



## Discovering Aspects of Teacher Identity Through Volunteering in the Noncredit ESL Classroom

As many scholars in the field of TESOL (Danielewicz, 2001; Harlow & Cobb, 2014; Kanno & Stuart, 2011) point out, the development of teacher identity is an ongoing, multifaceted process. Thus, quite frequently, novice teachers feel as though they take on a role when they are in the classroom, as opposed to fully embodying an identity of a teacher. This article chronicles my experience as a MA TESOL student at San Francisco State University (SFSU) during my participation in a volunteer organization called Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders). Project SHINE places student volunteers in ESL classrooms in the local community college and provides the opportunity for novice teachers to gain valuable classroom experience, to engage with professionals in the field, and to work closely with ESL students. Project SHINE has served as a practicum experience during my 1st year as a MA TESOL student and has become an integral part of my growth as a teacher. Through volunteering in the ESL classroom, I have had the opportunity to make discoveries about aspects of my personality that contribute to my identity as an emerging professional in the TESOL field.

### Introduction

This article chronicles my experience as a MA TESOL student at San Francisco State University (SFSU) during my participation in a volunteer organization called Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders). This volunteer program, which places MA TESOL students in noncredit ESL classrooms at a local community college, supplements the MA program at SFSU by providing the opportunity for novice teachers in their first semester/

year to gain valuable classroom experience, to engage with professionals in the field, and to work closely with ESL students. I volunteered with Project SHINE during my first year in the MA TESOL program, first in an intermediate-level class, then at the literacy level. Through volunteering with this organization, I have had the opportunity to make discoveries about my identity as an emerging professional in the TESOL field. Project SHINE has served as a practicum experience during my first year in the MA program and has become an integral part of my growth as a teacher.

### **First Experiences in the ESL Classroom**

Because I did not have prior teaching experience in an ESL classroom setting, the first few days of being a Project SHINE volunteer were especially salient in shaping my ideas surrounding what it means to be an ESL teacher. Before the official start day of volunteering as a SHINE coach in the ESL classroom for the first time, I visited the campus where my assigned ESL class was to be held. Once there, I figured out where the classroom was and then stealthily walked passed it, just to have a peek. I wanted to preview the context, classroom, teacher, and student population in which I would soon be participating. I was eager to begin being in an ESL class on a regular basis. Although excited, I was also nervous. This visit to the campus to find my ESL class helped calm my nerves in one regard: I knew exactly where to go on the first day. On the other hand, it made me slightly more nervous because I saw the classroom packed full of students and I knew that I would soon be standing in front of them.

When it was time for my first day of coaching, I remember arriving to campus filled with butterflies in my stomach yet also very excited. I walked to the classroom. The door was closed and the students stood outside. I stood with them. At six feet tall with blond hair and blue eyes, I did not fit the typical student demographic at this particular campus. They looked at me and I could tell by the looks on their faces that they were curious as to why I was there. I was clearly new to the scene. I wondered if they assumed that I was a new student or if they thought I was a substitute teacher. As the start time of class approached, a teacher arrived at our classroom. He unlocked the door and we went inside. This was not the teacher whom I had seen during my classroom investigation the prior week. I introduced myself and he explained that the professor who usually teaches the class was absent and that he was the substitute.

I stood with the substitute while the students took their seats. When he asked me if I knew what the students had been studying, I was surprised. I expected there to be a clear plan for the day; I thought

that the professor who normally teaches the class would have provided the substitute with clear instructions. I explained that it was my first day with the class so I was uncertain about what they had been studying. The substitute remained calm, which seemed very odd to me at the time. How was he not concerned without a plan? I soon found out. The substitute explained to me that this particular situation happens frequently and that they as teachers often have to make up lessons as they go along. So, he turned to the students in the class and asked what page they were on in their workbooks. Although students gave different responses, the substitute settled on a page in the workbook and began formulating his lesson plan from there. I observed him as he formulated a plan for the class based solely on the brief information he had received from the students. This day provided me with my first two lessons about teaching: Expect the unexpected and be ready to improvise.

### **Personal Traits That Contribute to My Emerging Teacher Identity**

The following section highlights experiences while volunteering in the ESL classroom that have turned into what I call my personal teacher-identity lessons. These moments have helped me to realize aspects of my own personality that are key components to my emerging identity as a teacher.

#### ***Confidence***

In general, I am a confident person. Yet when I stand in front of a new class to teach part of a lesson, I become slightly nervous. A very wise professor who taught in my MA TESOL program once told our class, “You don’t have to be confident to act confident.” I keep this in mind when I volunteer in ESL classrooms. If one of my mentor teachers asks me to conduct a section of the lesson, even if I am uncertain about how to go about it or what the outcome will be, I remember that as long as I act confident, my students will most likely not be able to tell I am nervous. For example, during a lesson about family, one of my mentor teachers asked me to conduct a dictation. She did not have any sentences preassigned for the dictation; she asked me to make them up on the spot. Because of one of my first lessons in the ESL classroom (be ready to improvise), I was not surprised by this request.

I thought of sentences one at a time as I stood in front of the class. As I spoke, even though I internally questioned whether the sentences were too challenging or too easy, I stated my sentences with confidence. This allowed me to take control of the classroom as a teacher. Even if I do make a mistake during a dictation or during any time when

I am responsible for part of a lesson, it is not the end of the world. I have learned to recover from mistakes and to learn from them. I have also learned that it helps to have a sense of humor in times of missteps. Laughter has the ability to spread to students in the best ways possible; it can build solidarity between students and teacher. Therefore, when I am in the classroom, I carry myself with confidence and am not afraid to laugh, two traits that have become part of my identity as a teacher.

### ***Resourcefulness***

I am still amazed at the drawing ability of my first mentor teacher with Project SHINE. Her artistry with a whiteboard marker was remarkable. I remember how, during one of my first weeks of volunteering in her class, she drew a near life-size young boy on the whiteboard so that the class could practice saying parts of the body. Granted, not every teacher has the capability to draw realistic pictures, but we all have talents or skills that can be incorporated into the classroom. Another one of my mentor teachers enjoys singing, so she incorporates simple songs in her literacy classes, which has proven to be enjoyable for not only her, but for the students as well. For example, when she taught the days of the week, she sang them. Some of the students knew the song already, so they joined in, while others learned it for the first time. The simple act of singing uplifted the students and built a sense of community within the classroom.

Furthermore, the ability to be resourceful can come in many forms. Not all teachers will have a whiteboard, or a projector, or the ability to play songs from the Internet. Thus, circling back to one of my first lessons regarding improvisation, the ability to use what is at one's disposal is especially helpful. For example, when I worked with a small group of literacy students outside the classroom during my second semester with Project SHINE, the only physical tools I had were a pen and paper. However, I discovered that my body and my voice were even more useful tools that I used to mime, act, and make sound effects that served as modes of teaching and of communication. Especially at the literacy level, I found these methods to be extremely useful. When practicing writing, a student at the literacy level may not understand my directions if I say, "This letter is too big; please make it smaller." But if I mime the letter being very big by widening my eyes and stretching out my arms and then use my hands, coupled with a sound effect, to mimic shrinking, I have found that the students generally comprehend what I am asking of them (to make the letter smaller). Therefore, to be resourceful I have learned to go with what I know, try out new ideas, and also be willing to adopt other forms of teaching that I encounter or observe.

### **On the Path to Assuming a Teacher Identity**

Although I am beginning to discover aspects of my identity as a teacher, I still believe that it will take time before I fully embrace the identity of being a teacher. Scholars in the field of education, such as Danielewicz (2001), Harlow and Cobb (2014), and Kanno and Stuart (2011), acknowledge the development of teacher identity as an ongoing process. Kanno and Stuart stress the challenge that novice teachers face in adopting the identity of a teacher. These two researchers found that novice teachers in the beginning of their practicum “were playing the role of a teacher rather than internalizing the identity of a teacher” (Kanno & Stuart, 2011, p. 245). In other words, they did not feel like real teachers. I felt similarly when I first began volunteering with Project SHINE. My first mentor teacher often gave me opportunities to conduct sections of her lessons. Although I was enthusiastic and confident when I stood in front of the class to teach, I often felt as though I was taking on a momentary teacher role—one that began when I physically stood in front of the class and one that ended when I finished and walked to the back of the classroom. Especially during my first semester of volunteering, after I left the classroom I felt as though I stepped out of the role of a teacher and back into the role of a student. It was as though my identity as a teacher was constrained by being physically present in the ESL classroom. This leads to a question, one that scholars such as Kanno and Stuart (2011) have pondered and one that I have mulled over myself: How does the novice teacher actually assume the identity of a teacher?

Kanno and Stuart (2011) imply that this question is a difficult one to answer and that it remains a topic for further inquiry. What is known is that “the development of teacher identity is a complex, difficult and contextually based process that can occur over time” (Harlow & Cobb, 2014, p. 71). The dynamic aspect of teacher identity development can, in part, be accounted for by social factors. As highlighted by Danielewicz (2001), coming to embody a specific identity is not an individual process conducted in isolation; rather it “involves others, especially groups or collectives connected to social institutions as well as the discourses associated with them” (p. 35). Similarly, Harlow and Cobb (2014) bring in the notion of communities of practice as central to identity development: “Through interactions with others in the school context that teacher identity is formed, influenced and reshaped through continuous interactions within a community of practice” (p. 71).

My experience has been that my fellow volunteers with Project SHINE, the teacher and students of the classes that I volunteered in, and my classmates in my MA TESOL program have formed com-

munities of practice that have allowed me to reflect upon and share my experiences, which has in turn facilitated my growth as a novice teacher.

Kanno and Stuart (2011) emphasize the importance that practical teaching experience has on the development of teacher identity. The authors state that “the actual experience of teaching is what enables student teachers to make a transition from aspiring to become a language teacher to actually being one” (p. 239). While my volunteer experience with Project SHINE was not one in which I practiced teaching for the full duration of the class, the opportunities that I had to teach parts of the lessons have added to my experience of teaching. Although at the end of one year of coaching with Project SHINE I still do not feel entirely like a teacher, I do feel that my identity is becoming more teacherlike. This can likely be attributed to not only time spent in the ESL classroom practicing teaching, but to time spent actively reflecting upon and discussing my classroom experiences with my mentor teachers, professors, and classmates. When I compare how I felt my first few days in the ESL classroom to how I feel in the classroom today, I sense a noticeable difference in the way I feel about being a teacher. My identity as a teacher is not so confined to the physical ESL classroom; rather it is something that I am beginning to carry with me in my daily life.

In sum, my experience thus far of teacher identity development exemplifies the point that identity is not finite or fixed. As stated by Danielewicz (2001), “An identity is never fully or finally achieved; we are always actively being and becoming” (p. 35). Therefore, even once the identity of being a teacher is eventually taken on, this identity is not complete; it will still shift, change, and grow over time. Personally, I view my current novice teacher identity as being constantly built upon. By taking more TESOL classes, reflecting on my ESL classroom experience more deeply, and observing mentor teachers more often, I further realize and grow existing parts of my teacher identity. Furthermore, while practicing teaching in ESL classrooms, I have discovered aspects of my own personality that are starting to become part of my teacher identity. While I still somewhat feel that I am taking on a role when I stand in front of an ESL class, I do sense that I am moving toward having an identity of a teacher.

### **Conclusion**

Identity is not black or white nor is it stagnant. Identity is evolving and process based, existing on a continuum of growth. For novice teachers, to fully embody the identity of a teacher can be a challenging developmental process. Thus, it is not surprising that many novice

teachers often feel as though they play the role of a teacher rather than feeling that they *are* a teacher. I, too, feel this way and recognize that my identity as a teacher is in a phase of development. My participation in Project SHINE has allowed me to observe mentor teachers, practice being confident and resourceful, and try new teaching methods. Overall, my volunteer experience in the noncredit ESL classroom has provided me with opportunities to discover what aspects of my personality can be employed to teach English and has ultimately served as a springboard to my emerging identity as a teacher.

### **Author**

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