking for student feedback via apps such as Mentimeter. The notion of anonymous autonomy was implied in this lyric creation act, and I would have liked Chuck to explore ideas how creating music in class could be both authentically agentic, equally

anonymous, and potentially more free of anxiety for language learners when creating a 'performer' identity.

What was equally interesting was how, mid-presentation, Chuck was directly challenged with a question about why we were doing this (a question that could be aimed at why would students do this activity and also why as teachers we were we doing that right then). I found this fascinating for three key reasons. Firstly, I would like to think that the TD is a SIG that has effectively created an atmosphere where teachers feel comfortable challenging one another. Secondly, this moment also brought me back to another key point from the plenary session of the morning. It was so refreshing to see Reeve stipulate the benefits of explicitly stating why students are being 'invited' to do something, something I have always felt is vital to purposeful learning. Thirdly, even if I felt that Chuck had actually stated the 'why' of the activity, I loved the fact that it was asked again and that it could be answered again. As a matter of fact, I would be happy to be asked that question every 10 minutes in a lesson, as if to keep the *raison d'être* of all learning alive and burning and always in our minds.

Some 10 minutes into the session, after the songs were made, there was sadly no time to share them despite attendee desire to do so. I would like to share the lyrics that were made in our group for a couple of reflective reasons. The stanza went a little something like this:

It's so hard to make a decision (I chose my clothes today)  
I can't make a decision to save my life  
So I've decided to save nothing at all.

Despite the original impetus for the lyrics being an inability to choose clothes, the collaborative writing of this stanza came very quickly. In my own classes, I am often ambivalent about how the collaborative process can make some tasks take longer than if done individually, but often know that interpersonal skills being developed are equally as important as the linguistic. In this case, however, it was very quick, connected, and authentic. The song resonated quite deeply with all group members. Perhaps we felt a creative union coming together as a group, that we had created, and we felt one as agents. If the song was right, then perhaps that's because, as Joan had illustrated in the collaborative reflection, we are often wrong about what we think is happening, that our decisions might not be as important as we think they are, and that is how things get done. Or maybe we just wanted to thrive. And like a successful, thriving shoe company, maybe sometimes you 'just do it .... together'.

### About the Author

Cam Hill has been teaching in Japanese tertiary settings for the last 10 years. Currently, he is exploring the Fukushima mountains and the curious world of learning at British Hills. His passions include student empathy, facilitating nonsense and dreams, and contemplating teaching as an art rather than a science. [cameronpaulhill@gmail.com](mailto:cameronpaulhill@gmail.com)