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Antonio Causarano

University of Mary Washington, acausara@umw.edu

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Two Roads Taken: A Literacy Roadmap of an International Scholar

Antonio Causarano

University of Mary Washington

ABSTRACT

Literacy plays such an important role in our lives that being able to know who we are as literate individuals is paramount to live and thrive in a complex literate society in the 21st century. Understanding the relationship between an individual's background (cultural, linguistic, social, political, familial, educational, communal and economic) and his/her literacy development is crucial to continue to evolve as a literate individual. This self-study examines the literacy development of the author as an international scholar by examining the convergence of two different but equally important literacy experiences in two languages (Italian and English) as a blueprint for becoming a scholar in the US. The author will explore two main questions related to his interlingual and intercultural literacy roadmap: (a) how did my experiences in literacy in my L1 supported a literacy development in L2 as a scholar? (b) When did the two different but equally important trajectories merged to further deepen and refine my literate persona as a scholar? Implications for further research in interlingual and intercultural literacy development as a scholar will be discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

As an individual and a scholar coming from another country and teaching and researching in a US institution of higher education I have always been fascinated with the idea that literacy is a multilayered complex system of intellectual and cultural development in our lives. I make such a claim due to the fact that this paper is a self-study on my development as a literate person who walked two roads in becoming literate in two languages, Italian and English and how this experience transformed my life as an academician and literate individual in the 21st century. I felt the transformation as a literate being under my skin for many years and by writing my experience within a self-reflective approach will give me the opportunity to delve into the complexities of my literacy development in two languages and how they eventually emerged to form a new literacy core in my life in the academia.

I will first discuss the current literature review on self-reflective practice. This will serve as the blueprint from where I will begin my journey to systematically analyze my literacy growth from an interlingual and intercultural standpoint and how these two components have been and still are paramount in my development as a literate individual in the academia. I will try to be as precise and specific as I can be. However, as in any self-reflective endeavor and in self-reflective practices that take into account literacy development within a long span of time, oftentimes

experiences, epiphanies and drawbacks overlap in ways unpredictable to the researcher to paint more a potpourri than a tidy tapestry. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort to try to piece things together to invite others into this conversation on how literacy from an interlingual and intercultural perspective plays a major role in our lives as academicians.

The Self in Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has a rich and long history in the field of teaching and learning. Dewey as cited in Lincoln, Stockhausen & Maloney 1997 points out that “there can be no true growth by mere experience alone, but only by reflecting on experience” (p. 100). What Dewey is claiming here is that intellectual growth divorced from systematic reflection on experience is a mere passive accumulation on facts without any influence of intellectual growth in the individual. The importance of reflective practice is due to the fact that reflective thinking pushes the individual outside his/her comfort, invites the self-reflective practitioner to feel an intellectual discomfort and from this uncertainty a new stage of intellectual development emerges and grows (Mann et al., 2009).

The field of reflective practice does not present a coherent and systematic framework for the analysis of qualitative data emerging from the thick narrative of the self-reflective practitioner. Instead, reflective practice is “a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation” (Boud et al., 1985, p. 19). The engagement and exploration in one’s own thinking entails a different set of cognitive skills such as observation, self-awareness, critical thinking, self-evaluation and taking others’ perspectives. As Mann et al. 2009) maintain the outcome of any reflective practice process is to systematically integrate this new awareness and understanding into future planning and goals to achieve.

The two main dimensions of reflective thinking and practice are: (a) iterative where a circular process of reflective thinking leads the reflective practitioner to new path to explore by developing a higher level of understanding of his/her field of inquiry and (b) vertical model describing depth of reflection from a surface descriptive only level to a deeper critical synthesis level resulting in changes in behavior (Lewis, 2013). Both models can be effective. It depends on the cognitive characteristics of the self-reflective practitioner and the goals and objectives set forth by the individual reflecting on his/her experience (Barton and Ryan, 2014; Chirema, 2007; Ottesen, 2007).

Boud et al. (1985) propose an integration of the two models presented above. According to Boud et al. (1985) an integrated model of self-reflective practice has the following components: (a) returns to a situation or event; (b) attend to others’ feeling within a self-reflective process; (c) re-evaluate one’s positionality in light of new data emerging from the self-reflective experience; (d) propose a resolution on an issue or model with new insights and deeper understating gained from a systematic reflective process. In other words, self-reflective practice should help the self-reflective practitioner to explore and gaining new knowledge on uncharted paths in his/her field of research and scholarship.

Another important ramification of reflective practice is to examine the self-practitioner’s stereotypes and prejudices to gain new awareness and understanding of his/her shortcomings and set goals to overcome them. Schon (1983) argues

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment

which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schon, 1983, p.68)

It is exactly this condition of uncertainty that represent a fertile soil for dismantling stereotypes and prejudices in the reflective practitioner. Puzzlement and confusion experienced by the reflective practitioner are not negative components of a self-reflective process. Paradoxically they are the very essence of intellectual growth due to the fact that an uncertain condition invites the self-reflective practitioner to rethink his/her positionality on a specific issue from a new perspective (Billett, 2011; Grushka, Hinde-McLeod and Reynolds, 2005). In doing so, a new understanding of the issue or experience is gained and new paths are explored and chartered.

Finally, self-reflective practice is perceived as a critical reflection in action by current research in the field. Fook (2006) claims that critical reflection reaches the depth of self-reflective processes in the self-reflective practitioner engaged in the endeavor. Fook (2006) argues

Enables an understanding of the way (socially dominant) assumptions may be socially restrictive, and thus enables new, more empowering ideas and practices. Critical reflection thus enables social change beginning at individual levels. Once individuals become aware of the hidden power of ideas they have absorbed unwittingly from their social contexts, they are then freed to make choices on their own terms (p.53).

It is this new awareness of the hidden power of critical self-reflection that brings the self-reflective practitioner to a more refined level of understanding of critical issues in his/her scholarship. Healey (2005) claims that critical self-reflection presents a four-step component. The four components are: (a) challenging the status quo of sedimented assumptions; (b) social and individual focus are at balance; (c) the particular attention it pays to the analysis of power relations; and (4) its pursuit of emancipation.

In conclusion, the power and effectiveness of self-reflective practice is opening up new perspectives and choices about practice may only be realized if the connections between individual thinking and identity are actualized in concrete situations. It is the continuous process of working on one owns thought and experience that allows the self-reflective practitioner to work the hyphen of his/her own thought and experience. Reflective practice will be an effective framework if support intellectual and human growth and support the self-reflective practitioner to enrich the field of inquiry in new and often uncharted ways.

The Two Roads Taken

Everything has a starting point. Mine begins with my decision to move from my country of birth, Italy, to the US for my graduate studies in TESOL and Bilingual Education after my BA in English and French at the University of Messina, Italy. As an international student I moved from a system of scholarship based more on a theoretical approach to learning to a system where application of knowledge and scholarship are prioritized. Also, at the beginning of this journey, I was still thinking in two languages, Italian and English, trying to juggle between two system of meaning and conceptual thinking when doing research. Two questions emerged at the time: (a) who am I as an international student and scholar? (b) How is my knowledge going to change in terms of language, culture and perception in the field of SLA and second language literacy?

These two questions represent the blueprint from which I began my reflective journey and took the two roads that allowed me to acquire a new perspective on scholarship and teaching and learning and to refine my academic dimension and identity. As the field of reflective practice points out, once the journey begins, uncertainty is what will challenge you to find the path in the maze of intellectual development (Fook, 2006; Mezirow, 2006). I will elaborate on the two questions to

allow myself and the reader to critically read between the lines of my academic experience and see language and literacy crossing language and culture to support my transformation as a scholar engaged in research in literacy.

The Student and Scholar from Abroad

When I first joined the graduate program in TESOL and Bilingual Education in a Midwestern University in the US, my goal was to earn the degree and go back to my country to find ways to put this experience to work. I assumed that the process of studying overseas was quite linear. Finish the graduate program, assess what you have learned and then go back and continue to do research in the field of second language literacy. I did not take into account what it means to leave your safe cultural and linguistic harbor and sail through uncharted waters in terms of a different system of higher learning, a different system of meaning and a different academic culture and language that inevitable affects the way one looks at knowledge and its significance in becoming a scholar.

The transformation in learning and scholarship happened serendipitously. It was just one time in which I realized that my scholarship, my assumption about language and literacy were changing. It was a slow and often undetected process were different academic components of methodology research design and critical thinking on new scholarship merge together and unsettled the deep seated beliefs I held for a long time in my system of meaning as a scholar and researcher. As Healey (2005) points out challenging one's assumptions at a deeper level in order to gain new insights and understanding of one's potentials and limitations.

Changes in terms of methodology research design and critical thinking in literacy research happened at a conceptual and practical level. The transformation happened when I began to engage in critical reading of the major theory of literacy within a sociocultural perspective. From a narrow view of literacy as reading and writing detached from any social, cultural and historical context I delved into the complexities of the theories of literacy coming from Vygotsky, Piaget and Bakhtin. The questions that were hunting me at the time were: (a) many ways do people have to use literacy in a complex society? (b) How does the printed word acquire a strong political meaning within the fabric of society? (c) As an international student and scholar how can I walk in two literacy dimensions and systems of meaning?

The more I was reading literacy from a sociocultural perspective the more my two literacy dimensions-my L1 literacy system and the L2 system-were interacting and at times colliding. The naïve knowledge of literacy as ink on a page was being nurtured and challenged by the new scholarship sipping through my mind where literacy was becoming complex in terms of structure and semantics and multilayered (Luke, 2003, 2004; Moje & Luke, 2009; Perry, 2007). My knowledge of literacy as mon-dimensional was becoming more kaleidoscopic in nature. I was beginning to put my assumptions into questions more and more.

The second major development or breakthrough happened when I read Freire's major work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). The seminal work on critical literacy shifted my perception of literacy from the margin to the sociopolitical and ideological implications of literacy as a situated and engaged practice. Again, the word as a neutral arbitrary sign shifted towards the deep complex aspects of literacy as a sociocultural and sociopolitical practice where the word goes beyond the neutral representation of meaning. The two literacy roads in my system of meaning and understanding of literacy were bifurcating due to the fact that I was not only studying in a different system of higher education and language but also and more importantly I entered a

different literacy tradition and dimension where the sign was not just arbitrary but socially and culturally engaged in literacy practices.

It was during this bifurcation that the second questions began to emerge: “How is my knowledge going to change in terms of language, culture and perception in the field of SLA and second language literacy? The question entails important aspects of what it means to see literacy in two different languages, traditions and systems of meaning. My assumptions about literacy, my beliefs about the importance of literacy in my life as a literate person and as a scholar were going through a qualitative transformation where the new and uncharted road at that time was simultaneously changing my dimensions of literacy by nurturing the old path in new and stimulating ways. The new theories, models and literacy frameworks were supporting this qualitative transformation in a symbiotic process of critical understanding of literacy from a broader and richer perspective.

The Chrysalis Effect: My Metamorphosis of Literacy

The journey of transformation walking two literacy roads had the effect to give me a new literacy dimension as a scholar engaged in exploring literacy by continuously and systematically challenging my assumptions on literacy and my professional persona as literacy instructor and researcher. A new dimension of literacy came out from the old cocoon of seated and unchallenged beliefs in my first language and culture. This does not mean that the first road is now abandoned. It does mean that by exploring a different and more challenging knowledge and dimension of literacy, I matured as a scholar by keeping the core of who I am as a biliterate individual.

Transformations and literacy transformations in two different languages and cultural systems happen when one’s own dimension as a literate person in the native language and culture forms the core, the center from where a new literacy identity and dimension is acquired and refined through time (Mitchell, 2008; Mobeley, 2011). Without a strong core or literacy center new and more refined concepts of literacy cannot emerge and develop through time. The metaphor of the Chrysalis is used here to symbolize my literacy journey where even though I changed and acquired a new literacy skin, the core of my development always lies at the core of literate persona coming from another language and culture and always looking at literacy from a bi-dimensional perspective. The transformation of my literate self is always developing from the thread of my core as an international scholar and instructor enriching literacy research and teaching by bringing to the fore a more wider and comprehensive lens in looking at literacy as a multidimensional and multilayered process.

Conclusions

This paper is an attempt to capture my ongoing literacy development as an international scholar. As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, this is an imperfect endeavor due to the fact that self-reflective practice emerges and evolves from a core of doubt and uncertainty (Schon, 1983). I tried to reflect back to the two literacy roads that have been influencing my literacy teaching and scholarship since I have always perceived my literacy self as shifting between two systems of meaning and languages. A continuous ramification in two different directions in terms of literacy awareness of who I am as an international scholar and the next steps to take to continue this journey.

I have to confess that I have more questions still to explore than answers. This condition of uncertainty (Grushka, Hinde-McLeod and Reynolds, 2005) is what invites me to delve into my literacy identity as a scholar and what frustrates me as well. Every time I get closer to what I

think it could be a consolidation of what I have become as a literacy scholar from an international standpoint, the more I feel and experience new threads emerging from this ongoing experience as a literacy scholar and instructor.

I want to invite other scholars who live a similar or somewhat different experience to write about how literacy in two languages and culture have the potential to open new ways of looking at literacy scholarship nurtured by two different language or more, two different philosophical conceptions or more, two systems of meaning or more and two ways of looking at the literacy curriculum or more. It is an invitation to join an open and uncharted conversation of what it means to become a literacy scholar from an international standpoint. The implications of such future conversation have the potential to bring to the fore the way the literacy curriculum is designed and interpreted when two different systems of meaning intersect and influence one another in the way we teach and develop scholarship.

I hope that this conversation will begin soon by looking at specific areas of the literacy curriculum in higher education and how being an international scholar influences the way pre-service and in-service teachers are supported in acquiring the theoretical and methodological tools to teach literacy in K-12 schools in the US and overseas where culturally and linguistically diverse students are not the exception anymore but the norm. The opportunity to initiate this conversation can have the potential to create through time an international panel of scholars whose experience can resonate or can be dissonant from what we perceive is the model for teaching literacy in the 21st century.

Antonio Causarano is an Assistant Professor of Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Mary Washington, VA. His research interests include multimodality, new literacies, and how literacy teachers use self-reflective practice to be effective educators in K-12 schools.

E-mail: acausara@umw.edu

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