How a Nexus of Communities Mediates a Novice Writing Teacher: A Case of the Dialogically-Interpreted Narrative from the Sociocultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Journal of Studies in Language 35.2, 237-258. In this self-reflective narrative inquiry based on teaching journal entries and interpretive dialogues, I trace how a nexus of communities mediated my own development as a novice writing teacher when I first began teaching in another languaculture. Combining activity systems analysis and autoethnographic narrative analysis allowed me to better understand the roles and influences of the community in gradually transforming me from a deficient nonnative teacher to a crosscultural meaning-maker with multimodal affordances. Specifically, three types of interrelated communities were mediating my development, namely the co-working, the co-walking, and the co-orienting community. This inquiry revealed two significant lessons. First, my development as a multilingual writing teacher was a process of reconceptualizing the scope of communities that mediate me. Second, the support of these communities materialized when it met my multimodal, multilingual, and conceptual repertoire.

Keywords: reflective practice, writing teacher development, narrative inquiry, activity theory, interpretive dialogue

1. Introduction

How do nonnative teachers manage to live with the anxiety of teaching another language, which for many feels forever alien to them? How do these teachers survive the social stigma of inadequacy and the haunting agony of being judged based on the criteria they will never be able to meet however hard they may try? There are different ways to deal with this seemingly insurmountable hurdle. Some may choose to bear the burden, swallowing the bitterness of ‘transgressing’ another world that permits only native speakers to inhabit. Others may rationalize their work by attaching different roles and values to native and nonnative teachers. However, there is an alternative, that is, to reinvent the meaning of language teaching itself.

The current study demonstrates that narrative inquiry can be a powerful mediational tool in achieving the enterprise of reconceptualizing language pedagogy.
It also highlights the crucial role of reflective practice in promoting a series of cognitive and affective changes in teacher development. Specifically it charts the path that a novice non-native teacher took in redefining language teaching, where a community of caring, thoughtful people mediated his development as a multilingual writing instructor.

Since a series of publications that sparked ‘the reflective turn’ (Schön, 1983, 1991), reflective practice has been recognized as one of the most valuable means of teachers’ professional development. At the core of the reflective practice lie two important motives: curiosity about the deeper meaning of one’s life experiences and the passion to make them better. However, for most practitioners, who are overwhelmed by a series of pedagogical and administrative tasks, reflective practice does not happen automatically.

Given this situation a mediating activity is required, where one can raise questions about the meaning and effectiveness of one’s practice and explore a set of principled strategies to further one’s development (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). One viable way to secure this reflective space is to carefully record one’s professional activities and closely examine these detailed recordings of practices. This effort may fall under the umbrella term, “narrative inquiry,” where narrative is “fundamentally an activity of mind, a way of gathering up knowledge of practice, simply, a way of knowing, and of knowing that one knew” (Lyons and LaBoskey, 2002: 3). The present study embraces this value of narrative inquiry, employing it as a means of making sense of the researcher/narrator’s teaching practice and thus promoting his development as a novice writing teacher. It delves into what he has witnessed to “reconcile what is known with that which is hidden, selectively infuse those events with interpretation, and actively seek to bring meaning to [his] experience” (Johnson, 2009: 25).

Specifically, the present study traces how a nexus of communities has mediated the researcher/narrator’s development as a novice writing teacher during his initial years teaching in another language culture, based on reflections on teaching journal entries and collaborative dialogues intended to better understand them. Combining the autoethnographic narrative analysis (Rose and Montakantiwong, 2018) and activity systems analysis, this study attempts to address two broad questions: (1) What kinds of communities within the activity system mediate a novice writing teacher’s development?; (2) In what ways do these communities build on his cultural and multimodal repertoire in providing their support? Exploring these questions, the study highlights the value of dialogic interpretation of a narrative, the importance of introducing a broader concept of community in teacher development, and the power of radically expanding the concept of a writing teacher’s pedagogical repertoire, from the target language-focused view to multimodal, multilingual, cross-cultural, and conceptual one.

2. Reflective Practice, Narrative Inquiry, and Activity Theory

Narrative inquiry can be understood as a form of qualitative research which employs stories as a data source as well as a way of understanding the world. Although rooted in different theoretical and methodological traditions, studies based on narrative inquiry share one common theme in that they explore a narrative mode of thinking, knowing, and re-experiencing reality. It seeks to understand human experience in specific time and place, explore alternative perspectives in understanding experience, and obtain a richer appreciation of lived experiences. It also values the integrity of experience, recognizing the need to hold a moment in close relation to other experiences on both the social and historical axes. These points make narrative inquiry distinct from other theoretical vantage points such as positivist,
post-positivist, and critical theories (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006).

With this methodological appeal, narrative inquiry has been adopted for research in a variety of topics including teachers’ experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), language teacher education (Barkhuizen, 2016), multicultural education (Philion, He, and Connelly, 2005), music education (Barrett and Stauffer, 2009), teacher identity (Hayler, 2011), mentoring novice teachers (Johnson and Golombek, 2013), as well as language teachers’ professional development (Johnson and Golombek, 2002). It has been also embraced as a viable tool for exploring the dynamics of non-native teacher identities and development (Moussu and Llurda, 2008; Park, 2012; Pavlenko, 2003). With regard to the organic relationship of nonnative teacher development and sociocultural contexts, the importance of teacher community and other people who the teacher interacts with has been explored in a diverse range of contexts (Ilieva, 2010; Norton and Tang, 1997). Some research highlights that native speaker ideology needs to be critically reconceptualized (Canagarajah, 2013) by questioning and re-examining the concept of (non)nativeness in relation to specific sociocultural contexts (Aneja, 2016).

Among different theoretical foundations for teacher narrative inquiry, the current study draws on the sociocultural approach to teacher development. Specifically, it builds the researcher’s narrative through the sociocultural perspective, proposed by Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this theoretical framework, human actions are mediated by various tools, both physical and symbolic. In the context of education, writing one’s own life stories and reflecting on them can function as a powerful mediational tool for teachers’ reflective practices. Narratives function “as a mediational tool that both supports and enhances teacher professional development” (Johnson and Golombek, 2011: 488) since “the act of narrating, as a cultural activity, influences how one comes to understand what one is narrating about” (Johnson and Golombek, 2011: 490).

Sociocultural narrative inquiry, along with other narrative exploration of teacher experiences, rejects the notion of an autonomous individual with an infinite number of choices at hand. The individual is understood as a person with sociohistorically structured potentials and confinements. This non-separatist understanding of the individual and the environment in which one operates is clearly laid out in activity theory, an analytical and transformative framework, which was originally proposed by Vygotskian theorists including Alexei Leon’t’ev, and elaborated and expanded later by other socioculturally-minded scholars, notably Engeström (Engeström, 2014). This approach is particularly relevant to the current project, which is primarily concerned with the interrelatedness of the individual (the novice teacher narrator), the community (his colleagues, supervisors, and friends), and the community’s role in mediating the teacher’s development within a specific sociocultural context.

Activity is understood in a non-reductionist, non-dualistic manner as follows:

‘Activity’, in the sense of Russian deyateli’nosti, describes a powerful dialectic rooted in contradictions such as thinking and doing, knowing and performing, individual and society, idealism and materialism, use-value and exchange value, and internalization and externalization (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006: 209).

As the quote indicates, one of the most powerful characteristics of activity theory is that it enables a dialectic perspective on human development. It neither reduces one’s understanding of a specific phenomenon to a limited number of separate variables, nor puts a partition between the individual and community. Instead it seeks a holistic
understanding of human actions. To achieve this ecological validity, activity theory “maps the social influences and relationships involved in networks of human activity” (Johnson, 2009: 77). Embracing these tenets of activity theory necessitates reconceptualizing a person as a residence of multiple voices, manifesting various social, cultural, and political affordances and constraints in a specific situation (Cross, and Gearon, 2007; Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia, 1999).

This study employs the activity system model proposed by Engeström (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010: 2), among different renditions of the theoretical framework, where a specific activity system is described as Figure 1.

As Figure 1 shows, human activity happens within a dynamic interplay of its elements. Activity theory captures this complex, mediated nature of human actions while proposing the subject’s action toward an object is mediated by an integral set of elements. To be specific, the instruments refer to a set of artifacts and symbolic resources that can be taken up by the subject. The object is the goal of an activity. The rules mean the regulations and constraints upon which the subject is obliged to act. The community refers to a group of people with whom the subject collaborates to perform the activity. The division of labor is the way in which the roles and work involved in the activity are distributed (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

In the field of teacher education, activity theory has been employed for a variety of purposes, including a critical assessment and redesigning of teacher education programs (Roth and Tobin, 2002) and understanding the multifaceted nature of teacher education in the context of mentoring primary student teachers (Edwards and Protheroe, 2004). In some cases, the theory pays attention to the importance of emotion as a central element that creates tensions and conflicts within a given activity system (Abdullah, 2014). It has been also employed for critically understanding the relationship between a macro-structural force such as national curriculum and the teacher’s response to it (Kim, 2008). All these studies highlight the importance of understanding the subject within a network of sociohistorically situated activity systems, where development is complexly mediated.

Although an activity theoretical perspective has enabled an in-depth understanding of how a given nexus of activity systems is transformed, it has shown some limitation in exploring the subject as a uniquely multifaceted being, treating “individuals generically, in terms of their roles in the system, rather than personally” (Minnis and John-Steiner, 2001: 300). Keeping this limitation in mind, the current reflective inquiry pays close attention to the narrator/researcher, aiming to charter how the reflective subject himself has changed through engaging in sociocultural practices within the
activity system. Furthermore, it attends to the relationships between the community and the subject’s emotion in terms of his development as a novice teacher. Recognizing that understanding teacher emotion is essential in “teachers’ work, development and identity” (Schutz and Zembylas, 2009: 4) and teachers’ emotional stances play a crucial role in forming their identity as well as confidence (Song, 2016), this study describes how the community’s affective support helped him face his cognitive and emotional dissonance as a nonnative teacher and gain confidence as a teacher with multimodal, crosscultural affordances.

3. Research Method: A Dialogic Interpretation of Narrative

To explore the research questions, the study used the researcher/narrator’s semester-long teaching reflection journal as the primary data source. It was written two or three times a week, totaling approximately 20,000 words. All entries were written in English, which is the researcher/narrator’s second language. In analyzing the narratives two rather distinctive methods were adopted. First, activity theory analysis was incorporated as a way to understand the context in which the researcher/narrator’s teaching practices were embedded (Engeström, 2014). This made it possible to comprehend the close relationship of the subject, which is the researcher, as a writing instructor, and the context in which he was situated, highlighting the intertwined nature of all the elements in the given teaching context. Second, the researcher shared significant parts of the journal with some of his colleagues and friends, who he thought were able and willing to give valuable, critical insights to his teaching. This enabled him to secure the intersubjective view of his teaching practices, beyond the one-sided, subjective interpretations of his own actions. Table 1 summarizes three people who participated in this interpretive dialogue. (All names are pseudonyms.)

Table 1. Participants in the Interpretive Dialogue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Relationship with the researcher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Yi</td>
<td>Dr. Yi is a socioculturally-minded TESOL and second language literacy scholar. The researcher had taken her class in South Korea before he joined the doctoral program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ramirez</td>
<td>Dr. Ramirez is a second language writing expert. He was going to work as an ESL program director in the researcher’s department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seoulrain</td>
<td>Seoulrain is a friend of the researcher. He has taught English in a high school in South Korea. He enjoys writing and taking photos.</td>
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The adoption of dialogic interpretation was not planned a priori. At the initial stage of the project, the researcher/narrator primarily turned to his personal thoughts, feelings, and efforts for exploring different avenues for potential growth as a writing teacher. However, several rounds of close reading of his journal entries made him realize that a complex nexus of communities was helping him become a better teacher. This realization transformed his understanding of professional development and led him to pursue a more dialogic, communal understanding of his experience. The following summarizes the steps he took in incorporating a new method of dialogic interpretation within the current project.
(1) The researcher wrote his reflective narrative in relation to his teaching practices including syllabus design, class preparation, interaction with supervisor and peer teachers, students’ feedback, class observers’ comments, etc.

(2) The researcher opened up some parts of the journal to a number of colleagues and received feedback from them. They gave comments on what they believed to be important to the researcher/narrator’s development as a teacher. The format and content of the feedback was not fixed.

(3) The researcher carefully interpreted their comments in terms of how they contributed to his renewed awareness of previously unattended aspects of teaching, learning, materials development, and other related aspects of professional development.

This dialogic interpretation was also motivated by the researcher/narrator’s recognition that he, in fact, had barely begun teaching and thus what he read out of his own narrative was also constrained by his inexperience. In this vein, the interpretive circle formed between him and his narrative has a definite limitation. He thought ‘adding another eye’ to the picture would help break out of this closed loop, and would instead provide him with a wider, wiser view of his practice.

4. Critical Reflections

A dialogic interpretation of the teaching journal entries revealed crucial aspects of teacher development. It was fundamentally a social and mutual process, where a group of people worked together, explicitly and implicitly, to realize a teacher’s potential, supporting him in various ways. Through this process the researcher/narrator witnessed his evolving relationship with the community change in tandem with his conceptualization of language teachers within his pedagogical context. In the following sections, the researcher/narrator’s critical reflections upon the mediating roles of community are presented. As a way of highlighting the self-reflective nature of the present narrative inquiry, all excerpts and commentaries are presented in the first person point of view.

4.1 Activity System Analysis-Informed Understanding of the Teaching Context

This section describes the activity system of the ESL class which I taught while keeping my teacher reflection journal. It is followed by an activity theory-informed narrative analysis, which focuses on the component of community. (For an activity system framework used in the following analysis, see Figure 1.)

The research venue is an ESL (English as a second language) academic writing course in a large US-based university. As the focus of the current research is professional development as a writing teacher rather than each student’s development, the subject in this activity system is the researcher/narrator Sungwoo Kim, that is, me, rather than the enrolled students. I was born in Seoul, Korea. I started learning English when I entered middle school. My studies were focused on English grammar and reading, which were essential for preparing for the college entrance exam. I majored in English education in my undergraduate study and master’s program. After working for seven years as a technical writer and project manager, I joined an applied linguistics program in the U. S. This narrative was written in the second year of my doctoral program.
I have multiple roles within the institution. I am a doctoral student, participating also in the Newsletter Committee as an editor and photographer. I play the piano in an amateur band and occasionally give an informal music lesson to undergraduates. And, most relevant to this narrative, I teach an ESL writing course to undergraduate students twice a week. Most of these roles first seemed irrelevant to the inquiry since my students met me in a pedagogical context, assigning me the role of writing instructor only. This in turn made most of my non-pedagogical roles invisible or only partially accessible to them.

I could clearly see my initial understanding of the subject slowly changed as I analyzed my teaching-related episodes, guided by theoretical concepts in the activity system analysis. I realized that it is crucial to understand the subject in a specific activity system as a whole person, rather than as a teacher performing a particular function. This is because a certain aspect of the subject can be brought to the front depending on the dynamics of the activity system or on the subject’s agentive move to marshal as diverse affordances as possible to achieve a specific pedagogical goal.

For example, the narrative shows that I intentionally chose examples of sampling in rap music or improvisations of classical music into modern pop to show that humans borrow from each other and that these mutual borrowing practices form the sociocultural basis of artistic activities. This explanation in turn was connected to citation practices in academic writing: Scholars depend upon each other’s writings while musicians depend upon their peers and predecessors. This shows the musical side of me cannot be separated from the pedagogical role I assume: My music life often functioned as a valuable asset for my teaching, as my conversation with Adriana below illustrates. As the following section shows, I found that the attempt to incorporate these seemingly non-instructional roles had been mobilized and supported by thoughtful community members.

Another notable theme relevant to understanding the subject was that I am a venue of conflicting identities. I have been interested in developing myself as a competent writing teacher, but this was met by a sense of inadequacy and incompetence. The following excerpt speaks to this theme.

I have a deep longing for moments when my passion for becoming a better writing teacher becomes transformative: when my teaching meets the world, raises fundamental questions about the meaning of teaching language, drives me towards critically evaluating my teaching practices, and, ultimately, helps my students develop their writing and appreciate the beauty of carefully chosen words, I experience an intense emotional journey. However, the journey was constantly punctuated by a sense of incompetence as a nonnative speaker of English. Nobody told me that I was inadequate as a writing teacher; yet, I pushed myself to the dark valley of suffering over and over, lamenting the formidable challenge of becoming a competent teacher in another language and culture. I had to do something to move forward, lest I may be washed backwards.

As will be discussed below, my desire to be a competent writing instructor and an accompanying sense of inadequacy as a nonnative teacher were a consistent theme in my narrative. Naturally, these issues often emerged when I engage in dialogues with some community members.

Regarding the object and outcome, the following excerpt, written at the beginning of the semester, explicitly describes my goal in teaching ESL writing courses.
My goal for this semester’s teaching in terms of teacher development is twofold: (1) my development in teaching to and learning from students and (2) building an interactive atmosphere and collaborative platform among the writing teachers in the department.

Even though my goal has been stated with regard to two aspects, they were closely interwoven: It was impossible to achieve the second goal without developing myself as a teacher as well as a learner of teaching. This was particularly true for a novice teacher like me at that time who depended largely on community support for the most aspects and stages of teaching. It was clear that I was not able to achieve these goals from a ‘deficient second language speaker’ standpoint. I had to become a resourceful contributor in another way.

The tool refers to mediating artifacts that can help me teach better. This included course-related files, books, websites, handouts, technology in the classroom, and other resources. A majority of them were suggested and sometimes directly relayed to each instructor via formal and informal instructor meetings. The following excerpt, which is related to my search for a relevant, quality syllabus for my teaching, demonstrates this point.

Several days later, at a TA meeting, I heard that there is a really detailed version of syllabus for ESL 015. I knew it had been drafted by Kay… I was struck by its thoroughness. It has a really carefully designed and well prepared syllabus. It was awesome!

The episode above is one of the many instances where pedagogical resources were provided by the community. In other words, the community was channeling relevant materials and instructional strategies to those who needed them. Thus mediating artifacts should be understood in close relation to the community.

My labor as a writing teacher was divided with other colleagues mainly in two types. The first involved sharing of some teaching materials such as handouts and rubrics. This is usually done via personal emails. The second took the form of official instructor meetings. For example, writing teachers and the supervisor had two meetings to discuss how to place students based on their diagnostic test results. Later several meetings were held to share teaching strategies and tips with regard to various topics in composition.

Several rules gave structure to my ESL class. The first rule is that the class should happen twice a week, from 11:15-12:30. There is a university policy which specifies the grading criteria. I was also advised to cover several topics, one of which was plagiarism. The program mandates rules for academic integrity, according to which the issues of plagiarism should be dealt with in a determinant manner. Whenever I hit some ‘gray area’ in implementing these policies, I resorted to other colleagues for clarification. Again, the community plays a pivotal role in understanding and implementing the rules.

One of the assumed yet most important rules was that I needed to deliver my lecture in English. This rule was so obvious in the context that it did not need any official explanation. However, it formed a strong force that propelled every pedagogical imagination to revolve around English. As the following section shows, this initial understanding of mine, gearing toward the target language, shifted slowly to another direction of incorporating multimodal and multilingual affordances, mediated by the community.

The community consisted of the people who intervened in my ESL instruction in various ways. The scope of
community is based on the following definition of community within an activity system.

The community within an activity system consists of groups who share the same general object and who position themselves as distinct from other communities. Depending on the subject of the activity system, a community might comprise fellow teachers in the school or the classroom community created by a teacher and a group of students (Johnson, 2009: 79).

I conducted a content analysis of my teaching reflection journal to learn who were involved in my teaching, which turned out to be a much broader circle of people than I had previously imagined. I categorized them according to the breadths and depths of their involvement in my teaching and professional development. This revealed that the community in relation to my teaching was not a monolithic group of people. Rather, different groups of people were providing different levels and types of mediation for me. To properly address these different roles assumed by those communities, I have conceptualized the community on three planes: the co-working, the co-walking, and the co-orienting community.

(1) The co-working community
The first community is referred to as the co-working community, which participates directly and indirectly in my class. This can be further divided into two groups: the students and colleagues. The current project focuses on the community of colleagues in terms of their contributions to the narrator/researcher’s professional development.

(2) The co-walking community
The second community can be termed as the co-walking community. This includes current and future second language education professionals. Their expertise and life experiences enable them to better understand me as a second language writing teacher. They may not be able to offer immediate solutions to the issues I face in my teaching; however, they are potential, accessible sources of information, wisdom, and inspiration.

(3) The co-orienting community
The third community, the co-orienting community, refers to anyone who is willing to help my growth as a teacher. Here, it is crucial to note that professional expertise is not required. Rather, the issue is how they can align with me and vice versa as fellow human beings. For example, a community of Korean teachers can mediate my development as a writing teacher even though they do not have any experience in the ESL writing pedagogy.

The following section focuses on the role of community within my ESL teaching context. There are four main reasons why I have chosen community as a main object of analysis. First, community, especially the co-working community, turned out to play a crucial role in shaping the entire activity system in issue: My role as an ESL instructor has been assigned and supported by this community. Second, it shaped a majority of elements in the system. Specifically, it established the rules for instruction. It also channeled mediating artifacts and guided how the instructors
should divide their labor. Third, the co-walking community and the co-orienting community played a significant role in encouraging me to take a broader perspective of my own teaching practices and the scope of pedagogical repertoire for teaching writing, which further led me to rethink the meaning of my life as a writing being. They helped me confront the dilemmas and paradoxes that lie in teaching writing in an era where the act of writing too often loses its meaning. Fourth, the community played an essential role in mediating my emotional state, encouraging me to examine my assumptions about writing pedagogy and explore alternative ways to understand the language I needed to teach.

4.2 Reflection on the Mediating Roles of the Community

This section discusses the role of community in my teaching activity system. First, I discuss the co-working community, that is, a group of people who interacted with me within the immediate instructional context and supported my teaching in person. Second, I focus on my future TA supervisor’s comment on my reflection journal to understand the impact of the co-walking community on my practice. Finally, I describe my conversation with Seoulrain, a close friend of mine, on the issue of conceptualizing writing as a uniquely human act. All through this, I hope to achieve two objects: reenvisioning the community component in the activity system model and charting the trajectory of my development from a deficient nonnative teacher to a crosscultural meaning-maker with multimodal affordances.

4.2.1 The Co-working Community

A substantial amount of support came from a group of people in the immediate teaching context, whom I call the co-working community. Two people played a significant role in shaping a community related to my teaching practices: Adriana and Dan (pseudonyms). Adriana studied foreign languages and linguistics and wrote a doctoral dissertation on sociolinguistics. She taught courses such as language and identity, while working as an ESL and ITA (International Teaching Assistant) program director. She also designed a study abroad program. Dan was a doctoral candidate in the department I also belonged to. He studied communication arts and linguistics. His research was related to dynamics of a teacher community. They formed ‘the backbone of the community,’ so to speak, in my activity ecology.

Content analysis of the journal entries revealed that the co-working community provided me with several types of support including useful suggestions, teaching materials, and affective support. What is notable is that (1) their suggestions for instructional options often revolved around multimodal affordances such as film and music, which tapped into my own artistic interests, and (2) my taking up those suggestions owed greatly to their affective support.

(1) Suggestions for the course and provision of pedagogical materials

One of the most far-reaching impacts on my teaching came from the co-working community’s concrete suggestions for the course. At the first writing instructors meeting, Adriana and Dan suggested I use film within my class. The idea of incorporating film into writing was appealing to me because I myself had once studied how to write screenplay in an attempt to understand different writing genres. This interest was rekindled by Dan’s subsequent mentioning about how to integrate a set of knowledge in film studies within the writing classroom. One entry describes Dan’s guidance about the film-based writing pedagogy.
I approached Dan and Kay while they were talking about how to incorporate film to the class. Since I was also interested in using films to engage my students in writing a compare and contrast essay, I thought it would be helpful to join the conversation. Actually, the soundtrack Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven, inserted in Elephant by Gus Van Sant, drew me to their conversation. Dan showed me a series of scenes he has used for his film-based writing pedagogy… The interpretive process starts from students’ feelings of, and attitudes towards, a specific scene, leading to a systematic analysis of it based on pivotal concepts in film studies. This in turn feeds back to the students’ refreshed, holistic understanding of what they have seen.

This was the very moment I decided to use films for my class. Later I asked myself why his mediation led me to making this decision. Two things were crucial. First, Dan’s guidance was very effective because it was based on substantial knowledge, concrete strategies, and usable artifacts. This assured me that it would be beneficial to the class, as well as to me as a teacher, to include film-related sessions in the syllabus. Second, one of the movies he recommended to writing instructors was Elephant by Gus Van Sant. The movie was one of my favorites and I once thought about comparing and contrasting it with Bowling for Columbine by Michael Moore. These two movies deal with the same shooting massacre, but in radically different styles. This was a perfect fit for the compare and contrast essay, one of the prose types covered in class. The entry above is followed by the following excerpt.

I was impressed by Dan’s skills of raising questions about each movie scene in an intriguing as well as systematic way. I learned that well-organized questions can be a powerful tool to stimulate students’ interests in the movie itself as well as in the task of analyzing it from various perspectives. The questions may address editing techniques, physical configurations of a scene, camera focus, use of light, breaking the audience expectation, use of music, revealing objects in a partial way, distance between characters, camera moving techniques, and so on. The crucial thing is to understand how these techniques would affect our perception and understanding of the scene. This will in turn have repercussions on how my students can make meanings later by marshalling different semiotic affordances.

Here I could see a clear example where one novice teacher’s vague idea met an experienced colleague’s concrete guidance, which led to a new instructional strategy, namely connecting film analysis techniques and the compare and contrast essay. It also exemplified an organic connection of traditional text-based instruction to multimodal, film-based explorations of semiosis. If I had not been interested in writing screenplays or multimodal approaches to teaching writing, I would not have adopted what Dan suggested. In addition, if his suggestion had been based merely on his verbalization without offering concrete artifacts and strategies, my adjustment to the syllabus would not have been made.

Another entry describes my talk with Adriana, the supervisor of the international TA program, as follows:

Today Adriana and I talked about various things. We reached an agreement that it will be exciting if we can develop a syllabus based on different artistic activities like music, architecture, photography, and film with writing at the center of these. — Yes. After all, my course is about writing.
Adriana was well aware that I am a music lover. And she knew that I enjoy taking photos since I had served as an unofficial department photographer for almost one year. The following excerpt indicates that she incorporated these factors to our discussion about how to improve writing pedagogy.

We talked about sampling in music, improvisation in jazz, certain constrains in architectural structures, their similarity to citation, creativity by breaking away from prescriptive genre features, and basic formal structure in writing. We also talked about directors’ repertoire of scenes which comes from their thorough understanding of a large number of movies. When they have a large collection of scenes from related films, they can literally visualize all the background details, characters, and physical configurations involved in each scene. Furthermore, they can instantly (or instinctively) play with these scenes for what they want to create. In other words, a meticulous analysis of a relevant collection of movies builds a director’s creative repertoire, which can be integrated into one’s directing work on a real-time basis. Maybe this is analogous to writing students acquiring chunks, prefabricated patterns, sentence patterns, genre conventions, and later using them in new rhetorical context.

Adriana began the conversation with different art forms, which led me to draw an analogy between film directors’ acquisition of directing repertoires and writers’ creative repertoires. Our conversation traveled across different multimodal modes of symbolic representations, but gravitated towards second language writing instruction. I was well aware that I had a long way to go before becoming a competent writing teacher, who needs to be an expert in the target language. I was also not sure whether my ideas about using various genres of art would work in class. I was certain, however, that this conversation sparked my imagination and gave affirmation to my attempt to embrace multimodal affordances to my writing class. A subsequent entry suggests that I became confident that my approach would benefit the other instructors: I came up with the idea of incorporating multimodal semiosis into the ESL writing instruction. Here is part of the journal entry.

… I would like to let my students gain awareness that they are always and already great meaning-makers. Whether it is gesture, talk, drawing, graffiti, dance, photography, their semiotic capability is amazing. I want to share with them the realization that we are good at making meanings with different representational affordances. Thus, I would like to “break” their bias that academic discourse is something they have little access to, more profound than other mode of communication, and thus extremely hard to learn. In other words, I want, on the conceptual level, to position them as already competent meaning-making agents, not as someone with deficient language proficiency.

Dan and Adriana’s support was not based on general, abstract theoretical concepts. Nor did it target a preconceived objective of the program. It was tailored to my experience and interests. This made it possible for me to view myself a teacher of meaning-making with an abundance of multimodal, conceptual resources, rather than a teacher of linguistic code with limited proficiency and accuracy. This in turn led me to redesign my writing pedagogy so that it would empower my students with a meaning-making capacity and multimodal repertoire. In short, they mediated me in mediating my students, which I would call a cascade of mediations.
(2) Affective Support

My talk in the writing instructor meetings sometimes went beyond the issues of syllabus design and touched upon the subject of the teacher’s feelings and emotional struggle. As a novice teacher I was not entirely confident about my teaching. My anxiety was also aggravated by the fact that I had to teach some bilingual students in English only, for the first time in my life. I felt imperfect and vulnerable in front of students (Song, 2016). The following excerpt shows my emotional state at the time.

There is a tension between my objective identity as a novice teacher and my performance as a competent writing teacher required in the classroom. I am struggling with this feeling of uncomfortableness. - I’m new here but I should be good at it. Temporarily I resolve this tension by saying to myself that “Even though you’re a new actor, you need to perform as naturally and confidently as possible on the stage. If you inject your novice identity into yourself over and over, that may negatively affect your on-stage performance.” This rationalization seems to be working a little bit (not perfectly) until now.

When I talked about this kind of feelings of insecurity as an inexperienced, non-native teacher, several colleagues, including Adriana and Dan, encouraged me to move on without focusing on something I could not change.

At the teachers meeting today, I shared some of my frustrations in my class. I failed in letting students engage actively in peer review. Some students were complaining about my selection of the movies (A few said that Elephant was too boring to watch). Even though I felt I was doing okay, that was just okay, that is, not good, let alone excellent. Dan and Adriana encouraged me to move on. Dan said it is usually the case that students show radically different opinions about the movies the instructor has chosen. He further suggested that I compare and contrast the first and last part of Elephant, for example, to make students engaged. Adriana said it is just a natural process of learning. Katie suggested that I include some testimonials of the Columbine Massacre.

My multimodal writing lesson was not easy to implement. It met, as any novel pedagogical strategy does, with mixed reactions. Once I started the experiment, I could not go back to a text-focused mode of teaching. However, my initial motivation weakened, my conviction faltered. At this juncture, the instructor meetings, one of which was described above, played a pivotal role in supporting my exploration. And, as I look back, this kind of emotional support from other colleagues was as important as the cognitive, instructional one. Since thoughts and feelings are intricately intertwined, emotional stability is the prerequisite for successful cognitive performances (Golombek and Doran, 2014). The fact that the community of instructors were there to share their expertise, suggest alternatives, and, most of all, be eager to provide unreserved support as fellow human beings helped me throughout my early development as a teacher.

One insightful moment in the middle of my emotional struggle found me when Adriana shared one lesson about striking a balance between expectation and dedication, which she had gleaned from Buddhist philosophy.

Adriana’s account of how she appropriated the Buddhist maxim that you need to get rid of all desire was also inspiring. She and I agreed that it is actually impossible to escape from our desire in this world. Your wish to remove
all desire is definitely a desire! So she reinterpreted the Buddhist teaching as giving much to, and expecting less from, others. Simply put, act freely, give generously, and yet keep your expectation to minimum. Attach a big stone to the hot big balloons of desire, so that they can stay on the earth, to borrow a metaphor from one of my favorite Korean poems.

Hearing Adriana sharing her insight, I was able to see I was simply expecting too much. After all I was just a novice ESL writing teacher with a very limited field experience. This was the perfect reason I needed to make the maximum effort while keeping my expectation to a minimum. I knew I was going to struggle with my teaching but also could learn how to reduce the emotional pain that such a struggle would engender. The conversation with Adriana, which lasted for more than one hour, remained as one of the most memorable moments in the entire semester. We talked about how to teach our courses and beyond. The dialogue, where she showed genuine support for my teaching and I put forward my knowledge and ideas, was particularly meaningful to me since it convinced me that I was participating in the community as an equally important being, not just as a novice member to be guided and commented upon.

These kinds of affective support seem to be crucial in encouraging me to engage confidently in my teaching. It helped me marshal my full potential, rather than shrinking from the sense of being incapable, inadequate, and alien to the very subject I was supposed to teach. This also drove me to further explore other modes of teaching, including the incorporation of film, music, and photography into the classroom. I was beginning to recognize myself as one of the legitimate teachers in the writing program. One fragment of me may be ‘deficient’; however, I could do something valuable as a whole person.

4.2.2 The Co-walking Community

This section discusses how the co-walking community, people who gave me feedback on my reflection journal, supported my teaching. Unlike the co-working community, these experts in writing pedagogy were not directly involved in my teaching. However, they shared common interests in TESOL and writing pedagogy, and could potentially work with me in the future.

My interaction with the co-walking community began when I heard the news that Dr. Ramirez was going to join my department. I was glad to hear that the new member of the community had expertise in second language writing, which I was considering as one of my dissertation topics. Presuming that to invite him into my dialogic reflection would help me, I sent him an email.

I am looking for people who can read parts of my teaching journal and make some comments. Through this process, I expect to understand myself better while contributing to the construction of the knowledge base for ESL instructors here. Considering that you will work as a supervisor of the ESL program, I thought this project may be of some interest to you.

I was rather concerned about his response since the timing of my request was before he officially began work. However, he gladly accepted my invitation and carefully read my journal. In a subsequent email he even thanked me for
sharing my journal with him and said he now had a picture of who I was as an educational professional as well as a human being. He went on to state that, for him, the issue of writer identity is the most salient one, which he himself was interested in as a writing researcher. He quoted my own words while aligning himself with my own experience as a second language teacher.

As you state in your journal entry, “This may be representing myself in the ‘capitalist’ medium.” This change in language ego that you are experiencing is something I have found in my own Spanish writing as well as in the experiences of some of the NNES students I have taught and studied.

This comment made me ponder the self-evident fact that I was operating in another language as a nonnative teacher. At the same time it assured me that I am not the only one who suffers from the deficient self-image as a second language instructor. Overall, he evaluated my journal reflection project in a positive manner, emphasizing the importance of keeping asking “how” and “why” questions as a reflective teacher.

I believe that an effective language teacher—or any effective teacher, for that matter—is one who is reflective, one who continually challenges him or herself with the critical thinking “how” and “why” questions.

The comment squared perfectly with my motive in initiating the teacher narrative project. It also provided significant support for my identity as a nonnative speaker of English. He explicitly affirmed my nonnative speaker status by stating, “As a nonnative speaker, though, you bring certain resources to the language classroom that native English speakers do not.” He appeared to legitimize my non-nativeness, arguing that I have an edge over native speakers. This line of comments encouraged me to maximize my strengths while keeping a critical reflection upon my teaching.

I appreciated his time and effort to give me guidance as an expert in teaching second language writing. However, I received the impression that he was conceptualizing my experiences in theoretical terms, rather than understanding them in ‘flesh and blood.’ This was clearly reflected in his use of jargon from applied linguistics and teacher identity studies. This led me to feel that his words were valuable yet “far away.” On the other hand, this was inevitable, I assumed, because Dr. Ramirez and I did not then have any shared experience or goals as collaborators in teaching. So, as a member of the co-walking community, outside my co-working space-time, his response may have been the best guidance for me under the circumstances.

Another interaction with the co-walking community took place when I was planning to cover the topic of plagiarism in my class. I had some knowledge about this topic, but had not taught a lesson focused on this issue myself. Pondering on how to teach the topic effectively, without lecturing on the importance of ethical practices and legal obligations, I came upon the idea of “copying as much as you can.” In this activity, students need not worry about the risk of plagiarism. They focus on creating intended meanings using whatever text they can collect. One condition was that they need to underline all the borrowed phrases, so that the class could later discuss potential consequences of, and some ways to go beyond, this kind of massive copy and paste.

I sent this idea of Copy as much as you can to Dr. Yi, one of my former professors in Korea. She liked my idea but gave me a caveat that this may be used just as an introductory activity, to be critiqued in the latter phase of the class,
since it may give students an impression that plagiarism is a legitimate way of writing in another language. She also directed me to a quote by Bakhtin, which she thought is highly relevant to teaching plagiarism:

This is why the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others’ individual utterances. This experience can be characterized to some degree as the process of assimilation – more or less creative – of “our-own-ness,” varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate (Bakhtin, 1986: 89).

This offered a theory-informed explanation about how one appropriates and transforms other people’s voices, while keeping me from forgetting the importance of intersubjectivity and intertextuality in understanding writing. The following excerpt shows how I embraced Bakhtin’s quotes, relayed by Dr. Yi. It also reveals my reservation about teaching plagiarism in a mechanical way, informing students that we all need to adhere to the designated rules.

I am a social being to the bone. My genes are from other people. Both my physical and mental existence owe themselves to other people’s and nature’s support. Numerous voices abide in me - I know this. As I am aware of the fundamental socialness and heterogeneity of human existence, I cannot just say “Do not plagiarize: Cite!” So first I would like to ask some seemingly stupid questions to students like “Where are our genes from?” or “Where are our ideas from?” Through a brief brainstorming of the questions, I want to establish the intersubjective ground in relation to plagiarism between me and my students.

I took this line of thinking in a serious manner, improvised it on my own understanding of citation practices, and applied it to my plagiarism class. The following journal entry shows my reflection on the class.

I said, “We are social beings, interdependent on each other and the cultural and biological heritage.” Then I introduced some variations on Variations on Pachelbel, followed by a Youtube clip on Amen break, which is so called, “the world’s most important 6-sec drum loop.” The loop has been reproduced and improvised an infinite number of times. Personally, I thought the clip is a really great resource to talk about “borrowing as ubiquitous human behavior,” the issue of copyright, and thus some similarities between music and writing. I am not sure how my students embraced my move to conceptualize plagiarism in a broader scope before dealing with details of how to cite in APA. I hope my intention has been successfully delivered.

Dr. Yi’s provision of Bakhtin’s insightful quote was instrumental in designing a new kind of plagiarism class. It served as a conceptual orientation and drove my imagination about how to explain the nuts and bolts of textual practices: borrowing. This in turn was connected to my interest in music, especially sampling practices. I did not formally survey my students’ evaluation of the class. However, I could clearly sense that they actively engaged in my class.
4.2.3 The Co-orienting Community

The final community through which I engaged in dialogic interpretation can be referred to as the co-orienting community. This group consisted of my close friends, who hold common worldviews and attitudes towards society and education, yet do not share my professional interests as a second language writing teacher. This made it difficult to discuss details of my teaching, but opened the horizon for a broader, more personal dialogue about the meaning of life as a teacher and, further, a human being. This section focuses on my dialogue with Seoulrain, with whom I had developed a long friendship, exchanging views on a wide range of topics such as language, education, politics, and social justice.

His feedback on my teaching journal was radically different from that of others, in terms of both its form and content. In its form, he published his feedback to my journal on his blog. Our open dialogue went further, with his three additional posts on his blog and my three responses thereto. This format was not anticipated at all. What was more striking than this unconventional channel of interaction was the content of his post. In his first response, he dealt with the status of writing itself in the contemporary educational, sociocultural context. It addressed the ontological as well as ethical aspect of writing.

There was no era like today when even the written is frequently betrayed by its writers. A writing teacher, in some sense, is the most tragic of all the teachers. I mean that all the writing teachers, in a certain aspect, secure their teaching podium by teaching strategies to rationalize something written about life rather than by teaching life itself.

His comment was heavy, poignant, yet highly significant to me since I was well aware of the conflicts and paradoxes embedded in the Korean as well as American educational system. Unlike other members in my teaching ecology, Seoulrain raised the question about the ontology of writing itself. He was asking the meaning of writing in a time when “even the written is frequently betrayed by its writers” let alone the spoken.

This simple question sparked a series of deeper, fundamental questions for me: ‘What does it mean to write well? Can we say that one writes well even though his actions are dissociated from his or her words? Can we call someone a great writer even when his or her life does not deserve people’s respect? Where does writing end? Is it on a piece of paper or on a screen? Is it where your words meet the world? How should we understand the relationship between writing and living?’

These questions were beyond the issue of how to become an effective writing teacher within a certain institutional context. Rather, they were at the core of human existence as a writing, meaning-making, and ethical being. If writing means just delivering one’s message to other people through the written medium, one does not need to be concerned about the issue such as the gap between writing and life. However, if we understand writing instruction as a part of liberal arts education, which aims to foster a creative, critical, and reflecting person, it will not be sufficient to teach writing simply as a linguistic skill.

I responded to Seoulrain, relating his concern about the ethics of writing to my own conceptualization of writing. It also touched upon my ‘naïve’ belief in the power of writing to heal the dissociation of writing and life.
In this world where writing is often dissociated from life and this dissociation sometimes turns everyday life into a world of liars, the only way to recover the status of writing is, paradoxically, to get back to writing, I think. In the ideal world, text should not be a controlling power; it should be the source and inspiration for resistance and emancipation. In this way, I am thinking about text from rather nonconventional perspectives. In fact, instead of raising questions such as ‘what does writing itself mean for our existence as human beings?’ we can ask alternative questions: ‘What consequences does the dissociation between writing and action bring to society and the individuals, and how would our interaction with text change or twist the world?’ Doesn’t the fact that we keep asking these kinds of questions about writing show that we still have hope for, and belief in, writing?

Later I created a simple quote and wrote it in my own calligraphy, reading “Writing a Life & Living a Writing,” to remember our conversation. The dialogue with Seoulrain brought to my attention that sticking to the textual world without making it relevant to our lives would inevitably lead to the ethical degeneration of writing. To borrow Seoulrain’s words, our lives will keep betraying our writing, and vice versa. It would be difficult to enable students to fully understand the dialectic nexus of putting words together and living a worthy life within one semester. However, it would be worth encouraging them to reflect upon the moral dimensions of writing as well as the integrity embedded in leading a life based on what one writes.

Looking back, I can clearly see that this insightful dialogue was possible only in Korean. I had known Seoulrain for a long time and discussed diverse issues related to life and education. This mutually-cultivating relationship cannot be disentangled from our history of using Korean, our mutual mother tongue, for sharing our thoughts, feelings, opinions, and beliefs. In due course there was a sense of security and relief in engaging in conversation in our mother tongue.

This raises intriguing questions about the role of ‘home literacy’ in empowering multilingual language teachers overseas. At least in my case, opening up my second language teaching practice to one of my co-orienting communities, which is built on my first language, deepened my insight of what it means to teach another language. This presents a possibility that multilingual teachers can reorient themselves to professional development by incorporating their L1 as part of their practices. In this scenario, L2 teaching does not mean leaving behind their L1 and reaching out to another language. Rather, it is a creative process in which one reenvisions one’s home literacy and its values within the context of second language teaching. An L1 need not be viewed as a hurdle; it can be understood as a springboard.

5. Conclusion: Reconceptualizing Second Language Teacher Development as Reimagining Communities and Reinventing Language

In this narrative inquiry, I traced how a group of people within a specific activity system has mediated a novice writing teacher’s learning and development. A careful reading of my narrative using the activity systems framework has showed that all the elements within the context of my professional development, including the mediational tools, rules, the division of labor, and even the subject, can be better understood when related to the roles and influences of the community. Furthermore, an analysis of the community has revealed that three types of interrelated communities were working simultaneously: the co-working, the co-walking, and the co-orienting community. These three communities
collaborated in mediating my development cognitively, emotionally, and conceptually, through different yet complementary ways.

This narrative journey has gifted me with a renewed understanding of teacher development based on a sociocultural perspective. Now I understand second language teacher development in two terms. First, I see teacher development, at least in situations similar to my case, as a process of forming an organic, dialogic relationship with different communities. I was able to gain deeper insights and obtain practical and conceptual resources by opening up my teaching life to a wide range of people and thus expanding the scope of my community. When I shared my teaching narratives, three concentric circles of communities helped me grow to be a better teacher. Second, I think that second language teacher development needs to be conceptualized as a process of gradually redefining the subject matter itself and accordingly the competencies a teacher needs to possess. This means that ‘second language’ needs to be understood as a nexus of semiotic systems, mediated primarily by another language, rather than the target language codes alone.

This in turn virtually obliterates the rigid distinction between native and nonnative teachers. People who speak multiple languages are not an aggregate of multiple monolingual speakers, but a qualitatively different being with multicompetence (Cook, 1992). However, I had unwittingly kept suppressing my capability of integrating a diverse set of semiotic repertoire, including my mother tongue, English, photos, films, and music. Now I was able to see that I could operate between languages, creatively mix them when necessary (MLA (Modern Language Association) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007) and even mesh them with a rich repertoire of multimodal affordances (The New London Group, 1996). In this reinvented world of language teaching, language, whether linguistic or multimodal repertoire, serves the act of meaning-making, not the simulacrum of nativelikeness.

These two points above are tightly interwoven. The multilayered community’s support materialized effectively when it met the multimodal, multilingual, crosscultural, and conceptual potentials I had long nurtured. This led me to an experience of breaking out of my initial assumptions and habitus about teaching in another language, into a liberating realization that I teach who I am with what I have, rather than a language which has happened to not accompany my entire life. Now I do not just teach English; rather I teach a rich semiotic system mainly mediated by English. The latter is far richer and deeper than the former, not just for me but also for my students, I believe.

I am well aware that my sense of development cannot be confirmed unless those in a specific activity system, including my students and colleagues, witness the fruits of the present reflection being enacted in my classroom instruction. However, I am certain that this narrative inquiry has led me to redefine the scope of communities and the concept of language in my teaching, which has in turn allowed me to have a different understanding of teacher development. I am truly grateful for my life teachers — my colleagues, friends, and students, for this realization. As the following excerpt from the journal demonstrates, they mediated my development to be an agent of change, fully aware of the conflicting discourses within myself.

I myself am the venue of ideological resistance and warfare. I am the very person to prove that International TAs can be valuable asset to the university. I am the very teacher who needs to show my students that so-called “nonnative speakers” can be great teachers. I am an agent of change, surrounded by other agents of change.
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