Teacher learning: Reflective practice as a site of engagement

for professional identity construction

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Abstract: This paper reports a qualitative study in response to the growing research interest in teacher learning. Informed by a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is considered as a process of identity construction in the paper. This paper taps into the development of teacher identity embedded in teacher learning and views reflection as a social practice for enhancing teacher learning. Through a close analysis of a selected discussion thread, this paper aims to demonstrate that teacher-learners' reflective practice in the online learning community provided a site of engagement for developing their professional identity and shaping the practice of teaching in their process of learning to teach.

Key words: teacher learning; reflective practice; identity construction

1. Introduction

Prior to the 1990s, teacher preparation programs emphasized the development of the teacher's knowledge base and how such knowledge could be effectively delivered to prospective teachers. The missionary focus was on "teaching of teaching" that often entailed an exclusive concern for transmitting the knowledge of what to teach in order to serve prospective teachers well. Later in the 1990s the orientation of teacher education began to shift away from "teaching of teaching" to "learning of teaching", as teacher educators came to a realization that effective teaching cannot be taught directly (Richards, 1998). This thinking gave rise to a line of research on teacher learning that seeks to understand the teachers' process of learning to teach and support the learning of teachers. Drawing from the broad research agenda on teacher learning, the present study examined the experience of prospective language teachers in an online learning environment to further the understanding of how teacher-learners develop professional identity and shape the practice of teaching throughout reflective practice.

2. Language and social identity

Two key constructs under study are professional identity and reflection. The former refers specifically to second language teacher identity in this paper, and the latter is operationalized as asynchronous discussion postings in an online learning environment enabled by WebCT (a web course system). Informed by Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, the relation between language use and social identity has been widely explored in the literature. In this section, I narrow the focus on the role of reflection, a variation of language use, in teacher learning. Also approached from the sociocultural perspective, professional identity is viewed as one of the dimensions of social identity in the present study. Specifically, I adopt Ochs' (1996) situational framework to

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consider how professional identity is socially constructed through language use in social interactions where learning takes place.

2.1 Reflection in teacher learning

The work of Donald Schön popularizes the significance of reflection in developing teachers' knowledge about what to teach and how to teach more effectively. After his introduction, many researchers continue to elaborate on the concept. Definitions of reflection abound. For instance, Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) view reflection as "intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to achieve new understandings and appreciations (p. 19). Hatton and Smith (1995) define reflection as "deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement" (p. 52). Daudelin (1996) considers reflection to be "a highly personal cognitive process which happens in the mental self" (p. 39). Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) view reflection as a professional development strategy that provides professionals with "opportunities to explore, articulate, and represent their own ideas and knowledge" (p. 16). These definitions reveal that reflection is commonly conceived as a cognitive construct that tends to operate at the personal level. In a recent review, Akbari (2007) points out several conceptual problems with reflective practice in language teacher education and asserts that "reflection, in its purely cognitive sense, will not be responsive to the social dilemmas the global community faced with and can not contribute to the improvement of human society" (p. 197). It is thus imperative to think in new terms about the practice of reflection in the field, as educational researchers are urged to shift the focus on the learning process of teachers.

Viewing reflection as cognitive practice impacts its implementation methods. In practice, reflection has been suggested to educate both pre-service and in-service teachers as a means to enhance teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and/or pedagogical content knowledge (Wallace, 1991; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Roberts, 1998; Reagan & Osborn, 2001). Common reflective tasks suggested for preparing language teachers are class reports, journals, and portfolios, to name just a few. For instance, Liou (2001) investigated 20 prospective EFL (English-as-a-Foreign Language) teachers' reflection on their learning experiences in a practicum course in Taiwan. Written reports of practice teaching by the teacher-learners were implemented as the reflective task designed for documenting and assisting their learning process. Tsang (2004) conducted a case study on three non-native ESL teachers in Hong Kong to investigate the role of teacher knowledge in guiding the practice of teaching. The focal reflective practice used in the study was a language teaching and learning autobiography which contained descriptions of their teaching philosophies, experiences, expectations, and favorite teachers. Leshem and Trafford (2006) investigated the narrative accounts of two groups, prospective EFL teachers in Israel and prospective ESL teachers in the United Kingdom, to understand how personal storytelling impacted the learning of the teacher-learners in the two cultural contexts. The reflective practice under study consisted of different tasks, including linguistic autobiographies, personal diaries, and reflective journals. In general, these recent studies on reflective practice in teacher learning confirm former findings about the role of reflection in guiding and shaping a teacher's thinking (e.g., Emery, 1996; Borko, Michalec, Timmons & Siddle, 1997; Olshtain & Kupferberg, 1998). It should be noted that the individual-based reflective practice implemented in these studies, however, may also constrain that thinking and teacher learning in the reflective tasks at the personal level. This thought is discussed in Zeichner's (1994) review on different theoretical understandings of reflection in the teacher education literature. As he puts it, an important distinction is made between "reflection as a private activity to be pursued in isolation by individual teachers" and "reflection as a social practice and public activity involving communities of teachers" (p. 11). He summarizes the view of many advocates of reflection as social

practice and points out that the lack of a social context for teachers to discuss their personal beliefs and to construct shared understanding limits the professional development of teachers because teachers' personal beliefs are brought to their own awareness through communication and interaction with others (Zeichner, 1994).

Along the same line, Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles and Lopez-Torres (2003) caution that "reflection defined as a technical and isolated skill is insufficient to support meaningful teacher learning" (p. 248). They call for a need to move beyond the common implementation of reflection as cognitive activities performed solely by the individual. This call is supported by empirical studies that compared the two modes of reflective practice as reviewed by Zeichner (1994): reflection as a private activity and reflection as a social practice. Farrell (2001) conducted a qualitative case study on a non-native EFL teacher in Korea to examine her level of reflection among three modes of reflective practice: personal journals, individual meeting with the researcher, and group discussions with her colleagues. Results indicated that the participant reflected more critically in the group discussions than in the other two reflective activities. The participant also showed a clear preference for group discussions in which she took a more critical stance towards understanding the relationship between her beliefs about teaching and her approaches of teaching. Although her personal preference may have played a part in the level of her reflection and such preference for certain modes of reflective practice may vary case-by-case, the research findings reinforce the notion that reflection as a social practice created more opportunities for professional development as compared to reflection as a private activity. With a similar research focus, Orland-Barak (2005) examined the quality of reflection in another reflective practice, portfolios, based on Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria: descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection. She compared the content of two different kinds of portfolios which she referred to as "process portfolio" and "product portfolio" constructed by 32 in-service EFL teachers in Israel as a way of documenting their professional development. In the content analysis of reflective thinking associated with portfolio use, the predominance of descriptive reflection was found in both practices of portfolios. It was, however, observed that the product portfolio contained more dialogic reflection. Interestingly, the process portfolios were carried out individually and the product portfolios were a collaboration of group work. While Orland-Barak's (2005) research focus was not on characterizing and evaluating the individual versus group portfolios, the higher reflective level disclosed in the collective practice of product portfolio confirms the notion that reflection as a social practice engages teachers to think and reflect more critically on their beliefs and teaching than they can in individual reflective practice.

Considering the type of reflection advocated above, the present study elaborates on the notion of reflection as a social practice and emphasizes on the value of embedding reflection in interactional or communicative settings.

2.2 Identity construction in linguistic practice

The sociocultural perspective centers on the nexus between language and society. Relevant to the present research is the view that language use is inextricably connected to identity construction (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1996; Wenger, 1998). More specifically, language is viewed as an inherently value-laden system of signs that embodies identity. In this sense, all learning that has to do with language practice involves "identity work" to some extent (Gee, 2003). Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnson (2005) further argue that learning is not primarily the cognitive acquisition of knowledge but "a process of identification – that is, of acquiring an identity, of becoming someone or something" (p. 37). Taken together, learning, identity, and language practice are interrelated constructs. Informed by the theoretical understanding, I outline Ochs' (1996) situational framework as an analytical lens for the present research.

According to Ochs (1996), a situation "includes socio-cultural dimensions a member activates to be part of

the situation at hand such as the temporal and spatial locus of the communicative situation, the social identities of participants, the social acts and activities taking place, and participants' affective and epistemic stance" (p. 410, emphasis in original). Briefly, the situational framework is constitutive of an array of sociocultural dimensions, including time, space, epistemic stance, affective stance, social act, social activity, and social identity. These situational elements are indexed through variable features of language use. Ochs (1996) noted that to index is to "point to the presence of some entity in the immediate situation-at-hand" (p. 411). For example, a statement with a raising voice may index the affective stance of surprise in one situation or the epistemic stance of doubt in another. Based on the situational framework, the notion of indexing is indispensable to the study of language use in society because connections between sociocultural meanings and linguistic forms are made thorough indexing.

The process of linguistic indexing entails social (re)-production. In one sense, language with its symbolic content encodes sociocultural meanings that are transmitted generation by generation. Social norms are thus reproduced. In the other sense, language has the potential for transforming sociocultural meanings as linguistic indexing not only encodes but also helps define sociocultural meanings in contexts. It makes good sense to argue that situational elements, such as social identities, are both encoded and socially constructed through linguistic indexing. Take the present research focus as an example: the linguistic structure of "as a" followed by a self-perception or categorization of social structure is commonly used to represent one's social identity. Sayings like "as a teacher", "as a woman", "as a non-native speaker of English" explicitly indexed one's self-perceived, social identities. In most cases, however, indexing of social identity is not encoded by certain linguistic structures and requires inference to some extent. Ochs (1996) stated that "While social identity is indexed across the world's language communities through pronominal systems and honorific morphology among the structures, social identity does not appear to be grammaticized through a wide diversity of grammatical structures" (p. 413). She suggested, this has to do with the complexity of social identity given that it is not prescribed but socially (co)-constructed in interaction.

In practice, the co-construction of social identity is more often assumed than clarified. In the field of English language teaching, few studies investigated the construction of professional identity as it emerged in the process of learning to teach, which presents a critical gap that the present study aims to bridge.

3. The study

As Singh and Richards (2006) put it, "Teacher-learning involves not only discovering more about the skills and knowledge of language teaching but also what it means to be a language teacher" (p. 155). This article echoes this view and sets out to address the importance of professional identity in teacher learning through a close examination of teacher-learners' linguistic practice in their process of learning to teach. Given the assumption that identity is embodied by language use, the investigation of the participants' linguistic practice is justified for the purpose of the study. The research questions central to this article are: (1) How does participation in reflective practice contribute to teacher learning? (2) How is professional identity of prospective teachers developed in their process of learning to teach?

Through a qualitative inquiry, I observed and investigated a teaching methods course at a university in the United States. Adopting an intensity sampling, the ten participants selected for the present study were master's students enrolled in the ESL (English-as-a-Second-Language) program. These participants were predominantly female (nine out of ten) with rather heterogeneous cultural backgrounds (four European American, one African

American, two Korean, two Taiwanese, and one Japanese). The class met weekly in face-to-face classroom settings but incorporated WebCT (a web course tool) as a supplement to the course. The collected data consisted of weekly classroom observations, the participants' individual teaching portfolios, and their collective online discussions in WebCT. I conducted a content analysis on the participants' teaching portfolios and coded the themes that emerged as central to their understanding of ESL teaching and learning. I also conducted a discourse analysis on the participants' online postings in WebCT based on Och's (1996) situational framework. While the situational framework allows researchers to examine various social constructs and their relations with language use, I zoomed the analytical focus onto social identity. Ochs (1996) asserted that epistemic and affective stances are central meaning components of social identity. I therefore examined how epistemic and affective stances constitute the social identity of the prospective ESL teachers. For the purpose of this article, I merely present empirical evidence from the discourse analysis to illustrate how the participants' reflective practice online engaged them to co-construct a shared understanding of good ESL pedagogy and make sense of what it means to be a good ESL teacher.

4. Analysis and discussion

A total of 696 online postings were retrieved and coded for data analysis. The following excerpts highlighted in this section were a discussion thread on gender equity in the second language classroom. This topical discussion, which yielded a thread of nine postings, began with exchanges about whether to correct third person pronoun in English grammar and then extended to a negotiation of the role of second language teacher in (re)producing gender (in) equity. In the following excerpts, pseudonyms are used to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Omissions of conversation are indicated by….

As shown in the first excerpt, one participant initiated the discussion by her concern about an overcorrection of third person pronoun in English grammar influenced by the prevalence of feminist movement across fields.

4.1 Excerpt 1

> I wanted to ask someone who knows more than I about this. Is it really acceptable and correct and not wrong to use "their" as a singular possessive adjective? … Dr. White told me it is okay to use "she" but never "he" as a subject pronoun when a noun antecedent is not given. How is that considered correct? Is it what Vandrick means when she writes, "Even a slight "overcorrection" in favor of feminine names, pronouns, and example is justifiable, considering the many years during which students have been exposed to instructional materials with a gender-neutral manner..." (p. 83). As a female, in my opinion, such a lame argument hurts the cause. Why do we insist on shooting ourselves in the leg, so to speak? It's just an example of overkill or, even worse, another example of the lack of gender equity. We don't need to overcorrect anything.
>
> (posted by Shirley, Message No. 569)

Shirley raised the question for discussion, "Is it really acceptable and correct and not wrong to use 'their' as a singular possessive adjective". A heightened epistemic stance is indexed through her use of emphatic stress "really" and repetition of three adjectives of similar meaning or position "acceptable", "correct" and "not wrong". From this, we can infer that Shirley was somewhat in doubt with the use of "their" as a singular possessive adjective. She then provided a rationale in support of the proposition by quoting two authority figures, including one university professor (i.e., "Dr. White told me…") and a textbook author (i.e., the quotation of Vandrick), from which her doubts arose.

As she sought legitimacy for the correction of third person voice in favor of the feminist movement (i.e.,

"How is that considered correct?"), she explicitly aligned herself with the counter position. Shirley invoked her insider role of female as a means to intensify her position against what she considered to be an overcorrection of third person pronoun in English grammar (i.e., "As a female, in my opinion…"). In addition, the marked expressions of "lame argument", "shooting ourselves in the leg", "overkill", "another example of lack of gender equity" also indexed her epistemic stance toward the issue of gender equity and revealed the focus of her concern. Lastly, she concluded with the statement "We don't need to overcorrect anything" which powerfully summarized her argument and contributed to a construction of an in-group identity "we". Technically speaking, the meaning of "we" was indeterminate, since it was not made explicit whether "we" referred to members in the class, females, second language teachers, and/or human beings as a whole. At least, the use of "we" opened up room for meaning construction of certain collective identity, which required further consideration of follow-up postings.

Under the same discussion thread, Freya posted her response in support of Shirley's thinking as follows:

4.2 Excerpt 2

> Lots of times I believe that gender equity in the US is overplayed. For example, if I were a police officer, I wouldn't care if someone calls me a policeman. It's obvious I'm a woman, right? I think it's important to teach gender equity/roles but it's important to tell students that men and women ARE different and it's not logical or "smart" to try and make us the same. I enjoy being a woman. I don't want a "man's role/job". I don't want to build houses, be a police officer or fire fighter, join the military, or be a pilot. It has nothing to do with those roles being seen as "men's roles". It has everything to do with what I feel comfortable with and what I am physically capable of doing.
>
> (posted by Freya, Message No. 572)

Freya stated her belief that "gender equity in the US is overplayed" and then connected this epistemic stance to make sense of the role second language teachers play related to this issue. As she commented, "it's important to teach gender equity/roles but it's important to tell students that men and women are different…" At this point, it is manifested that the indeterminate meaning of "we" in Shirley's concluding remark "We don't need to overcorrect anything" is constructed to specifically refer to a collective identity of second language teachers.

For Freya, the fundamental difference between men and women lies in physical capability, which is scientifically evident and has become commonsense knowledge. Her capitalization "are" was a means of emphatic stress that indexed the degree of her epistemic stance intensity. The examples she drew on in support of her epistemic position on gender equity (i.e., "build houses", "police officer", "fire fighter", "join the military", "be a pilot") were all physically demanding jobs that were traditionally considered men's territory. In Freya's argument, it is illogical to make the "un-equitable" gender roles equivalent as men and women are fundamentally different. In addition, Freya's expressions of "I enjoy being a women", "I don't want", and "what I feel comfortable with" indexed a stance of affect in line with her epistemic stance.

Amy replied directly to Freya's comments and strategically changed the subject line of the discussion thread to "response to Fe" to emphasize the focal point of her concern.

4.3 Excerpt 3

> I totally agree with you. I think that it has gotten ridiculous having to use "he/she", "him/her", and "—man/woman", just so you don't offend anyone. …I do not, however, think that these people should get so offended when they accidentally get called the wrong thing...it comes with the territory.
>
> (posted by Amy, Message No. 577)

Amy's posting indexed her epistemic stance in agreement with Freya's thinking (e.g., "I totally agree with you" and "I think that it has gotten ridiculous having to use 'he/she'…"). Specifically, Amy's expression "it comes

with the territory" echoed Freya's approach to understanding gender equity through the lens of physical difference. This linguistic indexing of epistemic stance made explicit Amy's belief that gender roles are defined by social structures and therefore, one is not inferior to the other but both are fundamentally different by nature.

To summarize the above episodes, Shirley's posting revealed a point of view against the emergent treatment of third person pronoun in English grammar in a generic sense. Freya and Amy, while taking the same position as Shirley, further justified gender inequity from a perspective on innate physical difference of the two sexes. Freya and Amy's arguments agreeably convey a proposition that men and women are different but equal as each role has its gender-specific territory.

While the three persons (i.e., Shirley, Freya, and Amy) who were involved in the discussion so far appeared to share a common standpoint, Mary posted an alternative point of view as follows:

4.4 Excerpt 4

> I've been taking a course in Language and Gender this semester and have been thinking about these issues quite a bit as a result. At the beginning of the course I would have agreed completely with Freya and Amy; however, now I feel differently. I do agree that getting hung up on the nomenclature can be annoying—and "overcorrecting" the "he" to "she" doesn't solve anything—however, there's a reason people take these things seriously. Our use of language reflects our cultural attitudes towards women and men, what they are capable of, and what rights they have. There are still countless aspects in American culture where gender biases have great influence, and females are the ones most frequently disadvantaged. For example, the unfortunate stereotypes that characterize women as "overemotional" or gossips who incessantly chatter about trivial matters still persist. …There's still a pervasive misconception that males are somehow better at math and science, at doing mechanical things or things that rely on physical strength. A lot of this has simply been taught to us, and continues to be taught to young girls and boys growing up now. …I absolutely agree that the cultures of ESL students must be considered and valued. I think it is part of our responsibility to provide learners with information about our culture and to actively learn more about theirs at the same time. …I think it might be valuable to discuss cultural differences and gender roles. I also think that specifics like the he/she thing would be worth discussing, especially if students are or will be speaking or writing in particular contexts where this issue would be important.
>
> (posted by Mary, Message No. 579)

As indicated in the excerpt above, Mary constructed a challenge specifically to Freya and Amy's proposition of looking at the gender equity issue from the physical difference point of view. Mary's expressions "I would have agreed completely with Freya and Amy; however, now I feel differently" and "however, there's a reason people take these things seriously" indexed an epistemic stance contrary to Freya and Amy's. In particular, the transition word "however" forecasted the contrasting standpoint Mary was proposing. Her statements "Our use of language reflects our cultural attitudes towards women and men, what they are capable of, and what rights they have" and "A lot of this has simply been taught to us, and continues to be taught to young girls and boys growing up now", indexed an epistemic stance that language played an important role in knowledge-transmitting and cultural persistence.

The point Mary was trying to make was that language use (i.e., the correction of third person pronoun) and physical difference of the two sexes and gender equity were not three separate things but interrelated matters. The examples she gave and her marked expressions "gender biases", "unfortunate stereotypes", and "misconception" indexed an epistemic stance that conventional language use defined by social structure has resulted in gender inequity in the society.

For Mary, the correction of third person pronoun was not "overcorrection" or "ridiculous" as considered by Shirley, Freya and Amy but "part of our responsibility" and "valuable to discuss". Here the first person possessive

form "our" referred to a collective identity of we as second language teachers. By linking language use to the social structure of gender, Mary shifted the focus of the discussion on gender equity away from the standpoint of physical knowledge to philosophical knowledge that is more concerned about human rights rather than human body. From this point of view, Mary constructed a teacher identity that was responsible for (1) "provid(ing) learners with information about our culture and actively learn(ing) more about theirs at the same time" and (2) "discuss(ing) cultural differences and gender roles." Clearly, Mary's meaning construction of teacher identity was contrary to that of Shirley, Freya, and Amy's, as she considered the nomenclature regarding third person voice reflected part of American culture and attitudes toward gender roles and therefore was worth discussing in the second language classroom.

In Mary's argument, however, it remained unclear in what ways and what exactly second language teachers should teach their ESL learners about the conventional use of third person pronoun in English grammar. Despite the indeterminacy, Mary significantly legitimized the correction of third person pronoun as a means of reaction to the conventional, value-laden language use in favor of male. Simply put, such correction was not and should not be considered "overcorrection".

While Mary's argument attempted to negotiate a standpoint of human rights as opposed to physical difference in addressing gender equity, it shaped Shirley's epistemic stance accordingly. This is evident in Shirley's follow-up posting as she stated, "For sure, I think men and women should have equal rights".

4.5 Excerpt 5

> For sure, I think men and women should have equal rights. Women are capable of doing many great things, and should have the freedom to pursue all possibilities. A classroom teacher can do much to promote equity in the classroom and show respect to all present, thus modeling a behavior that is to be desired. The idea that ESL teachers must be active advocates for social change against injustices of all kinds comes across very strongly from time to time in different courses and readings. We don't all go about it in the same way.
>
> (posted by Shirley, Message No. 581)

The phrase "for sure" indexed Shirley's degree of certainty and conviction as to Mary's proposition. In Shirley's initial posting, she considered the correction of third person pronoun to be redundant "e.g., we don't need to overcorrect anything" and implied that second language teachers should teach the conventional use of third person pronoun in English grammar. This epistemic stance was constitutive of teacher identity as transmitter of cultural-historical knowledge. Later in the discussion, Shirley shifted her epistemic stance to be in line with Mary's proposition, which helped construct teacher identity as "active advocates for social change against injustices". As Shirley noted, "A classroom teacher can do much to promote equity", the correction of third person pronoun was no longer considered as overreaction but one of many possible means to promote gender equity. Apparently, Shirley's shifting position reflects the negotiation of what role second language teachers play in promoting gender equity. It is noticeable that the teacher identity co-constructed so far was more of a collective identity of second language teachers as a whole with little attention to individual variations. Shirley's concluding remark "We don't all go about it in the same way" revealed her attitude toward the epistemic stance co-constructed in their discussion. It conveys a caution that to correct or not to correct is possibly a personal choice.

In addition to Shirley's shift of positioning (as shown in Excerpt 5), Freya also changed her initial standpoint as indicated in the following episode. Although her short comments "Well said Mary" and "Well said Shirley" did not elaborate on her thinking in detail, these expressions noticeably indexed acts of complimenting and agreeing which helped constitute an epistemic stance that was different as reflected from her initial argumentation (see

Excerpt 2).

4.6 Excerpt 6

> Well said Mary.
>
> (posted by Freya, Message No. 582)

4.7 Excerpt 7

> Well said Shirley.
>
> (posted by Freya, Message No. 583)

As noted earlier, while Shirley shifted her position to agree on Mary's proposition, she also brought up alternative thinking. To be more specific, in constructing the meaning of second language teachers, the interlocutors appeared to approach the role of second language teachers in promoting gender equity in dichotomy —to correct or not to correct third person pronoun and if such correction is overcorrection or legitimate correction. Shirley's argument in Excerpt 5 "We don't all go about it in the same way" opened up a third space that allowed for individual variations in the co-construction of the collective identity of second language teachers.

Shirley's proposition influenced Mary's initial epistemic stance, as Mary's statement "I don't know if it is possible for us to advocate on behalf of all injustices while being language instructors" indexed relative uncertainty and a re-consideration of second language teachers as advocates for social change, in particular "on behalf of all injustices".

4.8 Excerpt 8

> I agree, well said Shirley. I don't know if it is possible for us to advocate on behalf of all injustices while being language instructors. But I do think it's helpful to learn about and discuss these things. I think it will help prepare us for situations we will encounter with our diverse students.
>
> (posted by Mary, Message No. 585)

Although at the end no "right" answer to this inquiry was sought, Mary emphasized the value of their discussion as she noted "it will help prepare us for situations we will encounter with our diverse students". The emphatic stress "I do think" indexed the degree of her certainty in this matter.

At the end of this discussion thread, the interlocutors reached total agreement (e.g., "you are so right", "I agree") as shown in the following excerpt. Shirley also reiterated Mary's statement "it's helpful to learn about and discuss these things" in the paraphrase "it's good to learn about and discuss matters such as these" to reinforce her agreement with Mary. Shirley's concluding remark "We owe it to ourselves and our students" stressed the value of understanding the role of second language teachers in promoting gender equity (and social change)—it is, like Mary noted earlier "part of our responsibility", one that is constitutive of the identity of second language teachers.

4.9 Excerpt 9

> Mary, you are so right. You are good with words! I agree that it's good to learn about and discuss matters such as these. We owe it to ourselves and our students.
>
> (posted by Shirley, Message No. 595)

In short, the above discussion thread demonstrates how social identity as one situational dimension can be entailed by other situational dimensions (in particular, epistemic and affective stance) as components that help constitute the meaning of social identity (in this case, ESL teacher identity). This finding confirms Ochs' (1996) claim that epistemic and affective stance has a privileged role in the constitution of social identity. More

importantly, the excerpts discussed above provide evidence that the online interaction of the participants' reflective practice enabled them to co-construct ESL teacher identity, which contributed to their process of becoming theoretically and pedagogically informed language teachers. As evident in the participants' reflective practice online, their collective construction of ESL teacher identity was an interactional achievement that often involved negotiation of meaning. In the discussion on gender equity, the participants negotiated the legitimacy of correcting or not correcting third person pronouns in English grammar. Through linguistic indexing of epistemic and affective stance, their discussion entailed a negotiation of teacher identity as a culture transmitter or culture transformer. The participants exchanged their opinions to figure out what professional second language teachers do in the classroom. They were observed to learned from one another's experiences, thinking, and beliefs about what counted as "bad", "good," and "best" practices of teaching. It is significant to note that the construction of teacher identity that occurred in the interaction was not a unidirectional but dynamic process in which the each interlocutor was an active contributor whose reflective practice shapes and was shaped by others' reflective practice.

5. Conclusion

This study was carried out in the spirit of "reflective practice movement" in teacher education resulting from the growing interest in teacher learning (Sikula, Buttery & Guyton, 1996). Although the research was situated in the field of English language teaching, implications of the present study are relevant to teacher education in general.

One major implication reinforces the role of reflection in teacher education. This article argues that it is important to educate teacher-learners into reflective practitioners who constantly and critically reflect on their teaching for professional growth. Among various forms of reflective tasks, the article advocates the notion of reflection as a social practice and illustrates an implementation of reflective practice via the use of asynchronous discussion postings in an online learning community. As indicated by the research results, the participants' reflective practice online allowed for negotiation and co-construction of meaning in the community of practice. It appears that a higher level of interactivity establishes better interlocutory contexts that allow for learning to take place. Taking a step further, interactional reflective tasks enabled by Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as email, listserv, and online discussion forums, are expected to encourage the co-construction of teacher knowledge and professional identity and thus contribute to teacher learning. These claims, however, must be answered by more empirical studies on innovative reflective tasks with emphasis on the notion of reflection as a social practice.

Another implication concerns the view of teacher learning as a process of identity construction. The research proved that participation in an online community provided a space for co-construction of teacher identity, and more importantly, it served as early socialization into the teaching profession. The experience of participation in the online learning community was actually a process of socializing the teacher-learners into what it means to be professional teachers, i.e., coming to know what professional teachers know and learning to think, talk, and act the way professional teachers do. It follows that the potential of online learning community for fostering teacher-learners' professional identity development can't be overlooked. This thinking propels teacher educators to involve teacher-learners in learning community that allows for anytime learning and anywhere learning in a collaborative fashion. It is expected that teacher-learners in such communities of practice are empowered to share responsibility for their learning and collaboratively work toward a shared goal of mutual professional growth. If we accept the notion that teacher professional development begins as early as prospective teachers enter the journey of learning to teach and not after they graduate from teacher preparation programs, it is also critical for

teacher educators to identify better ways of reaching out to the broader community consisting of teacher professionals that transcends the boundaries of individual courses or teacher preparation programs. Learning communities enabled by information networks or web course systems appear to open up opportunities for enhancing teacher learning, but more research effort in this direction remains to be done.

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