



What's the Story? Professional Learning in a Three-Act Structure

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Abstract

This blog post adopts a three-act narrative structure to underscore the importance of sensemaking, that is, the making of meaning within learning. Act One reviews the author's doctoral journey studying language learner autonomy, and Act Two emphasises *know and centre the whole individual as a process* as the main message learned from analysis of his doctoral research efforts. Finally, Act Three evaluates lasting changes to the author's teaching practice that have resulted from that research. Language learners, educators, and other doctorates are thus encouraged to tell the story of their own learning to promote meaningful change.

Keywords

1. Language learner autonomy
2. Language teacher learning
3. Doctoral learning
4. Sensemaking

AI Declaration

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was not used in this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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This post follows a narrative structure, rather than typical article or blog style. I do this to engage in “narrative knowledging” (Barkhuizen, 2011). That is, exploring mine, my colleagues’, and my students’ relationships to my doctoral journey, and making sense of them wholistically through structured, analytical narrativization across three “Acts”. These Acts, “Setup” (scene-setting), “Confrontation” (rising action or tension), and “Resolution” (denouement), adopt the narrative story structure of a stage play. Therein, I reveal the interplay of research and professional learning with identity and process across times and places. My choice of the [St Andrews Journal of International and Language Education](#) (SAJILE) as the venue in which to tell this story is also purposeful. As one of the Editors-in-Chief, I belong to the journal’s Community of Practice, as well as to my wider doctoral cohort. I want to enhance the relevance and impact of my story by directly addressing these groups in our in-house journal. Furthermore, in selecting the Academic Blog, with its open review process, as the reporting medium, I choose to not position the narrative as static. This tale will continue to be shaped through reinterpretation by editors, reviewers, and other audiences. I do not simply recount past developments across the three Acts. Rather, the telling of the story itself embodies and presents chances for new learning.

Act One: Setup

Once upon a time, in 2008, I finished my undergraduate degree in Philosophy. In that context, perhaps eventually choosing a doctoral topic with elusive, philosophical overtones – autonomy in language learning and teaching – makes sense.

During my studies for a professional doctorate in English teaching, I have considered [the emergent nature of autonomy](#) and compared [how Japanese practitioners employ the construct](#) to those involved in international research. I have refined my understanding through different levels of professional engagement in the field: sharing recorded discussions with international [researchers](#) and [practitioners](#), participating in [academic conferences](#) and [research hubs](#), and by [developing supportive resources](#) for learners and educators.

Over one academic year, some colleagues even joined me in a concerted effort to teach for autonomy – collecting (as yet unpublished) [vocabulary](#) and [scale](#) data to better understand and evaluate our efforts. As our university-aged learners of English set [semester learning goals](#) (Semester Dream Goals) and logged their [in-class](#) (Exit Journal) and [out-of-class](#) (Self Study Log) language studies, we teachers concurrently monitored and reflected on our own professional learning (paper under review at time of writing) in teaching diaries and interviews.

Act Two: Confrontation

Approaching the climax of my doctoral journey has helped me reflect on changes in my own professional practice. The open peer review model adopted by the Academic Blog format, as well as the chance to dialogue openly with other interested educators in a journal community to which I belong, make this an appropriate place to isolate and share my core message: *know and centre the whole individual as a process*.



First, knowing the whole individual. I began this post by mentioning my undergraduate degree on purpose, and it is the perspective of time that reveals the consistent thread throughout my experiences. My deeply knotted personal, academic, and professional histories – mentioned in Act One – fundamentally shaped my development, even within a sustained, highly coordinated endeavour such as a doctorate. What made the difference has been dedicating systematic, sustained time to retrospective reflection, such as in this blog. For instance, through my experiences I have become less convinced of the value of scale data and attempts to quantify autonomy. The landscape of change within my teaching and research processes, inextricable from the broader narrative arc of these interrelated identities of mine, can thus be found in how I have related differently over time to the multiple forms of production described in Act One.

Second, centring the process. The penultimate pseudonymised Exit Journal entry of the most prolific diarist among my students from the data collection year describes sharing their self-study journey with multiple partners in class. Scaffolded by the aforementioned [out-of-class](#) Self Study Log tool, we repeated this activity in four, three-week cycles, and this was the last:

I learned what classmates did in this semester and felt about their study habits. I talked (discussed) with some classmates about their action for studying English. I didn't feel difficult today, but I was inspired by friends because they have taken action in various things like uploading diaries on Instagram. Thanks to them, I will do something for myself to improve like increase opportunities to speak English. (Kaito, Exit Journal 46)

For context, 31 of my students produced 938 such entries over 28 weeks, averaging 30 entries per student (range 7-47) with most (17) writing 31-40 entries. Our class met three times a week. It is in sharing activities such as this, rather than in complex inferential analysis of self-reported scale data, that I have discovered the pedagogic (rather than research) value of the students' own authentic learning journeys. Note Kaito's use of the words *friend* and *classmate* and acknowledgement of the process of creating change from shared understanding. What autonomy in language learning means *for them* can be discovered by helping students use English to centre the process: recognising, foregrounding, and articulating the contours of co-authored learning journeys. The classroom activity raised the salience of who they are and how they engage with the English language as learners, that is, to *know and centre the whole individual as a process*.

Act Three: Resolution

In the data collection year, we teachers tried to help learners plan and look forward. It is only now that I realise I had neglected to first encourage them to look back on their own learning histories. I had not done enough to help students *know the whole individual*. Today, my classes still use [learner-generated resource lists](#) and scaffolded, openly shared, written and



spoken elucidation of their plans and processes. These efforts support the technical, directed actions of autonomous language learning. What I have changed, however, is to increase the depth of focus on what learners value and their learning histories. I now pose the questions: how far have you come, who did you meet along the way, why are you here today, what are you curious about, and how does this fit into the arc of your learning life? Put more simply, I now try to help students ask, “What’s the story?” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). This practice of sensemaking, of retrospective interpretative attention paid to the socially constituted identities and processes underlying language learning, contextualises and functions as a precursor to learners’ future autonomous study. As a teacher, it also opens a useful window onto students’ lives that can guide cycles of classroom action.

I hope the moral of this tale – *know and centre the whole individual as a process* – resonates equally with language students, teachers, and even doctorates. Telling the story is what counts.

The End.

References

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