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Cover Page Footnote

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Teachers' Stories about Teaching: Collaborative Dialogues as Open Educational Resources

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of teacher learning through a social-constructivist perspective and describes instructional strategies utilized with teachers during an international teaching assistants' (ITAs') training workshop offered at the Utah State University (USU). The strategy used involved eliciting and structuring exemplary teachers' stories about teaching to serve as a basis for class discussions and other assignments. These teachers' stories, recorded on video, were then shared online through the university website and YouTube. In this way, new teachers gained access to co-constructed and pedagogically appropriate teacher knowledge represented by authentic teachers' voices.

Introduction

"It's like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story."

- Patrick Rothfuss, *The Name of the Wind*

Teacher education research has noted great benefits associated with the use of teachers' stories about teaching. For example, Elbaz (1991) contended that the sharing of stories produces collaborative dialogues that bridge the divide between classroom teachers and education researchers. Elbaz (1991) insightfully noted that "the story affects those who listen, and possibly also the teller, through the dialogue

that may take place between story-teller and audience, sometimes even changing the story” (p. 16). Teacher-authored narratives about teaching have been recognized as legitimate forms of teacher knowledge (Johnson, 2009; Park, 2013; Verity, 2000) and have been acknowledged as effective tools to prompt teacher learning, reflection, and even engagement with new instructional ideas and practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Although many studies have been conducted utilizing teachers’ written accounts and reflections on teaching (for a review, see Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2012), less attention was paid to teachers’ oral accounts of their teaching beliefs and practices, and this paper aims to address this gap.

Besides, given the increased interest and spread of online technologies to promote teacher learning (Choppin, Amadour, Callard, & Carson, 2017; Hood, 2018; Tour, 2017), it is particularly important to implement and research the effects of these new technologies for teachers. The use of video-recorded interviews of expert teachers available online is one of the ways to promote thought-provoking, and relevant discussions with novice teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation course. While teacher educators have been utilizing online technologies in teacher education programs for an extensive amount of time, the research about how teachers utilize these technologies in their practice and for self-learning and what makes online learning particularly relevant for teachers is only beginning to emerge (Tour, 2017).

In this paper, I argue for the use of teachers’ oral narratives about their teaching facilitated by video recordings and the Internet. The paper is grounded in a social-constructivist perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991) on teacher learning and suggests pedagogical implications for using this instructional practice with international teaching assistants (ITAs) at the Utah State University (USU) and other American universities and in higher education more generally.

Literature Review

Use of teachers’ stories about teaching

Many research studies have shown benefits from engaging teachers in writing self-authored accounts of pedagogical beliefs and practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Whitney, 2008; Verity, 2000). Teachers’ experiences with writing about teaching can be transformational. Some teachers can experience important changes in their

professional identity, such as gaining more confidence as a teacher, while others can realize various contextual constraints of educational institutions, such as standardized tests, and express commitment to creating meaningful educational experiences for students despite these constraints (Whitney, 2008). In another study, an experienced American language teacher used a personal journal to generate ideas about effective instructional strategies she could use in a new instructional context. She taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a Japanese university (Verity, 2000).

International teaching assistants (ITAs) are graduate students from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds assigned to teach undergraduate-level courses at American universities. While there exists an extensive body of literature examining ITAs' experiences in the U.S. universities (Gorsuch, 2011; Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Kuo, 2002; Trebing, 2007), less research was conducted on ITAs' engagement in oral and written discussions of their teaching while in the U.S. (Arshavskaya, 2016; Stevenson & Jenkins, 1994), and this paper aims to fulfill this gap.

Open Educational Resources (OER) and Use of Technology for Teacher Training

The Internet and other technologies have dramatically changed the ways we as teachers engage with our students in the classroom. One of the recent innovations involving instructional technologies is the use of free online educational resources, known as Open Educational Resources (OER). These resources can be freely shared, edited, copied, and used. The Open Courseware offered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is considered the precursor of the OER overall (Weller, de los Arcos, Farrow, Pitt, & McAndrew, 2014). Despite the increasing interest in the OER, little research addresses the specifics of the use of the OER with non-native speakers of English (Thoms, Arshavskaya & Poole, 2018; Filatova, 2019).

More generally, given the characteristics of our students today, it seems impossible to imagine today's classrooms without the use of instructional technology. In fact, "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) may also think differently since they learn information using technology, and this experience may affect how their brains form and develop. Because of this characteristic, more and more language instructors start to utilize the OER in their classrooms (Thoms et al., 2018). While many of these instructors have doubts about the quality of these materials and as a consequence, are uncertain about the ways to locate necessary and high-quality materials online, the

benefits of using the OER are numerous, including saving textbook costs for students and professors, providing more authentic language input, and allowing for various forms of media.

In the context of teacher training, research shows multiple possibilities and benefits associated with the use of technologies and the Internet to facilitate and enhance teacher learning. For example, research (Killeavy and Molloney, 2010) showed that blogging allowed language teachers to exchange ideas and created an interactive environment for learning. Blogs also enable teacher educators to further mediate novice teachers' learning through monitoring course participants' conversations and providing comments. Among other common instructional technologies used with teachers is the use of video-recorded teaching sessions to promote reflective teaching (Williams & Case, 2015).

More recent studies (Choppin et al., 2017; Hood, 2018; Tour, 2017) highlight the importance of using online technologies in teacher education programs, yet point out that despite this increased interest and use, little is known about how teachers utilize these resources in their practice and for self-learning. Among the characteristics that teachers name that make their learning in online contexts particularly useful are the social dimension of learning online and its personalized nature (Tour, 2017). Similarly, in this paper, I discuss how after exposing prospective ITAs to video-recorded interviews of former successful peers, the ITAs engage in collaborative discussions with each other (the social aspect) as well as can focus on the parts of interviews that seem particularly relevant to them (personalized learning).

Following a recent call to investigate the use of videos with the ITAs (Williams & Case, 2015), this paper describes a pedagogical innovation involving the creation of the OER through video-recorded interviews of several exemplary ITAs. Given recent educational developments, it is necessary to provide both teachers and students with high-quality and easily accessible educational materials. Creating online instructional videos seems one of the ways to move the field forward in this regard.

Theoretical Framing

According to the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), learning is primarily social. We learn through participating in social activities and engaging in various discursive practices with our family, peers, co-workers, and others. In their

seminal work, Lave and Wenger (1991) provide several examples about how humans learn various skills and kinds of knowledge, such as the apprenticeship among Yucatec Mayan midwives. This model can be as well applied to other contexts, such as educational settings where most of the teacher learning occurs.

Through the lens of the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), an expert teacher telling stories about his or her teaching is conceptualized as a mentor who has gained legitimacy of participation through engaging in the social activities of a given community and appropriating its discourse, while a novice teacher can be viewed as a mentee whose goal is to change his or her participation in the given community from peripheral to full. This process occurs through acquiring the discourse, knowledge, and skills required by the desired community of practice and is accompanied by the development of a professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1998).

The process of gaining this legitimacy is embedded in power struggles in various hierarchical communities of practice. For example, Warhurst (2008)'s account of the mentoring experiences of new lecturers in a research-oriented U.K. university illustrated how institutional factors influenced the quality and quantity of feedback to newcomers. In particular, given the institutional focus on research, mentors provided limited feedback on the new lecturers' teaching and left the newcomers feeling isolated, inhibiting their professional growth.

From the situated learning perspective, acquiring the discourse of a desired community of practice is of key importance and, therefore, sharing exemplary teachers' stories about teaching is one of the ways to expose this discourse and engage viewers in virtual dialogue and thinking. Elbaz (1991) highlighted that "the sense of a community of teachers and researchers, working together, listening to one another, is especially important" (p. 16). The co-constructed nature of the dialogues with exemplary teachers and myself allowed to structure conversations in a way that highlighted the most relevant aspects of these conversations for the new teachers, yet it presents this knowledge in a highly accessible form, such as a story. Moreover, the genre of a story does not only presuppose the sharing of success stories but also may contain stories of instructional challenges, and their overcoming and lessons learned through this process. In what follows, I describe a pedagogical practice to create a community of story-tellers and listeners online, thus offering a possibility for collaborative learning experiences for teachers now and in the future.

Methods

Educational Context

Utah State University (USU) offers specialized training workshops for incoming foreign graduate students who elect to work as international teaching assistants (ITAs). ITAs come from several countries, such as India, South Korea, Brazil, Russia, China, and Columbia. Therefore, the goal of ITA training workshops is to familiarize ITAs with characteristics of the U.S. higher education system and support them in becoming effective teachers for undergraduate students enrolled at the university. ITA training workshops focus on the characteristics of teaching in the U.S. higher education system and involve several teaching demonstrations, some of which are video-recorded and reflected on by the presenters themselves. The workshops as well as involve U.S. undergraduate students who serve an audience for the teaching demonstrations and provide feedback to help improve these demonstrations for the ITAs.

Instructional Project

The project involved creating a series of video recorded interviews. First, during the spring of 2018, I met and discussed various aspects of teaching at the USU with several exemplary ITAs from India, Jordan, and Russia. I approached these ITAs based on the positive feedback of their professors, on their department recognition awards (i.e., one of these ITAs received the Best Graduate Instructor Award in his respective department), and, of course, on their outstanding performance in the training workshops led by me. The videos addressed the following topics:

- Potential challenges for ITAs;
- Insights from experience;
- Advice for new ITAs.

To elicit corresponding teachers' narratives, the following questions were asked to the participating ITAs:

- What are the instructional challenges you encountered while teaching in the U.S.?

- How does teaching in the U.S. compare to teaching in your home country (if this applies to your situation)?
- What insights did you gain through the ITAs' training workshops and teaching itself?
- What advice can you offer to new in-coming ITAs?

Our conversation started with these questions, but then I also asked several clarifying and follow-up questions in an attempt to elicit full and interesting responses from my participants. The videos were also illustrated by snapshots of the ITAs' actual teaching at the USU.

The Use of the Videos in the ITAs' Workshop

In this section, I highlight several interesting findings that I encountered while using the video-recorded interviews with the ITAs enrolled in the ITAs' training workshops. The video focusing on the challenges that the ITAs encountered while teaching in the U.S. for the first time mentioned that students would sometimes question their authority as a teacher due to their similar ages, and this challenge was hard to face by some of the interviewees. On the other hand, another interviewee emphasized the benefits of establishing more informal relationships with his students and even building long-term friendships with some of them. The nature of student-teacher relationships (from formal to more informal) and its consequences on classroom learning environments caused a thought-provoking discussion for new ITAs in the workshop and made them think of their own desired teacher identities that they wished to project in the classroom.

Another video in this series focusing on the insights gained by the ITAs through the training workshops and teaching itself showed that previously one of the ITAs had not been aware of some distracting body language he used while presenting. Upon being video recorded as part of the ITAs' training program, he realized this mistake and was able to subsequently improve this aspect of his teaching. When used during the workshop, this particular excerpt helped new ITAs to get familiar with some of the concepts related to teacher education and learning, such as the concept of teacher presence in the classroom manifested through confidence and certain body language. In other words, the new ITAs were introduced to some important educational discourse through a relevant, easy-to-grasp example.

Lastly, through the use of these videos, it was possible to establish a sense of learning community during the ITAs' training workshops. The final video about advice by the participating ITAs that can be useful for new in-coming ITAs mentioned continuing working on language skills. For example, instead of choosing roommates or friends from the same country, this ITA encouraged prospective ITAs to choose English-speaking roommates or friends. This arrangement could increase the non-native English-speaking 'T.A.s' opportunities for interaction in English. During the in-class discussion of this excerpt, many of the ITAs admitted their lack of confidence in their language skills and found this piece of advice particularly useful. This advice given by one of their more experienced peers who had faced a similar challenge while teaching in the U.S. helped to create a more relaxed and open atmosphere during the ITAs' workshop, allowing the new ITAs to acknowledge certain challenges they will face and to realize that they were not left alone with this issue. There were resources in the community (U.S. peers and roommates) as well as in their ITAs' workshop (several Canadian students) that they could utilize to improve their language.

Discussion

Overall, the project discussed in this paper has allowed creating the community of story-tellers and listeners that Elbaz (1991) proposed as an ideal environment for teacher learning. It is important that in terms of story-tellers, I selected the most deserving ITAs who gained their legitimacy of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through effective teaching and overall academic excellence. Also, given the international background of most of my interviewees, the project expands the concept of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and blurs its clear boundaries due to the globalized and diverse nature of today's educational and work environments.

In their subsequent work, Lave and Wenger (1998) shifted the focus of their theory on identity formation and skills learned to achieve the desired identity. These identities and skills are often formed and learned through an informal kind of learning, such as through a conversation with a co-worker with regards to how to solve a particular issue at work. Similarly, we gain many aspects of teaching insights through informal office conversations with colleagues. The semi-structured interviews with exemplary ITAs allowed for some aspects of this informal learning to take place since

the conversations prompted the participants to share informal stories related to their teaching experiences that may be relevant to the new in-coming ITAs at different points of their careers. While I prepared a list of questions to ask, I also allowed the ITAs to share additional stories by asking them if there was anything else that they wanted to share at the end of our interviews. As I interviewed my participants, I paid attention to leaving some pauses between my questions to let them think, reflect on, and perhaps even question my assumptions. From the point of view of creating a community of story-tellers and listeners (Elbaz, 1991), it seemed particularly important to allow my participants to have this space to think and perhaps even to disagree with me.

Similarly to Killeavy and Moloney (2010), the online videos allowed to create a space for teachers' exchange of ideas about teaching. Besides, through externalizing their feelings and thoughts on teaching, my interviewees were invited to critically reflect on their experiences in the classrooms. The importance of teacher reflection is well-established in teacher education literature (Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2012), and this pedagogical practice offers a new way to promote teacher reflection, such as through semi-structured video-recorded conversations with a mentor teacher. Less research addresses the specifics of the use of the OER with non-native speakers of English (Thoms et al., 2018; Filatova, 2019), and this paper adds to this literature by sharing this pedagogical practice.

The telling and re-telling of stories about teaching also help the story-tellers realize the most important aspects of their teaching philosophy, allows a deeper reflection, and perhaps may even have a positive effect on teaching in the long term. Taken more broadly, the stories told by exemplary ITAs serve as platforms for class discussions during the workshops. Also, they weave into the discourse about teaching during the workshops and help build the professional identities of the participating ITAs since it is through acquiring the professional discourse and skills that we become central members of the desired communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998).

The next video in this project will highlight experiences and advice from the U.S. and international faculty currently teaching at the USU as well as from ITAs' current mentors. It is expected that ITAs can greatly benefit from being exposed to various perspectives on teaching and teaching experiences before their actual teaching. In addition to asking the professors the questions I asked the ITAs, I will also inquire about how they were able to adapt their instructional practices to better fit the U.S.

educational context. These conversations about change and adaptation can be particularly useful for the ITAs who previously taught in their countries as T.A.s or even lecturers. All videos in this series are available at the following address: <https://ieli.usu.edu/about/international-teaching-assistant-training>

Pedagogical Implications

The online depository of the instructional videos discussed in this paper can be used in various ways by instructors teaching workshops at the USU and other universities. One of the ways to utilize them in the coursework is to watch them in class and ask ITAs to note interesting and arguably quotes from the video. New ITAs can also be asked to compare the educational systems of their respective countries to those mentioned in the videos. Besides, ITAs can be asked to reflect on the similarities and differences of teaching in their majors rather than those represented in the videos, such as engineering, language, and computer science. As a current instructor for these workshops, I noticed that my ITAs were particularly interested to watch and discuss these instructional videos since they feature someone to whom they can relate due to the similarity of their situations. At the same time, the ITAs in the video represent certain positive role models that new ITAs can aspire to become.

More generally, this practice can be used in higher education in other instructional contexts. For example, teacher educators working with both more experienced and novice teachers can invite both groups of instructors to share insights and challenges from their work environments. Such videos can create spaces for reflection, knowledge exchange, and inspiration.

Research Implications

This description of a pedagogical innovation offers implications for future research. The videos have been used and discussed by the ITAs at USU; however, no rigorous data collection or analysis has yet been conducted. In the future, it is worthwhile to evaluate the impact of these instructional videos on ITAs' learning during the workshops and perhaps subsequent teaching at USU.

Conclusion

Overall, the project has been particularly satisfying for all involved, including the participants, the audience, and myself. Creating a learning community is particularly important not only for our students but also for teachers. The video-recorded interviews containing both insights and challenges of teaching experiences can be used with ITAs at the USU and other U.S. universities. Moreover, this pedagogical practice can be utilized in other higher education contexts, such as teacher education programs.

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