



Becoming a language teacher: Exploring the transformative potential of blogs



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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, Internet and advances in technology more generally have allowed to support and enhance teacher learning in both school and university contexts. Computers and other technological innovations have created more collaborative learning environments, expanded the contexts of teacher communication, and facilitated teacher engagement with digital literacy such as blogging. This paper presents case studies of two pre-service language teachers involving analysis of the teachers' blogs and interviews. Developmental trajectories of the participating pre-service teachers during one academic semester (15 weeks) are analyzed through the lens of transformative learning theory. The transformative learning theory allows to investigate the ways in which teachers change (or, transform) through the activity of writing. The analysis reveals that some pre-service teachers may not always react positively to the requirement to maintain a teacher blog and such lack of involvement prohibits teacher transformation. The study suggests that teacher educators provide more guidelines regarding blogging to more reluctant participants or even offer alternative arrangements such as, for example, face-to-face meetings. Lastly, the paper argues for greater consideration of adult learning and adult development theories as a basis for furthering our understanding of and fostering teacher learning. (193 words).

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1. Introduction

Following an epistemological shift in teacher education whereby teachers have come to be viewed as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987) rather than as technicians, a considerable body of research has been published on the kinds of reflection in which teachers engage in their professional lives. Among the tools that facilitate such reflective activity, teacher-authored narratives (Johnson & Golombek, 2011) have become a focus for research. Borg (2006) notes that “journals and autobiography in particular have been widely employed to support and study teachers’ understandings of their own learning and practices,” emphasizing that writing helps make “tacit mental processes explicit and hence available for examination” (p. 250). By externalizing their tacit thoughts and feelings about teaching beliefs and practices, teachers act as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987) who learn from their practice. Provided with reflective spaces such as, for example, a teaching journal or, more recently, a teacher blog, teachers can examine and enhance their current understandings of teaching and consider or even implement alternative modes of engagement in the classroom.

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According to Farrell (2012), teachers at all stages of their careers can benefit from engaging in writing as a reflective practice. Furthermore, Farrell (2012) pays particular attention to beginning teachers' engagement in writing as a reflective practice, as "this is where the seeds of reflective practice are planted so that they can blossom in later years" (p. 3). Beginning teachers' learning to teach at the elbow of a more experienced educator can further foster an inquiring stance toward teaching and cultivate novices' "skills and habits ... such that they learn in and from their practice" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 18). Feiman-Nemser (1998) provided a basis for this claim by reporting various strategies that an experienced teacher who was also a teacher educator used to mentor his student teachers. In his conversations with novices, the teacher educator responded to issues raised by novice teachers and focused on those that he considered most important to their development. In addition, the teacher educator reported assisting novices in pinpointing problems in their practices and, in this way, he probed and facilitated novices' thinking about teaching.

Multiple studies analyze transformative experiences that teachers have at various stages of their professional careers facilitated by writing as a reflective practice in both general education (Whitney, 2008) and second language teaching contexts (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Verity, 2000). While it has been widely accepted that engagement in narrative writing can foster teachers' conceptual change and lead to transformative experiences, less is known about *how* this transformation takes place, what *conditions* are necessary for the change to occur, and *why* transformative experience may not occur. In this regard, the theory of transformative learning proposed by Mezirow (1978, 1991) is particularly useful. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning can help us understand the ways in which teachers transform (or, change) through the activity of writing as well as explicate reasons for lack of change.

Findings related to the potential of teachers' blogs for teacher transformation are particularly useful for teacher educators and researchers interested in understanding how teachers transform (or, grow) and facilitating this growth in the concrete contexts of their work. While we know a lot about how blogging environments can facilitate interaction and exchange of ideas among teachers (e.g., Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Luik, Voltri, Taimalu, & Kalk, 2011; Top, Yukselturk, & Inan, 2010), less is known about how the activity of writing in a blog can promote teacher transformation. In addition, while researchers concede that teacher engagement in narrative practice can lead to conceptual change in teachers (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Verity, 2000), research about lack of change has not been particularly robust (e.g., Kubanyiova, 2012). The purpose of this study is to address this gap by examining case studies of two pre-service teachers engaged in the process of learning to teach by using transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) in the context of language teaching practicum blogs.

The present study provides case studies of two pre-service teachers enrolled in the same program for educating pre-service language teachers in order to describe the kinds of transformations that occurred for one of the participants and not for the other. Although educators can impact learners by creating environments in which transformative learning can occur (Cranton, 2009), this study raises the critical question of whether there are more effective ways than those currently used by teacher educators to induce transformative learning on the part of the less successful participant.

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the theory of transformative learning introduced in 1978 by Jack Mezirow and subsequently critiqued and developed by Edward Taylor and by a number of other researchers (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Mezirow (1978) describes transformative learning as essential to adult development as follows:

This [transformative learning] involves learning how we are caught in our own history and are reliving it. We learn to become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives. Let me refer to this as learning about "meaning perspectives". A meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to—and transformed by—one's past experience. (p. 101)

Mezirow (1978) further elaborates that adults often encounter challenges that cannot be resolved by simply learning more about them or by learning how to cope with them more effectively. Certain adult experiences require us to examine our assumptions about ourselves and the world in order to understand and integrate a new disorienting experience into our lives, which involves acquiring a new meaning perspective (also referred to as a frame of reference). Otherwise, the experience is ignored such that it remains outside our field of reference.

Mezirow's insights into the nature of adult learning are particularly useful for understanding the process whereby teacher learning can be facilitated or hindered. By transformation, Mezirow (1978, 1991) primarily meant an adult learner's adoption of a new frame of reference, a perspective on a certain disorienting event in his/her life. By reframing an event after it has taken place, a learner can adopt a new course of action in order to improve his/her life circumstances. In the context of teacher learning, such a transformation may involve a teacher in achieving a new, enhanced understanding of his/her professional identity. In his seminal works, Mezirow (1978, 1991) foregrounded the educational objective of creating an environment wherein learners can examine assumptions they have made about themselves and/or the world—assumptions that may have hindered them in terms of taking better control of their lives. In the educational context, working-class student teachers who have feelings of disdain toward their white-collar career choice, for example, might usefully reconsider their assumptions about teaching and their own background and sense of self (Cranton, 2009).

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