

Chapter 14

Teacher education and autonomy: Where's the real story?

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Part One

Richard's story

When I moved from a university in Japan to one in England at the end of 1999, I also moved from a mainly English teaching role into being entirely a teacher educator and research supervisor. I'd already been involved with teacher education in Japan, but hadn't been associating the notion of autonomy with that work. I had, though, begun to use the word 'autonomy' in connection with my own language teaching experiments, and with my development as a language learner and teacher.

Those teaching experiments were derived partly from my own experiences of learning Japanese in Japan, where I'd been frustrated about the way I was being *taught* the language in classes and at the same time excited about the opportunities for learning that existed in the surrounding environment of everyday life. I'd been sharing support and insights with other adult 'lazy learners' (as we characterized ourselves) via a newsletter-based network called *Learner to Learner*. In my own students I'd recognized some similar frustrations with the language provision being 'given' them, and I'd begun to engage them in personal goal-setting, in sharing insights about how they could best improve their English, and in developing support groups for themselves that would be rooted in self-directed, self-assessed work in the classroom but which would extend outside, to out-of-class collaborative activity. I'd also begun to share my teaching insights and concerns with others in the JALT Learner Development SIG, and—via links with groups like the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy and the IATEFL Learner Independence SIG—with members of a wider, expanding 'autonomy community'.

I remember, in particular, how visiting Leni Dam's class just after a conference she organized in Denmark around 1995 helped me become less of a 'radiator teacher'—in other words, less hesitant to interfere with students' activities (metaphorically speaking, less intent on warming myself against a radiator!); instead, I began to intervene more to challenge my students, as I saw Leni do, with questions about what they had been doing, had learned, were currently doing, were intending to do, and why. Discussions with Flávia Vieira were also informative and formative for me, particularly the way Flávia told me she could see plenty of self-directed activity in what I described of my classes but couldn't understand how students' autonomy was being *developed*. As a direct result of this, I increased the amount of explicit written reflection on learning experiences that I required from students and tightened the cycles of planning-acting-evaluating in my practice. In the Learner Development SIG, there were also many useful interactions, but those with Naoko Aoki and Andy Barfield were particularly influential on my understanding of the role of autonomy in teacher development—both Andy and Naoko, in their different ways, were highly innovative, subversive indeed, and committed to

creating new *structures* for teacher development with autonomy in mind. Naoko was tireless in establishing egalitarian, inclusive, bilingual processes in SIG affairs, while Andy was an imaginative events organizer along radical lines, as well as a pioneer of mentored writing, helping many teachers to ‘find their voice’ for the first time.

It was mainly from my new language learning, teaching and self-development experiences, not directly out of my practice as a teacher educator, that in the late 1990s I began to develop the notion of ‘teacher-learner autonomy’ (by which I meant a teacher’s own autonomy as a learner). This encapsulated a few things for me, including the way my experience had shown me the value of teachers viewing themselves as learners, in a fundamental, not just an ‘add-on’ or incidental, way, and the value of teachers helping one another to engage and enhance their own autonomy through mutually supportive networks.

In my personal experience, learning by systematically researching my own teaching had also emerged as an important, indeed necessary means of understanding what was going on among and within students who were otherwise moving beyond my control. Indeed, I felt my own teacher-learner autonomy was being particularly engaged and developed as I turned more towards my students as a source of professional insight, and less and less towards the professional literature. Therefore, a belief in the value of teacher-research was something else I took with me when I left Japan and became a full-time teacher educator and research supervisor in England. Despite all this, it was not until several years into my work in England that I began to consciously think of it as autonomy-oriented.

It’s interesting, looking back, that both in Japan and during my first years in England I kept the world of my own language learning/teaching/self-development and my work as a teacher educator so separate, so incongruent in my mind. At the same time, I can see now that there had already been, in fact—beneath my own consciousness—an autonomy orientation informing my teacher education work in Japan, for example in the way I engaged student-teachers in reflection on the memories they had of classroom learning, and on actual classes that I had videoed in Japanese schools, rather than introducing these students top-down to fashionable western methods or applied linguistic notions. This paralleled very much my own growing realization at the time that whatever I had learned from my own practical teacher training and academic studies needed to be largely set aside in the face of realities I had encountered in the Japanese context which seemed to require methodology to be contextually-driven, not imposed.

With my pre-service MA in ELT students in England what I did was largely to continue and expand upon the bottom-up, reflective approach to initial teacher education that I started off developing in Japan and which I can now see (retrospectively) was autonomy-oriented. One new thing that I started to do after I moved to England was to involve student-teachers in small-scale action research projects related to their teaching. Out of a combination of this experience and input that I provided about learner autonomy, some students began to identify the development of their own autonomy as an outcome of the programme, thus validating, I thought, the notion of ‘teacher-learner autonomy’, and bringing it back to my consciousness as a possible explicit goal. Engaging with and attempting to develop student-teachers’ autonomy within teacher education has since then consistently been a major explicit goal in my teacher education practice, indeed has become what I might call my overarching professional *value*.

Quite a large part of my work since I came back to England has also involved supervising students’ research for doctoral or masters dissertations. It’s not dissimilar to the role of ‘adviser’ I used to take on as a teacher in my ‘autonomous classrooms’ in Japan—establishing what interests the students have, where they want to go, and

providing ongoing support and monitoring on that basis of expressed need. So I see myself as ‘practising autonomy’ in this area of supervision too. In short, as a teacher educator and research supervisor, I am as much a *teacher* engaging with and developing learner autonomy as I was when teaching English, and as much a learner as I was then, too. I’ve discovered a kind of congruence between teacher education, language teaching and my own development as a teacher and learner that has emerged in my consciousness only gradually, but which has ended up making a lot of personal sense to me.

Grand theories and abstract models of autonomy, on the other hand, have never held much appeal for me, nor have they made so much sense—I still find it difficult to trust writers on autonomy who do not ground what they say in autobiographical experience and/or detailed accounts of practice, perhaps because my own experience with autonomy has been so ‘localized’ and ‘personal’, as I hope I’ve conveyed here. Basing insights—including ‘theoretical’ insights—on lived and situated experience reflects, for me, an authentic autonomy orientation, and is what I value as a reader. I hope I’ve remained true to this as a writer, too.

Gary’s response

I work in a situation quite similar to Richard. Firstly, I am a language teacher educator in a university setting, a researcher, and a supervisor of graduate research students. I too was an English teacher before moving into the world of teacher education. Secondly, even though I live in a different country and the education systems are probably quite different, I guess that our students are quite similar. For a start they all plan to be or are language teachers, many are international students from diverse countries, and they all have interesting stories to tell about their language learning experiences. Thirdly, Richard’s story, like mine, includes a large number of characters, involved in a wide range of interconnected practices: language learners learning languages, pre-service student teachers training to become teachers, teacher practitioners teaching in classrooms, researchers trying to learn about language teaching and learning, and teacher educators training language teachers. Finally, both Richard and I work hard at engaging our (pre-service) teachers in reflective practice. In the graduate narrative inquiry course I teach, for example, students develop narrative portfolios consisting of multiple written narratives that tell of their teaching and learning experiences related to a selected theme, such as gender, ethnicity, immigration and globalization. In a sociolinguistics course I teach, students write reflective journal entries which consider their lives in relation to the work being covered in the course. The portfolios and journal entries are later analysed so that students can make further sense of their life experiences and apply their developing knowledge to their real or imagined teaching practice.

Richard took some time (‘several years’) to realise that his work in England was ‘autonomy-oriented’. I have never thought that mine is, until reading about the connections Richard makes between autonomy and reflective practice. But I am not entirely sure how my work is autonomy-oriented. How is it, Richard? What makes my students’ portfolios and journal entries autonomy-oriented? I could possibly guess at an answer, but I have to admit my reading on autonomy theory has not been very wide, so definitions and explanations escape me. Is reflective practice the same as or a type of autonomy, for instance?

I am also very enthusiastic about teachers engaging in research; that is, doing their own, rather than, or as well as, reading that of other researchers. Moreover, the kind of research I like is that which is distinctly autobiographical, in the sense that teachers explore their own practices, professional development, classrooms, learners, and schools. This research is especially powerful when teachers relate their findings and new knowledge to other research in their contexts (e.g., collaborative action research with

colleagues) or beyond (e.g., the research of teachers or researchers in other contexts). Is teacher research, Richard, an extension of reflective practice? Or is it the same thing? Is teacher research also autonomy-oriented, and if so, in what sense?

I have a final concern that emerged during my reading of Richard's story and when writing my response above. Many student teachers and teachers I have worked with over the years are quite resistant to reflective practice and research activities. They don't seem to like doing them, they find them time-consuming, and they question the supposed benefits (although in my experience, many also find at the end of the activity that they really were worthwhile after all!). Why is this so? Is this reaction typical of other explicitly autonomy-related activities?

Flávia's response

Biographical self-disclosure is the most striking feature of Richard's narrative account of why and how he became increasingly aware of himself as a teacher-learner whose 'overarching professional *value*' is the enhancement of autonomy. His experiential basis for self-knowledge and professional growth is assumed quite radically, to the point of mistrusting writers of autonomy who fail to ground their ideas on experience and/or accounts of practice. I myself have defended this kind of reasoning, arguing that professional empowerment is built from critical reflection on educational experience. But now I would like to take a step back and ask: how personal is *personal*?

Richard draws extensively on his reflective and practical attempts to grasp the essence and the congruence of his professional self ... trying to make sense of his own story as if it were only his own. However, our stories are small pieces of a larger picture. I do not mean the 'grand theories and abstract models of autonomy' that Richard finds to be of little use, but rather the myriad historical and structural forces that impinge on us and (re)shape our identities at any moment of our lives.

Let me give a personal example: why and how did I get involved in the autonomy field? I could say a lot about this, but my turning point occurred when I was a high school student back in 1974, and a military revolution took place in my country, Portugal, putting an end to a dictatorial, fascist regime. Those were times of great joy and hope for the future, and also of social agitation and accelerated change. I suddenly woke up to reality, realising that the world, including my school, was not as neat as I thought, and that freedom and justice were not easy to understand and put into practice. My diary shows that I was enthusiastic about ideas of democracy, but unsure about the righteousness of some of the political actions I observed. I wrote about the day when the students at my school had a long meeting to decide whether our directive board should be dismissed. Yes, students could make such decisions and send their proposals to the provisional National Salvation Committee of military who ruled the country for one year. And we did: 300 votes for its dismissal, 60 against. I voted against, and then I stepped onto the stage and read an article written by a priest who ran a local newspaper. The article, entitled 'The first stone', was about blaming others for what goes wrong in the world and the need for self-questioning. I'm sure my catholic upbringing had some influence on my action, but at that time I saw it as a matter of integrity. That night I wrote in my diary: 'I was booed by those for whom my article was inconvenient—but I don't mind and I'm glad that I read it. I was fearful and nervous before I began, but I instantly felt at ease.'

Was my action revolutionary or counter-revolutionary? Hard to say. What I want to stress here is that my dilemmas back then were quite similar to some of the dilemmas raised by a pedagogy for autonomy in my current practice: Where do we draw the line between self-determination and social responsibility? How do we position ourselves in

the midst of contradicting rationalities? To what extent are we willing to take risks and assume the consequences of being part of a minority?

Of course, this episode is about my personal experience and might only serve to prove Richard's stance. However, it is more than that. Had I been a teenager in another sociopolitical environment, my experience would have been different, and I would probably be a different professional today.

Among the various pieces that compose the larger picture where our personal stories of autonomy develop, I would like to stress our professional settings and how they (re)shape our identity. Working as *academic* teacher educators committed to pedagogies for autonomy, like Richard and myself, is not an easy path. Even though autonomy is usually cherished among faculty and we have plenty of freedom to teach according to our own values, the same cannot be said about pedagogy, which often has a very low status in our milieu. Therefore, efforts to invest in the scholarship of teaching and teacher education can be very disappointing from the point of view of peer recognition and merit, and are often reduced or abandoned simply because we have to survive in our communities.

Can we truly devote ourselves to autonomy as a social interest in the service of more democratic societies, when we live in a competitive setting where being a full member of our disciplinary tribe means publishing peer-reviewed articles in English and raising money from research grants? From our position as academics, what are the constraints, the contradictions, the things that we fail to say or do as regards our commitment to autonomy? In sum, how is our story imprisoned (or set free?) by our working context?

I guess my point is that the *personal* is only part of our autonomy stories. Actually, it is often silenced by external forces that make us fear and abandon educational transformation for the sake of professional security. So ... can we really stop 'warming ourselves against radiators'?

Part Two

Richard's story continued

In my files there is a parallel, third person, fictional version of my story which I decided not to submit in the end, feeling it was paradoxically too personal, too revelatory, and too *particular* for a professional publication. What I learned when writing this 'suppressed account' was that I could reveal more intimate detail and write more easily in a third person, explicitly fictional mode than when inhabiting a professional 'I'. This is not to say that I'm dissatisfied with the account I ended up submitting as the first part of this chapter. I hope this can be viewed on its own terms both as a professional/intellectual autobiography with potentially some use or resonance to others engaged in teacher education, and, intertextually, as a way of connecting together in a new way my previously published accounts of autonomy-oriented English teaching (e.g., Smith, 2001; 2003) and teacher education practice (e.g., Smith, 2005; 2006). On the basis of my 'suppressed version', however, I'm very conscious also that my submitted account doesn't offer the 'whole story' or the 'big picture' in a personal relationship or well-being sense (quite different from the social/political sense employed by Flávia), in that it is not nearly as *personal* (in the sense of 'self-revelatory') as it *could* have been in a different version.

My submitted story could, indeed, have been written in manifold ways other than the way it turned out. The multiple drafts and various sketched-out ideas that I ended up not using remind me of this. One of the discarded drafts is another fictional parallel version I began to write, this time from a student's perspective. This was intended to

counteract possible tendencies in first-person professional writing (including my own previous writing of this kind) towards excessive subjectivity and self-justification, indeed complacency and narcissism: the ‘student’s’ writing would, I imagined, be supportive overall, but critical of aspects of my teacher education practice; I was trying to create a distancing effect on the main account, wanting to show that my first person account was potentially over-celebratory and unreliable. By this means I also wanted to convey, firstly, that ‘my’ practices have been jointly constructed with students and, secondly, that, as Gary implies, things have not always run as smoothly as my main ‘I’ narrative was conveying, indeed that there are student doubts, resistances and mindsets that teachers do not necessarily have the means to know about, although they can be partly understood by means of teacher-research (see Brown, Smith & Ushioda, 2007, and Smith & Erdoğan, 2008, for related considerations).

There were alternative writing possibilities, then, but I feel my submitted story turned out as it did for reasons other than my having a particular asocial or apolitical ‘stance’ of the kind alleged by Flávia—these reasons included but were not confined to: constraints of word count, responsiveness to my perceived brief (to consider teacher education practices connected with autonomy, not my original motives for or commitment to autonomy), internal momentum of the written story, and a concern for wider relevance. I’d add an additional justification, that one kind of larger picture *is* provided in my account, in the way my students, my participation in teachers’ associations, and insights gained in particular from four colleagues ‘impinged’ on me, making the journey of discovery as portrayed a social and far from solitary one. In fact, I intended my use of the word ‘personal’ not to contrast with ‘social’ or ‘political’ but to highlight the way I’d derived insights more from working in particular *contexts*—i.e., with particular students, and in particular associative groups with colleagues—than from abstract theories or external ideologies of autonomy. By saying that what and how I had learned was localized and personal to me, I also intended to avoid seeming to ‘preach’ the specific virtues of teacher-learner autonomy as a professional value or goal at the same time as arguing for the *kind* of theorization from practice illustrated in my account overall.

Thus, while it’s perfectly legitimate—and constructively challenging—for Flávia to point out that I could have written the story in a different way, I don’t accept at all the implication in her response that I *should* have written an account of the social/political kind she’s indicating. I’m interested to know, Flávia, if you really think like this—and, if so, what your grounds are for implying that someone’s story, i.e., the narrative account they end up choosing to represent themselves and their actions for a particular purpose, *should* have been written in a way that it is not?

Having ‘defended’ the way my story turned out, I shall now move on to take Flávia’s challenge more seriously and consider ways in which I *could* have written a more social/political account, *had I wanted to* (my emphasis). Flávia’s response helps me understand that there is a major difference between her teacher education experience and mine, namely the way she has been firmly and continuously involved with her local education system whereas, for good or ill, I have been relatively ‘displaced’—formerly as an expatriate English teacher and teacher educator and now as a teacher of students who are themselves, temporarily at least, expatriates, separated from their (original) homes and teaching contexts. Flávia knows the target context for her teacher education work with Portuguese students deeply and from within; additionally, I sense, she has a commitment to democratic transformation of that particular context which has roots in her positive overall experience of revolution as a school student within the same system (though this is not the focus of the critical incident she relates). I could respond with an account of my own involvement with and partial disillusionment with left-wing politics

as a school student—I have no doubt that these had an influence on my attraction to and interpretations of learner autonomy—but my focus here is on my relatively recent teacher education practice. Unlike Flávia, I have been working from a position of relative distance from, and non-engagement with, my student-teachers’ teaching contexts. In Japan I had a growing realization—touched on in my account above and elsewhere (e.g., Smith, 2003)—that fashionable ‘western’ ideas about language teaching can be far from appropriate in East Asian secondary school teaching contexts. This led me to investigate the context more deeply, engage with associations of Japanese secondary school teachers and with the history of English teaching reform in Japan, and characterize my approach as ‘context-sensitive’ but not, at that time, ‘autonomy-oriented’ (‘autonomy’ was something I was exploring for my *own* English teaching, not at all something I wanted to see myself ‘imposing’ on trainees, though now I recognize that being context-sensitive and being autonomy-oriented were interconnected in my experience as developing professional values). My growing awareness of the ‘politics’ of global ELT and of the need to be context-sensitive may also help to explain, in a ‘negative contextual’ fashion, why I have found it so important since coming to England to attempt to empower students to investigate their experiences and their own teaching in their own (relatively distant) contexts and to act as agents of change in ways they can make an informed choice about—rather, that is, than training them into particular commitments which may or may not be feasible or appropriate for them to implement in contexts I am marginal to.

Gary, I wonder if the same kind of thinking underlies your own approach at all? If so, by engaging students in autobiographical reflection and other forms of context-oriented practice, you may indeed be developing their autonomy as learners of teaching, i.e., ‘teacher-learner autonomy’ (Smith, 2000; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008) for reasons similar to mine, apart from simply engaging them in reflective practice. The question is, though, whether this is a useful way for you to reconceptualise your work. Why *do* you think you are doing what you are doing with students, in fact?

As I’ve begun to imply, some aspects of the ‘bigger picture’ where my (and perhaps Gary’s) kind of teacher education context is concerned would involve considerations of globalization of education, neo-colonialism within it, English linguistic imperialism, native speakerism and struggles to find a ‘right’ place to stand in relation to these forces—these are difficult to represent in a short story, but some of them are implicit in my account, for example in the way I construe my developing awareness and appreciation of cultural/educational difference as an alternative source of insights to dominant western norms (see also Smith, 2003).

It remains difficult for me to imagine, though, how a short autobiographical account can do justice to the social and political forces militating against the promotion of autonomy in a particular or in a global context (I wonder if any other contributors to this volume have attempted this and been more successful). Perhaps writing in our own ‘I’ encourages us to see things ‘from inside out’, from a personal developmental perspective in other words, and pushes us in the direction of self-justification. I wonder, Flávia, did you experience this difficulty in practice when writing about that critical incident in your own early experience? As I think you recognize at one point, your narrative could be viewed as more of a ‘personal’ than a social/political account, despite the revolutionary backdrop and your mention of Catholicism as a possible influence, and despite your stated intention as a writer.

What *would* a deliberately social/political account look like, then, if we *want* to write one? I sense that for me this would again involve third-person writing, this time as a way to see myself better from the outside, and to set the manifestations of outside forces more clearly and ‘equally’ (with ‘I’) into the story. I’m happy to experiment with this

further—maybe we could continue exchanging stories, Gary and Flávia, after we complete our participation in this volume?

All in all, as I've emphasized, I did not want to 'preach' in my account, and therefore characterized my ideas as 'personal', but I also wanted it to be professionally relevant and, if possible, resonant, and so didn't want it to be 'too' intimate or particular either. Regarding my readers' responses, Gary saw that he and I may share commonalities of career trajectory and teaching context and possibly of teacher education 'philosophy', though he has not been using the term 'autonomy'. On the other hand, what has been reinforced to me as a result of reflecting on Flávia's response is that even though we share an espoused commitment to autonomy-oriented teacher education, the nature of this commitment differs partly due to social/political/contextual factors. Autobiographical writing—with all its limitations—has brought us here, and has confirmed the idea, for me at least, that it is precisely by highlighting the *personal*—by which I mean here the contextually driven and constrained as well as the 'idiosyncratic', or free-floating—that this form of writing, with accompanying critical reader response, can take our thinking forward.

A final few words in response to Flávia's comments: we three are 'academics' but have been engaged in something quite difficult and time-consuming (writing for this experimental publication) that will bring us little or no obvious reward in the academy, but which it 'felt right' to accept. This is just one example of ways we *are* finding spaces of manoeuvre to prioritize profession-oriented 'service', at least partially, despite this bringing us, as Flávia points out, no credit with academic management, or, indeed, at home (in short, it is 'not part of the day job'). Nevertheless, we seem to be managing to maintain what we need to do with regard to academic publications and research grant applications. Others may engage more single-mindedly and strategically in self-promotion and other parts of the 'academic game', but perhaps we should be reasonably pleased as academics if we've been able to fashion a role in the interstices between (family and) university and community and yet survive—with integrity reasonably intact. Or is this sheer complacency?

Gary's second response

Richard's story and his response to our responses comment on and illustrate a number of interesting characteristics of the processes and purposes of storytelling. In my response here, I discuss some of these, not only because of my interest in narrative, but also because what he says has implications for teacher autonomy. I also answer Richard's questions to me about my teacher education practice, and finally, I comment on the usefulness of this collaborative exercise that Richard, Flávia and I have engaged in.

Richard spends much of his response 'defending' (his quotation marks) his storytelling position against his perceived criticism by Flávia that his story could have been written another way; particularly, that it could have taken a more social/political stance. Richard responds brilliantly. He says the story he told was only one version from a number of alternatives that were or could have been constructed for the purposes of our discussion about autonomy. Not only do we have the choice to construct and tell the stories we want to tell, we have at the same time a range of stories available to us. This range is framed by cultural, discursive and practical factors, amongst others, but ultimately, it could be argued, that the story told 'belongs' to the narrator. In the process of storytelling, there's the narrator, the audience and the context of telling, all operating with and in opposition to each other. These are the basics of narrative. Richard makes it clear in his response why he chose to tell the story he did, and why he opted not to tell the third-person story now stashed away in his files. These decisions are his right as a storyteller. But once a story is told that is not the end of it. They generate new stories, or

take on different shapes (both in form and content) when they are retold again in different circumstances. As has happened in Richard's re-telling. Again, this is the basics of narrative.

What I did find a little unsettling, though, is that Richard felt the need to defend himself so thoroughly and quickly (albeit eloquently). I have just said that, despite the constraints of narrative, we have the right to position ourselves as particular kinds of storytellers, telling the stories we want to tell. The audience of the stories told also have the right to react as they wish, of course, but it seems to me that whenever any criticism of the stories comes from a political voice the narrator feels the need to become (overly) defensive. This is not a criticism of Richard's response. He has the right to respond as he wishes, and in fact, his response is incredibly thought provoking, relevant to the topic and useful for future discussions. There is just something that has concerned me for some time, however: It is ironic that those coming from critical positions who address the consequences of unequal relations of power can induce, through their own political discourse, perceptions of guilt, inadequacy, powerlessness or having done something wrong. These are strong words, and so let me say again, this is not a criticism of Richard's response. I am not saying that Richard experienced these perceptions. I could not know that. Nor is what I am saying a criticism of Flávia's initial response to Richard's story. I do not know if she felt that Richard should have told a different story. I am responding here to Richard's perception of her criticism.

And now a comment about Richard's question about my practices as a teacher educator: 'Why *do* you think you are doing what you are doing with students?' This question was preceded by his comment to me that 'by engaging students in autobiographical reflection and other forms of context-oriented practice, you may indeed be developing their autonomy as learners of teaching'. Having re-read Richard's story and both my and Flávia's responses and then reflecting on what I was to write in this response, I really do think he is right. Yes, that is probably what I have been doing all along. The goal of the reflective activities my students engage in (e.g., narrative portfolios, teacher journals) is for them to see themselves as teachers practising in various levels of context. I have written about a simplified way of conceptualising these interconnected levels (Barkhuizen, 2008). One level is what I call *stories* (all small letters). Here, teachers tell and reflect on their stories of practice that are immediately relevant to their lives; their inner thoughts and emotions, their practices in the classroom, their relationships with learners and teachers. On a broader level, *Stories* (with a capital S), teachers' lives intersect with social practices beyond, though still very much related to, their classroom practice, such as school language policy, curriculum development, and community needs and desires. At this level teachers usually have less control or power. They have even less power at the widest, socio-political contextual level, *STORIES* (all capital letters). This level includes decisions made by Ministries of Education, external examining boards, and governments.

When (student) teachers tell their stories during reflective activities I encourage them to consider all three levels, bearing in mind their interrelatedness, while (re)positioning themselves and their practices contextually. I think it is this idea of developing an awareness of self-positioning and being positioned that relates to autonomy. Knowing what we do and understanding what we do as teachers means we are able to locate ourselves (through our self-positioning and being positioned) in the *stories*, *Stories* and *STORIES* that we live, experience and tell. Elsewhere I have referred to this as an aspect of *narrative knowledging* (Barkhuizen, 2011). In this series of stories and responses, Richard, Flávia and I, as teacher educators, have engaged in narrative knowledging. In our conversation we have learned about each other and also about ourselves, and we have also perhaps got to know just a little bit more about autonomy.

Flávia's second response

Dialogic writing can generate richer perspectives of experience, but it can also create misunderstandings. My first response to Richard's story was by no means intended to imply that it *should* have been written in a different way, or that it conveys an *asocial or apolitical stance*. My only purpose was to reflect on how the personal is partially shaped by oppressive and liberating circumstances and forces, and also on whether our agency as professionals committed to autonomy can be empowering in contexts where issues of pedagogy and teacher education are not a priority. I will try to expand my thoughts about our role as academics and the relation between the personal and the sociopolitical.

I agree with Richard when he writes that 'others may engage more single-mindedly and strategically in self-promotion and other parts of the "academic game", but perhaps we should be reasonably pleased as academics if we've been able to fashion a role in the interstices between (family and) university and community and yet survive—with integrity reasonably intact'. I do want to emphasise, however, the expressions '*relatively pleased*', 'survive' and 'integrity *reasonably* intact' (my emphasis), since they suggest that things should be otherwise. I also agree that 'we three are "academics" but have been engaged in something quite difficult and time-consuming (writing for this experimental publication) that will bring us little or no obvious reward in the academy, but which it "felt right" to accept'. My question is: why shouldn't this publication be recognised as academically worthwhile?

One way of breaking the rules of the academic game is deliberately doing things that are professionally relevant for developing a transformative teacher education for pedagogy for autonomy even though they are judged irrelevant in the eyes of our institutions. Collective strategies (like this publication) should be developed to challenge discourses and practices that make some of our work on autonomy sound unimportant and even non-academic. A possible strategy consists in developing a scholarship of teacher education for promoting autonomy, whereby our work as teacher educators articulates teaching, research and service, and is assessed holistically on the basis of its situational relevance and transformative power. This kind of scholarship challenges 'the game plans of normal science', and its overall motivation is 'to drive democracy further down to individuals engaging with each other, drawing upon their *power* to create community as a facilitator of each other's talents and thus to enrich each other as individuals' (Schostak & Schostak, 2008: 13).

Perhaps the risks of going against the grain are too high. For example, in many academic contexts, a scholarship of teacher education will not be regarded as serious inquiry, and this will affect faculty merit and careers. So, perhaps we are too fearful or reluctant to challenge the academic game and change its rules from within by exercising our professional autonomy as critical agents of transformation. In the meantime, we are probably missing opportunities to make our work more relevant as regards promoting autonomy in schools and universities, and also losing the teachers' trust ...

One of the highly oppressing rules that still prevails in the academic game, both in higher education and other educational contexts, is the suppression of the self, which is related to the suppression of empowerment as a goal of education. Without an expansion of the self, empowerment cannot take place. As academics committed to autonomy, I believe that one of our roles is to enhance the expansion of the self—in our work and in the work of the teachers we work with. This entails a subjectivist approach to educational experience and inquiry, whereby you (de/re)construct your personal theories and action *as* you become more in touch with the discourses, ideologies and rationalities operating around you, more critically aware of how they shape your beliefs and choices, and more willing to reveal how they affect the nature and impact of your work. The personal is not separated from the sociopolitical. It *becomes* socio-political by incorporating an

understanding of the limitations and possibilities of your self and a disposition to go on struggling for your ideals, despite (and because of) the many constraints to democratic education.

A subjectivist approach to educational experience and inquiry has implications for how we write about experience. I have found that writing *from* our self rather than *about* our self (Contreras & Pérez de Lara, 2010¹), by seeking to position our personal experience in relation to broader educational beliefs, values and concerns (which might be in tune or in conflict with ours), is one of the major challenges of autobiographical writing and self-study research. For me as teacher educator and researcher committed to pedagogy for autonomy, I have found this kind of writing quite liberating, since it subverts a positivistic discourse tradition that denies the ontological dimension of knowledge. Yet, as the Brazilian pedagogue Rubem Alves (2003) points out, each theory is an accessory of biography, each science is an arm of interest.

I believe that the expansion of the self within a subjectivist approach to educational experience and inquiry is somehow present in our dialogic writing, and I hope that readers can add their voices to ours in further explorations of stories of autonomy. Multivocality can move individual stories in unanticipated, intersubjective directions, and generate sub-plots that disclose latent issues which may be of wider interest. As a participant in this writing experience, I feel that we have started to scratch the surface of a larger picture—one where stories of autonomy are set against the background of historical and structural forces that (re)shape our identities and practices.

Note

1. The authors discuss the risks of writing about personal experience, which Richard also mentions (sounding too personal, too revelatory, and too particular...), and they make a distinction between writing *about* your self and writing *from* your self ('escribir a partir de si'). Writing from your self involves a critical detachment from experience that helps you understand and report it in ways that are more relevant to others without silencing your voice.

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