Developing Artistry in Teaching

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Abstract

Considering the current practice that evaluates teaching in terms of demonstrable classroom behaviours, and teacher knowledge in terms of the accumulation of techniques, there is an increasing concern that the artistry of language teaching is not given enough credit. In this article, the author discusses how this impacts on the work of teachers, especially in terms of performance evaluation and definitions of best practice. This paper also suggests some alternative frames to address areas such as disposition towards inquiry-based development, acknowledgment of the centrality teacher intuition, and the necessity of collective engagement.

Key words: *artistry, professional development, teacher knowledge, reflective practice, professional knowledge, evaluation*

Apstrakt

S obzirom na trenutnu praksu koja ocenjuje nastavu u smislu dokazivih ponašanja u učionici, i znanja nastavnika u smislu akumulacije tehnika, sve je veća zabrinutost da umetnost učenja jezika nije dobila dovoljno na važnosti. U ovom članku, autor ukauzuje na to kako ovo utiče na rad nastavnika, posebno na polju ocenjivanja i definicijama najbolje prakse. U radu se takođe ukazuje na neke alternativne okvire za rešavanje ove oblasti kao što su određenje prema istraživačko-baziranom razvoju, priznanje važnosti intuicije nastavnika i nužnosti kolektivnog angažmana.

Ključne reči: *umetnost, profesionalni razvoj, znanje nastavnika, reflektivna praksa, stručno znanje, ocenjivanje*

1. Introduction

At the present moment, one of the challenges of teacher development and evaluation, both formal and informal, is to swim against the current of a so-called 'box-ticking' culture (Cardoso and Madhavan, 2014). A box-ticking culture is one that: (a) focuses on visible behaviour as the main form of evidence of professional knowledge; (b) considers that change in behaviour means change in cognition; (c) focuses on teachers' techniques, methodologies, classroom management and control, repertoire of activities, rationales for activities, etc; all of which matching externally constructed knowledge and its translation into assessment criteria (i.e. boxes to tick).

With modes of evaluation defining what valid professional knowledge is, we have to be reminded that evaluation is never neutral, and that valid professional knowledge is never neutral either. They are constructed within discourse, which is inevitably value-laden: culturally and politically. Within these interrelated spaces there are power structures that will delineate the dominant mode of discourse,

which can be emancipatory for some and oppressing for others. Advances in our understanding of the role teachers tend to open up new ways of thinking; however, they can simultaneously limit or suppress less dominant ways of thinking as well. By evaluating teaching in terms of demonstrable classroom behaviours, and teacher knowledge in terms of the accumulation of techniques, current modes of evaluation, with their focus on competencies, may give us a false impression of teaching as a coherent, linear process, when in fact, the day-to-day teacher would not find it hard to evaluate one's practice in terms of "uncertainty, rupture, dissonance, tentativeness, provisionality and self-disclosure" (Smyth, 1995, p.8).

The challenge is that at the same time the work of teachers becomes more regulated and standardised; teachers are asked to become reflective practitioners and to engage in lifelong learning through continuous professional development. The kind of reflection teachers are encouraged to engage in is also constituted within a dominant discourse which reinforces that teachers should reflect on the practical and personal, which may neglect reflection on the values constituting their teaching. If your work is mainly spoken in practical and personal terms then you are accepting a definition of yourself as you speak (Goodson, 1995). This means reproducing

the status of teachers as 'classroom technicians' and giving away the intellectual work and responsibility to others. One of the main implications would be that "differences in teaching practices are viewed as merely differences in teaching style rather than as differences that derive from ethical and critical considerations" (Hursh p. 102). As a counter-narrative, the author proposes through this article a view of teaching as art, and that teacher development takes onboard elements similar to the development of artistry. He also proposes that classroom experiences work their way towards the opening up of more opportunities for artistic experiences. It should be emphasised that this is not a novel or revolutionary view of teaching, but it is one that is not promoted as often as it should. This article is then taken as an opportunity to join in the debate and invite others to this less travelled route of inquiry into our profession.

2. Understanding artistry in teaching

It is curious that after many years of experience and many years of academic engagement with teaching, a well-prepared teacher may still find that his/her lesson plan failed to address the reality of the students, as individuals and as a group studying together. Sometimes, the knowledge we have about what we should do does not fit, and sometimes we find ourselves in classroom situations which

are so context/person-specific that it would have been impossible to foresee and plan for a known outcome; even though, generally speaking, these situations are nothing but common. For example, what kind of knowledge stock the author draws from to tackle situations in which: students seem to be unresponsive to the material presented; a student starts to cry out of frustration for not achieving a task; one can overhear a 'good' student say the lesson is boring. It is felt that these fairly common classroom situations are practically impossible to be theorised and studied based on an overarching conception of teaching.

These doubts led the author to look at the knowledge base of our profession: how it is constructed, what philosophies and ideologies underlie the methodologies teachers use; what assumptions they hold about teaching and the work of teachers. The author found out that there was a certain world view, a way of seeing things, that could maybe be lacking in some respect; that would have certain normalised ways of being and behaving that could be counterproductive to the work teachers do and consequently to the learning they are trying to bring about in their students.

One of these views, and the dominant one, is that teaching is a science, or better an applied science. The contrasting view, and the one promoted is that teaching is also an art. It could even be argued that it is more of an art form than a science one. However, one cannot be entirely sure about it. At any rate there are some very important things to reconsider if we agree that teaching resembles artistry.

Elliot Eisner (1985) defines teaching as an art in the sense that teachers, like artists, make judgments based on qualities that are emergent, that is, which unfold during the course of action, a course of action which is not dominated by prescriptions but by contingencies – unpredictability. Teaching then is dependent on the perception and control of these emergent qualities. Likewise, the ends achieved in teaching are also emergent, that is, ends are not predetermined but often found in interaction with students.

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, the author will confine this exploration of artistry in teaching within an understanding of artistry which consists of artistic ability, artistic quality, and artistic pursuit. With this in mind, he will further explore how teachers can develop artistry.

3. Inquiry-based development and problem-setting mindset

It is difficult not to relate artistry in teaching to the notion of the reflective practitioner. Especially in ELT, this theory of practice is usually traced back to the work of Donald Schon, who in turn was influenced by the philosophy of education of John Dewey. Schon builds his theory on the hypothesis

that "there is an irreducible element of art in professional practice" (Schon, 1987: 18) and because of that we should revisit what an epistemology of practice looks like and in turn rewrite what is valid professional knowledge and how people acquire it. For Schon, professional practice is not only about solving problems but also, and very importantly, about 'finding the problems' (problem-setting). It is with the latter concern that problem-setting becomes central in the art of reflective practice. Problem-setting, in essence, consists of an exercise in naming and framing, which can form a continuous cycle once in the 'art' of practice it is unlikely that a solution to a problem will always be the only solution possible. In Schon's words,

When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the "things" of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them. (ibid. p. 40)

The process then is always open-ended, working in iterations and becoming more developed as it becomes more reflective. However, this is easier said than done. The major problem is that of mindset, or the epistemological standing of the professional when faced with situations of problem solving and problem setting. In lacking the tradition, and therefore the instruments and the language, to describe 'artful competence', teachers may find themselves unable to make sense of the situation and the process of naming and framing once their foundational grounds or models no longer apply (at least in theory); i.e. they have nowhere to go and grasp the necessary knowledge that will solve the problem if we agree with Schon that knowledge is in the action. In sum, "complexity, instability, and uncertainty are not removed or resolved by applying specialized knowledge to well-defined task" (ibid. p. 19). In sum, an inquiry-based approach to teacher development which is focused on problem-setting requires the teacher to accept the unpredictable nature of his/her practice. The challenge, on the other hand, is that in many cultures the teachers' job is equated to control, that is, to direct students' behaviour and cognition through effective control of materials and group dynamics.

In practice, that means that in trying to develop artistry from an inquiry-based approach, a teacher could consider 'development' as being able to do more with less; that is, with a lesson plan that is never 'complete' as it always leaves room to experience and experiment with what emerges. This approach requires a relatively different set of skills and dispositions.

4. Observing and evaluating practice

If relying on scientific knowledge to develop the practice of teaching is to be temporarily suspended in order to give way to artistry, then what will lay the grounds for practice? That is, what can teachers rely on? An interesting analogy to start to formulate an answer is that of how musicians improvise.

Musicians know that behind a seemingly effortless performance or improvisation there is an incredible amount of training. The purpose of such an intense training is that during the actual performance the musician can "forget" all s/he knows. In this case, during the performance the improviser will rarely think about what has just happened or what is about to happen; improvising requires an incredible awareness, and a need, to be in the present. For this reason, besides the technical knowledge and skills, improvisers show us they have a 'feel' for what is going on as they adjust their play in light of what others are playing; and vice-versa.

Linked to the idea of developing a 'feel for' the material or situation is that of 'tact'.

Tact seems characterized by moral intuitiveness: A tactful teacher seems to have the ability of instantly sensing what the appropriate, right or good thing to do on the basis of perceptive pedagogical understanding of children's individual nature and circumstances is. (van Manen, 1995, p. 10)

A tactful teacher makes classroom decisions on the fly by interpreting students' indirect clues such as body language and expression. Tact involves seeing through what is apparently only a cause-effect relation (van Manen, 1995).

In practice, intuition can be developed by reflecting on classroom decision-making. By examining the factors that led the teacher to make a pedagogical decision on the spots he might find that many of these decisions are not supported by her formal/explicit knowledge of teaching. When realising a decision was made based on intuition the teacher can then examine the conditions in which this was possible (e.g. who was involved, the time of the day, the type of lesson and material, and so on) - these will not determine future practice of similar situations but will inform them. If successful, these classroom events will also build the teacher's self-confidence on partly relying on intuition. To this end, reflection journals and video recordings of classrooms come highly recommended.

As Eisner (1985) put it, the arts teach us to judge in the absence of rule and to make choices based on an attention to nuances and a reliance on feel. For Parks (1992), there are certain attributes of artistry which should be included as a model for judging the quality of teachers' performance. In terms of 'artistic' communication, teachers

would demonstrate sensitivity to allegory, metaphor, irony and other similar concepts, as well as the ability to think qualitatively about the best way to communicate an idea which can trigger empathic and interested responses from students. Another relevant attribute is self-knowledge and its relation to the subject and skills taught; along with self-motivation and self-directedness which enable the artist/teacher to place the pursuit of knowledge and personal growth above other activities and beyond custom and conventions.

From a similar perspective, but with an added layer of critical theory, Smyth (1995) argues that teachers can gain some control over defining best practice through self-government, self-regulation and self-responsibility, which will be essential aspects of their portrayals of practice and reflection. This will reinforce the view that teachers are the ones who know best about teaching.

In sum, one of the downsides of evaluations following a technical-rational model of knowledge is the emphasis on prediction and control, perhaps at the expense of exploration and discovery. This model diminishes the importance of opening oneself to uncertainty, and consequently to artistic practices (Eisner, 1985).

5. Collective engagement

The author suggests that professional development should focus on teachers' active process of contesting and determining the ends of their work; instead of just adapting to innovations which focus on ends determined by others. There has been a constant call for teachers to develop in the light of the 'new' - that is, methodological or technological innovations. But many times what is needed is development which focuses on renewal. A focus on renewal will pool the local expertise already present in a school and create conditions for teachers to collectively strengthen local knowledge arising from critical examination of their accumulated personal experiences (Eraut, 1994). In this case, teachers become central in determining the ends of their practice, and not only the processes.

Each discipline requires us to learn how to think within it, however, disciplines are not static and unsullied, by thinking within a discipline we can learn how to change it. An artist develops techniques with which s/he can manipulate materials that aid the expression of his art; and in many cases the artwork is an expression of deeper values, commitment and ideologies - with this awareness, the teacher can also develop techniques that will serve as a means to an end. In other words, teaching techniques are not the ends; the

accumulation of resources, materials, activities, etc, is not the ends of teacher professional development - if taken as artistry; it is a means by which the teacher can express her educational values and achieve her educational aims.

A conflict of ends cannot be resolved by the use of techniques derived from applied research. It is rather through the non-technical process of framing the problematic situation that we may organize and clarify both the ends to be achieved and the possible means of achieving them. (Schon1983, p. 41)

In a recent interview for TEA Austria, I was asked whether the forces of box-ticking cultures in this age of measurability are unstoppable. I think they are, indeed, unstoppable – but that they don't preclude the emergence of parallel narratives, or even counter-narratives. Many artistic expressions develop first as a subculture, and are initially frowned upon for their subversion of the status quo; however imperfect they are they can form novel forms of communities of practice and bring freshness to the field.

In this scenario, engagement stops being an option and becomes a necessity. If left to the external forces of curriculum, policies, performance indicators, and other influencers, the classroom can contribute to and become a representation of the teacher's isolation. We ought to be careful when collective concerns are turned into individualised concerns; because where teachers could benefit from sharing there might be in place a culture in which asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness (Britzman, 1986). In face of a certain kind of (isolating) autonomy culture, collective engagement is thus of utmost importance. This bottom-up counter-narrative is what can actually empower teachers.

6. Conclusion

To make sense of their experiences in artistic terms, teachers will have to overthrow the image created by researchers, administrators and policymakers (Smyth, 1992). One way to rework this cultural image is to reframe teaching as a transformative intellectual activity (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985). The artist-teacher as a transformative intellectual can offer a counter-narrative for what is possible (and potentially desirable) in classrooms.

Because perception of relationship between what is done and what is undergone constitutes the work of intelligence, and because the artist is controlled in the process of his work by his grasp of the connection between what he has already done and what he is to do next, the idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd. (Dewey, 1934 p. 45)

Rubin (1985) talks of attitude and professional "hunger" being the roots of great teaching. Artistry in teaching is

important, but artistry alone does not suffice - it is less a matter of talent and more a matter of developing talent along with the sort of dedication and attitude which do not come prescribed.

In this vein, a number of questions remain: how can teachers tap into acts of artistry? How can they create classroom cultures that welcome artistry? What role should artistry play in professional development activities and what would it look like, feel like, if it played the lead role?

From this brief development of the opportunities and necessities of understanding teaching as an art form, we can see teachers and artists share similar functions and characteristics. Not the least important of which is that becoming a teacher or an artist involves more than making a career choice; above all it is a choice of how one wants to live –a life choice.

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