



Professional Development as Academic Apprenticeship: Moving From Outsider to Voice of Authority

Drawing on the author's experience as both a graduate student and ESL practitioner, this article explores the process of taking on a voice of authority within a new discourse. The author reflects on her own struggles with authorship in the professional discourse community of TESOL, and she uses these experiences to illuminate the struggles of her ESL students with authorship in the academic genre. It is suggested that for graduate students or ESL students to become authors in their target discourses, they must be able to use that language for authentic communication.

Introduction

Last year, I flew across the country to present at my first national conference. As I began my preparation in the months prior, I became increasingly anxious. The anxiety wasn't akin to stage fright or a fear of public speaking, but rather it was a new feeling I could not quite name. I stared out the window of my airplane wondering what new information a graduate student could offer to seasoned TESOL professionals and if I had enough expertise on my topic to be taken seriously. A few of my peers were also first-time presenters, but they appeared so confident that I initially kept my insecurities to myself. I later learned, however, that my peers who were presenting, and even those who were not, confronted these kinds of fears. This realization led me to question if new teachers hesitate to publicly share their ideas because of fears around adopting an authoritative professional voice in the field.

This reflection triggered a connection between the challenges graduate students face and the challenges ESL practitioners help their students overcome. I now teach ESL at the university level. Many of my students are multilingual speakers and some are Generation 1.5, a group historically defined as immigrants whose traits and experiences lie somewhere between those associated with the first and second generation (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Many of my students have high proficiency in spoken, colloquial English, so classroom instruction mainly focuses on written, academic language. Through my dual perspective of graduate student and practitioner, I noticed parallels between my struggle to acquire a professional voice and my students' struggle to acquire

academic voices. In this paper I will address why new discourses pose such a challenge for both the ESL student entering the university and the graduate student entering the professional world. I will explore my processes in overcoming these challenges and the implications this experience has for students seeking to enter the academy or to enter the professional TESOL community.

Locked Out of the Parlor

For students acquiring academic discourse, this challenge includes not only mastering English, but also understanding the cultural expectations surrounding this particular way of using English, or “the nature of academic tasks and the abstract use of language under university-based conditions of knowledge construction” (Thesen, 1997, p. 491). One significant expectation of academic language that poses particular problems for new learners of academic English is how to express themselves with authority. Blanton (2008) suggests that many students resort to formula-based writing, such as the five-paragraph essay, as an attempt to adopt a traditional academic voice in a language they are still struggling to acquire.

Another layer of difficulty these students face in taking on an academic discourse is a feeling of outsidership, not only because they do not know the language and conventions, but also because many of them have been positioned as outsiders in their educational pasts. Labels such as *at-risk*, *remedial*, *basic*, and even *ESL* can act as barriers to students’ acquisition of academic discourse because these labels position them outside the academic culture that exists at a university or college. In describing the nature of this difficulty in our conference presentation, my colleagues and I referenced Kenneth Burke’s “unending conversation” metaphor that paints the world of academia as a parlor in which a heated discussion is taking place. Burke’s parlor is meant to represent the joy of entering one’s voice into the greater academic conversation: A new scholar enters and listens “until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar” (1941, pp. 110-111). My copresenters and I argued in our conference presentation that this “parlor” is inaccessible to many of our students because they are unable to properly use the academic language needed to enter the “unending conversation”; they are effectively “locked out of the parlor.”

To become users of the new target discourse—to enter this great conversation—these students must not only learn new discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax, but they must also undergo initiation into a new culture filled with experts who may or may not accept them. Gee (as cited in Eyman, 2007) names such discourses with a capital D and describes them as “identity kits” that can be learned only through “scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse” (p. 193). These academic “identity kits” cannot simply be imparted to those wishing to use them, but rather they must be acquired through trial and error and through interaction with the existing community of users, or that *discourse community*.

Just as my students must find their way into the Burkian parlor of academic discourse, graduate students must also learn the professional discourse of TE-

SOL to put their oar into the greater conversation of the field. However, these discourse communities can often feel intimidating and exclusive to new members. Both students learning academic discourse and graduate students learning professional discourse need the opportunity to use these new discourses for real communication with preexisting members. Thus, new members need mentors to encourage and support them through acquiring new discourses. To better fulfill my role as a mentor and teacher, I first examine my own experience learning how to use the professional discourse of TESOL.

Becoming an Insider

Completing a graduate program in the field is ideally one path to membership in a new professional community. Graduation from my MA TESOL program marked a significant milestone in my professional development, but it did not translate to a full sense of membership. In reality, the process of developing a voice of authority to access and contribute to a discourse community is complex and recursive. I am an active participant within the TESOL community and ready to share my ideas, but at times I am daunted by how much I can still learn. I am *trying on* the discourse and exploring authorship within it.

The first significant step toward this authorship was pushing against insecurity and putting my ideas forward publicly at the conference referenced in the introduction. In spite of our doubts, my group gave our presentation confidently to an attentive and engaged audience who asked relevant questions at the end. In short, we were received as professionals. While this experience did not eliminate my concerns about using my voice in the professional sphere, it did cause me to reevaluate my initial fears. As graduate students we may not have read every article relevant to our topic and may not be the first to present these ideas, but we too have a responsibility to push the field forward with our unique voices and new perspectives and to share ideas within our local professional communities. Perhaps *our* audiences can still learn something from our perspectives.

This presentation instilled me with confidence in my professional voice in a way that a successfully led seminar or well-written term paper could not have done. In exploring possible reasons behind this change, I realized that this experience had a greater impact on my professional development because I was not just a graduate student doing well on an assignment but also a contributing member of a greater professional dialogue.

Professionals in my field attended and stayed for my presentation based on genuine interest in my topic and desire to learn from what I had to say. This realization made my sense of contribution very real. New learners of academic English require this same sense of authentic communication to move from being outsiders to new members within the academic community. For ideas to feel like contributions, both new learners of academic discourse and new learners of professional discourse must come to understand that writing and presenting are essentially social acts, and that they are not used only to complete class assignments and make good grades, but also to communicate and contribute ideas to a larger audience.

Implications

In the process of moving from outsider to voice of authority, I had to learn the language of my discipline as an act of communication rather than simply an act of proving my knowledge to my professors. This idea is deeply rooted in my teaching philosophy: I believe that for my students to become members of the academic discourse community they must first understand that such a community exists. To accomplish this, teachers should encourage them to see themselves as apprentices within this vast community of language users and create real communication opportunities in which students can engage with audiences other than just the teacher. Examples of practices that can achieve this are writing assignments such as online forums or blog posts, letters to the editor, online movie or restaurant reviews, or even something as simple as a journal that students pass to other peers for response. Teachers can require students to write assignments with a specific publication in mind, or make everyday out-of-class writing, such as résumés or formal e-mails, into class assignments. Students undergo a complicated and difficult process when entering a new discourse. They face affective variables such as self-doubt and insecurity in addition to the expected challenges of learning a different language. Teachers need to find ways to engage students in this process as part of apprenticing them to academic discourse.

New TESOL professionals also need this type of support and mentoring. I have begun to acquire a professional voice and form a professional identity mostly through real exchange of ideas and communication with other members of the field, and I have done this mostly through professional-development opportunities that I sought out on my own in spite of challenging circumstances. My ultimate growth through participating in professional activities with a variety of members from the field, and my initial hesitancy to do so, convinces me that new members in the field of TESOL need more programmatic support to access professional-development opportunities.

Conclusion

As I headed home from my first professional conference, I opened my laptop to complete a learning-log assignment about the conference experience for one of my graduate classes. I began by reflecting on my initial insecurities and the strange shift that occurred in the way I regarded professional development in my field. The self-doubts that consumed me before the conference existed now in a different way. Self-doubt was no longer my focus. Instead I focused on the conversations I had had at the conference with other practicing teachers, professors, researchers, administrators, publishers—and I found myself consumed with continuing this conversation that I suddenly found myself a part of.

As a graduate student transitioning to practitioner, I have struggled and continue to struggle to find my voice and identity as a TESOL professional. My first professional conference was a transformative experience that taught me about how one becomes a member of a new discourse community. This lesson has made me both a better and more empathetic teacher and a more determined and confident new professional in the TESOL field.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the colleagues who struggled through the process of becoming professionals with me and continue to contribute to both my philosophy and practice of teaching.

Author

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