Student Perspectives of Peer Assessment for Learning in a Public Speaking Course

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Abstract
This peer assessment (PA) case study was conducted to determine student feelings about a student-centered assessment procedure, and whether it was useful in promoting effective learning. Set in a Public Speaking course at a Tokyo university, this paper reports on a PA framework in which 30% of students' final course grades were comprised of peer assessment scores of oral presentations. The course contained 55 third-year female students, in two classes. Data collected and analyzed included completed PA rating sheets for two presentations by each student, and a student survey at the end of the course. Based on survey responses, student perspectives on using peer assessment were positive, on the whole, and the process did indeed lead to the promotion of student learning. The analysis also determined that student views expressed are often congruent with views in the PA literature, despite the particular context of this investigation.

Key Words: peer assessment, assessment for learning, formative and summative assessment purposes

Introduction

The student point of view matters because of its affect on learning. From the students' point of view, classroom assessment information is not merely information 'about' himself or herself. Rather, it forms a major part of his or her learning life, becoming part of the lessons he or she is expected to learn, the relationship she or he has with the teacher and the subject matter, and relationships with peers (Brookhart, 2003, p. 6).

Teacher decision-making with regard to assessment frameworks they use in their courses can be hugely influential in the degree of student engagement with the subject

matter and the degree of student learning which results. While assessment practices can have a profound impact on learning, most assessment is implemented with little or no input from the students themselves (Stefani, 1998). The practice of peer assessment (PA) has been recognized as having possibly enormous benefits in terms of learning gain, and is increasingly being used in higher education to involve students more actively in the assessment process (Race, Brown & Smith, 2005).

Peer assessment (PA) has been defined as "an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status" (Topping, 1998, p. 250). Use of a PA component in a course assessment diet can promote student involvement, responsibility and excellence, establish clearer course frameworks, focus attention on skills and learning, and provide increased feedback (Weaver & Cottrell, 1986). PA has a vital role to play in formative assessment by involving students in judging the work of their colleagues, and, with careful implementation, can also be used as a component in summative assessment. In addition to being a way of assessing the products of student learning, PA can also be seen as a process of learning in its own right. While these ideas about the positive role PA can play in classroom assessment are well-known, less is known regarding student perspectives of assessing and being assessed by peers.

Case studies enable researchers to investigate a specific setting and its participants in context (Gay & Airasian, 2003). The investigation reported here focuses on student views of a PA framework used within the particular context of a Public Speaking course, called Effective Public Speaking (EPS), at Tokyo Woman's Christian University. In this case study, peer assessment scores for oral presentations were aggregated into students' overall grades for the course, making up 30% of their final grade. The purpose of this investigation is to explore tertiary EFL students' perceptions of PA, and its impact on students' experience of learning. Primarily based on student responses to an end-of-course PA survey, the case study focuses on two key questions:

1. How do students feel about peer assessment, particularly the framework implemented in this Public Speaking course?

2. Do students feel that the PA process (scoring peer presentations, giving/receiving peer feedback) was helpful in their learning to become more effective public speakers?

A student presentation in front of a group of peers is a public performance - a showing of skill or talent before an audience. The evaluation of student presentations is a form of *performance-based assessment*, one in which students perform a task and show specific skills and competencies (Stiggins, 1987). In this case study, this involves the students demonstrating to an audience their understanding and application of the knowledge and skills of effective public speaking. Basturk (2008) writes that in performance assessments the role of the students in the assessment process is changed from being passive learners to active participants, and notes that it "allows instruction and assessment to be woven together in a way that more traditional approaches fail to accomplish" (p. 13).

PA and Assessment for Learning

The potential for PA to promote students' learning has a key place in the ideas associated with assessment for learning (AfL), or assessment used for formative purposes. In classroom assessment *for* student learning, the assessment process and its results are turned into instructional interventions which are designed to increase, not just monitor, student learning, motivation and confidence (Stiggins, 2008). In AfL, peer assessment is considered 'uniquely valuable' because it motivates students to be more careful in the work they do, it amplifies the student voice in the learning process, and their learning is improved (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003). PA is also a valuable assessment for learning procedure because student learning is promoted as they take on the roles of teachers and examiners of each other, and students find it easier to make sense of assessment criteria if they examine the work of other students alongside their own (Black & Wiliam, 2006).

Black et al. (2003) warn that this learner-centered mode of assessment will only thrive if students are helped by teachers to develop peer assessment skills. They also make the point that "the ultimate aim of peer (and self) assessment is not that students can give each other levels and grades-these are merely a means to an end . . . the real purpose-the identification of learning needs and the means of improvement" (p. 62). A similar idea is

captured in the simple phrase '*learning by assessing*' (Toppings, 1998, p. 254). Yet, in this case study, as often happens, such formative assessment practices as peer-assessment also must contend with the summative assessment realities that exist.

Formative and Summative tensions

While summative assessment (assessment *of* learning) summarizes what students have learnt at the end of a period of instruction, formative assessments (assessment *for* learning) are ongoing and occur concurrently with instruction to provide feedback to both teachers and students and serve the purpose of guiding teaching and learning (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005). PA is considered a key formative practice, one which students are "in the process of forming their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them continue that growth process" (Brown, 2004, p. 6).

However, in this case study, peer assessment also serves a summative purpose by aggregating student-generated scores of their peers' performances into final course grades. Because marks and grades may be viewed as threats to valid formative assessment, summative assessment purposes can distort or cancel out any learning benefits for students (Stobart, 2006). Noonan and Duncan (2005) assert that "based on principles of assessment for learning and formative assessment, it seems that the use of peer-and self-assessment ought to be limited and not used in summative student assessment" (p. 6). Limited, yes, but PA does not have to be excluded from summative use. If students learn from them, summative assessments can act formatively (Yorke, 2003). In his review of the PA literature Topping (1998) concluded that studies suggest that feedback of even a simple quantitative nature can result in positive formative affects with regard to improved scores/grades and students subjective perceptions. In their discussion of the potential for assessment to enhance learning, Kennedy, Kin Sang, Wai-ming and Kwan Fok (2006) write:

> Whatever the purpose, there is no reason to prevent these summaries of learning
> at a point in time from abiding by the principles of formative assessment and
> assessment for learning. That is, these assessments can be used as feedback to
> help students move from where they are to where they need to be and they can
> be designed in ways that reflect the principles of assessment for learning (p. 8).

The PA framework discussed in this case study was intended to serve the dual role of using assessment as a formative learning tool as well as a summative measuring instrument.

Literature Review

An extensive body of research related to the study of PA exists, and a number of reviews and analyses of PA are available (see, for example, Topping 1998; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002; Bloxham & West, 2004; Deakin-Crick, Sebba, Harlen, Guoxing & Lawson, 2005). Most PA literature is focused on two issues in a particular: evaluating student contributions to group assignments or the reliability and validity of such types of assessment (Ballantyne et al., 2002).

Student perceptions and experiences with peer-assessment have been little reported in the extensive PA literature. At the turn of the century, Hanrahan and Issacs (2001) noted that there is little in the published literature on how PA and self-assessment are viewed by students, and called for further investigations across subject areas noting that the case-based literature on PA is "still alarmingly sparse" (p. 67). While PA has been identified as a key element in formative assessment, there is little research showing the extent to which teachers' classroom practices utilize this student-centered strategy (Noonan & Duncan, 2005). More recently, the call for further research of student views of PA is echoed in Vu and Alba (2007). Otoshi and Heffernan (2008) note that, with regard to ESL/EFL contexts, PA has not been well-researched, with most of the work having been done in peer assessment of writing.

This review of previous PA research will: 1) briefly summarize literature findings of teacher and student views of using PA, 2) address the issue of using PA scores for summative purposes, and 3) present, in chronological fashion, some relevant research related to the primary issue of this case study - student perspectives of PA.

Brief overview of teacher/student views on PA

Using a criterion of desired performance, peer assessment requires that students closely scrutinize the work of their peers (Vu & Alba, 2007). From the teachers' perspective,

some of the main advantages and disadvantages of using PA that have been identified and described in the peer assessment literature are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. *Potential advantages and disadvantages of PA*

Advantages
1. Helps students to become more autonomous, responsible and involved
2. Encourages students to critically analyze work done by others, rather than simply seeing a mark
3. Helps clarify assessment criteria
4. Gives students a wider range of feedback
5. More closely parallels possible career situations where judgment is made by a group
6. Reduces the marking load on the lecturer
7. Several groups can be run at once as not all groups require the lecturer's presence

Disadvantages
1. Students may lack the ability to evaluate each other
2. Students may not take it seriously, allowing friendships, entertainment value, et cetera, to influence their marking
3. Students may not like peer marking because of the possibility of being discriminated against, being misunderstood, et cetera
4. Without lecturer intervention, students may misinform each other
(Peer Assessment, 2007, University of Technology Sydney)

In his state of the art review of 31 PA studies, Topping (1998) contends that PA is well worth using despite the pitfalls and any difficulties experienced with assessment quality. This is because these potential drawbacks are compensated for by the greater frequency, volume and immediacy of the feedback provided by peers, compared to what the instructor alone can produce.

In their review of student perceptions of assessment in higher education, Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) noted that students hold strong views about assessment methods and that these perceptions play a significant role in how they approach learning. Student concerns about PA that have been identified in the literature include such things as: students being aware of their own shortcomings in subject areas; having doubts about their own objectivity; feeling the PA process to be unfair; the social effects of PA, such

as friendship or hostility; and the view that it is the teachers' 'job' to assess (Cheng & Warren, 1997; Falchikov, 2003).

Using peer assessment for summative grading

While there is general agreement on the potential value of PA to promote learning, the issue of whether peer assessments should form a significant part of student grades is much more contentious (Magin & Helmore, 2001). Table 2 provides a useful summary of the arguments presented in the literature on both sides of the issue.

Table 2. *Arguments for and against the use of PA for summative grades*

Arguments <u>against</u> using PA as part of summative grades
1. This practice could compromise the main pedagogical intention of PA
2. Peer assessments are too inaccurate for such purposes
3. Reliability and validity concerns (for example, students are 'poor judges' of effective communication skills, the potential for bias to influence students marking, variability of marking standards used by peer assessors)
4. The need for universities to have confidence in their assessment practices as these are used for high- stakes certification purposes (and therefore not relying on inexperienced assessors)
Arguments <u>supporting</u> using PA as part of summative grades
1. Knowing that peer grades will 'count' towards final grades will have the washback effect of promoting greater seriousness and commitment from students
2. PA used only formatively may not be taken seriously by students
3. This practice will help develop student autonomy and empower students to make judgments that count
4. While in some contexts fair and valid peer assessments may be difficult to obtain, in other assessment contexts such impediments are minimal or can be overcome
5. It may be possible that assessments based on peer ratings are superior to solely teacher assessments (for example, in oral presentations and communicating to an audience)

(from Magin & Helmore, 2001)

There are valid arguments for both sides of this question, a reflection of the complexity often associated with assessment issues. In this case study, I decided that PA would play a significant summative role, finding more convincing the argument supporting the inclusion of peer scores into the final grade, and concurring with the views expressed by Vu and Alba (2007):

> If peer assessment excludes assigning marks, however, its positive impact on student learning and development is restricted. The act of marking demands that students take greater responsibility, as they are required to base their judgments on thorough examination of the quality of their peers' work. Thus they are more likely to gain deeper understanding of the subject matter (p. 543).

Addressing the issue of making PA marks meaningful, Race et al. (2005) note the view held by some that PA is only suitable for feedback purposes, but they also advocate that PA should account for something, even if it is a small part of the final grade, if students are to take it seriously. In this case study, it was hoped that making peer scores part of the final grade would encourage students to take PA more seriously and more carefully, and subsequently lead to the promotion of learning about the course content and objectives - 'learning by assessing'.

Student perceptions of peer assessment

In his review of peer assessment in tertiary settings, Topping (1998) briefly reports a sampling of student views about PA expressed in the literature. On the positive side these include fairness (being assessed by more people) and the formative usefulness of detailed peer feedback. On the other hand, students expressed a dislike for possible social embarrassment (especially concerning identifying weaknesses in the work of peers) and the fact that PA may be cognitively challenging and straining for students. Hanrahan and Issacs (2001) reported on tertiary students perceptions of self and peer assessment in a health psychology course. Student questionnaire responses about PA included such themes as: motivation to impress peers, difficulties with being objective, discomfort with peers judging work, and gaining a better understanding of marking procedures through PA. Hanrahan and Issacs (2001) reported the generally positive affects peer assessment has on students learning, despite any negative views expressed by individual students.

An important PA study which focused on student perceptions of the process was conducted by Ballantyne, et al. (2002). The authors investigated the implementation of PA in large classes, and they concluded that while there are a number of specific difficulties associated with using PA with larger classes, the learning benefits for students of being involved with PA outweigh any of these drawbacks. Their large study (involving completed questionnaires from 939 students in a variety of classes) conducted at the University of Technology, Australia, obtained a wealth of information about student views of various PA procedures implemented. Their research reported what students liked and disliked about being part of PA. On the positive side, this included such things as: students felt that PA encouraged them to compare and reflect on their own work; it gave them the opportunity to develop skills useful for future employment. The things students disliked about PA included: questioning peers competency in marking; issues of fairness (feelings that peers were either easy or hard markers); and large numbers of students felt PA was too time-consuming. Ballantyne et. al., (2002) also address the issue of using PA marks for grading purposes. They suggest that "a 'reasonable' number of marks (10-15% of the total) be allocated to student performance in the peer assessment process, as it may boost student engagement and commitment to the task" (p. 435). They also highlight the fact that the clear articulation of assessment criteria is of paramount importance and should be a fundamental aspect of the PA process.

McLaughlin and Simpson (2004) described how first year university students felt about peer assessment. Working in a context of a construction management course, the PA model implemented asked students to assess the group work of their peers. McLaughlin and Simpson (2004) found that in this PA model trialed with freshmen, students were overwhelmingly supportive of the process and viewed PA as a very positive assessment experience. Students perspectives about the PA model used showed they felt they had learned a great deal, enjoyed assessing peers' work and a significant portion (43%) preferred PA to lecturer only assessment. Reflecting a fundamental idea of AfL, McLaughlin and Simpson (2004) stress the idea that "the assessment process needs to be a learning tool" (p.136).

An investigation of peer assessment with sports studies students in the U.K., was conducted by Bloxham and West (2004). In order to encourage students to carry out PA

seriously, they awarded 25% of their assignment marks for the quality of peer marking. These researchers noted that actively engaging with the assessment criteria while marking peers is beneficial for assessors in understanding how their own work will be assessed. Bloxham and West (2004) found that with regard to the experience of assessing, and being assessed by peers, two-thirds of students were positive while one-third expressed some disquiet. Some students felt that peer marking resulted in higher or lower grades depending on whether peers were generous or mean assessors. Overall, however, Bloxham and West (2004) concluded that students saw peer assessment as a positive experience that aided in their understanding of the assessment process.

Nigel and Pope (2005) focused on the impact of stress in peer (and self) assessment. They explained that course requirements for students to assess their peers, who will also assess them, can be stress-creating for students. The stress may be caused by inexperience with PA, the fear of hurting someone, or being hurt by someone. Researching in the context of PA of group projects an undergraduate research methods class, Nigel and Pope (2005) found that peer assessment was more stressful for students but did in fact lead to improved performance in summative tasks.

Longman and 10 associates (2005) specifically focused on the peer assessment of oral presentations. They compared marks awarded by both students and tutors in environmental or biological courses in the UK. Longman et al. (2005) write: "There seems to be consent that a firm understanding of the assessment criteria, within a study of high design quality, appears to be associated with greater validity of peer assessment" (p. 23). Also, because the teacher is required to manage 'a group of mostly inexperienced assessors' PA is more complex and demanding. Longman et al. (2005) concluded that the benefits of PA outweighed any differences between peer and tutor marks. They felt that "the benefits of learner inclusion and the active dimensions of this scheme (e.g. learner empowerment, assessment experience, better understanding of assessment criteria) merit its inclusion in future courses" (p. 31). However they end their article by cautioning that, due to the possibility of bias in PA, there is some doubt as to whether student marks should be used for other than formative purposes.

Wen and Tsai (2006) investigated the views of university students in Taiwan towards peer assessment, particularly the on-line variety. The authors noted that in similar studies

students generally showed a liking for PA as it enabled them to compare work with classmates, but students were less appreciative of being criticized by peers and expressed a lack of self-confidence to peer assess classmates. Analysis of the student questionnaires in their study led Wen and Tsai (2006) to conclude that, in general, university students had positive attitudes towards PA activities.

Vu and Alba (2007) described students' experience of PA in a professional course at an Australian university. Students peer assessed a viva voce course component, which consisted of a student interview with the teacher. The PA component was planned and structured so as to "both evaluate and promote student learning" (Vu & Alba, 2007, p. 545). The authors reported that in their case study, PA had a positive affect on students' learning experiences with most students acknowledging learning from both the process and from their peers. An exploration of the power of PA to promote learning in other settings was also called for.

Papinczak, Young and Groves (2007) reported a qualitative study of PA in problem-based learning with freshman medical students at an Australian university. Students in this study took a much more critical view of assessment by peers. In their study the authors noted a widespread view among students that PA could be corrupted because of bias due to lack of honesty or friendship marking.

As a whole, the literature that deals with student perceptions of PA report that students see the positive benefits of having it part of a courses' assessment framework and the impact it can have on their learning. Student awareness of the potential disadvantages of PA use is also evident in the literature, and, at times a dislike of doing or receiving peer assessment. A review of the literature did not uncover any reports similar to the context of this case study, student perceptions of peer assessment of oral presentations in an EFL context.

This case study report takes up the call for additional PA research from Vu and Alba (2007), and investigates PA in the setting of a Public Speaking course at a Japanese university. Following their example, the PA process discussed here was also designed and structured to both promote and evaluate student learning.

Methods

Context and course

Tokyo Woman's Christian University (TWCU) is a liberal arts institution in Japan. The Department of English has a one-semester course for junior students entitled Effective Public Speaking (EPS). Lasting from April-July, the particular course discussed in this case study included two classes of third-year students, numbering 55 in total. Students were approximately 20-21 years old. Age considerations may be worthy of note with regard to student views of assessment. The students in this case study have already had a couple of years of tertiary level experience with a range of assessments in a variety of classes. This fact may impact opinions expressed on the PA survey at the end of the course.

The primary learning objectives of the EPS course focused on developing student skills in planning, organizing and delivering effective presentations, supported by a computerized slideshow. Divided into two classes (both taught by the author), each student was responsible for delivering two main presentations during the semester. These presentations, both with an informative purpose, were based on news media stories selected by the students. Students were instructed that topics were to be chosen based on their personal interest and interest for the listening audience. Students selected internet-based stories primarily from such news outlets as The Japan Times, or BBC News and included such topics as 'World's costliest cities', and 'Convenience stores going green'. Presentations were from 8-10 minutes in length, and all presentations, two per student, were videotaped.

Materials and procedures

Each of the two EPS classes met weekly for 90 minutes, approximately 15 times during the semester. Class time involved such things as: examining and practicing elements of effective public speaking, learning to put together well-designed computer slideshows, and choosing news stories and organizing the information for a presentation format. Students were assigned to planning groups to aid in preparation for their mid-term and final presentations. These planning groups of 4 students, involved: discussing presentation topic choice, reporting on progress, doing mini-presentations (2-3 minutes)

about their topics, and getting feedback from peers. Approximately four of the fifteen classes (two in the middle of the course, two at the end) involved students delivering presentations and assessing their peers, and being assessed by the teacher. There was an approximately six-week gap between mid-term and final presentations. The first class of the semester included an introduction to peer assessment. Students were told about PA, provided with a rationale for why it would be included in the course, and were given the criteria that would be used by both peers and the teacher to assess and score their presentations.

Rather than using a textbook for this relatively short, 14-week course, the theoretical and practical frameworks for the classes were based heavily on a journal article by Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) entitled *Public Speaking in EFL: Elements of Course Design*. In this article, Yamashiro and Johnson introduced a Public Speaking course which they had developed and used at both secondary and tertiary levels in Japan. A key element of the public speaking course designed by these authors is a reference list (Table 3) of the elements of public speaking covered in the course. Both the peer assessment and teacher assessment rubric criterion used in this case study were based on these 14 points.

Table 3. *14 Points for Public Speaking* (*from Yamashiro & Johnson, 1997*)

	Speaking Area	**Comments**
Voice Control		
1	*Projection*	**Speaking loud enough (not too loud or too soft)**
2	*Pace*	**Speaking at a good rate (not too fast or too slow)**
3	*Intonation*	**Speaking using proper pitch patterns and pauses**
4	*Diction*	**Speaking clearly (no mumbling or interfering accent)**
Body language		
5	*Posture*	**Standing with back straight and looking relaxed**
6	*Eye Contact*	**Looking audience members in the eye**
7	*Gesture*	**Using few, well-timed gestures, nothing distracting**

Contents of Oral Presentation

8	*Introduction*	**Including attention-getting device, thesis statement**
9	*Body*	**Using academic writing structure and transitions**
10	*Conclusion*	**Including restatement/summation and closing statement**

Effectiveness

11	*Topic*	**Choice picking a topic that is interesting to the audience**
12	*Language Use*	**Varying types of clear and correct sentence forms**
13	*Vocabulary*	**Using vocabulary appropriate to the audience**
14	*Purpose*	**Fulfilling the purpose of the speaking task**

Peer assessment was also an important part of the syllabus designed by Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) and presented in their article. The authors note that students "clarify and deepen their understanding of course objectives by becoming critical evaluators of their peers" (p. 1). They also make the point that through this course material, as well as developing their oral production/ public speaking competencies, students develop their critical thinking skills as they realize they must understand the assessment criteria in order to provide their peers with accurate feedback. A key component in assessment for learning is student understanding of 'where they need to get to in their learning' (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Black et al. (2003) point out the need for structures that are carefully thought out so as to foster effective PA and promote student reflection on their performance. These 14 elements of public speaking provided a series of focus points as students prepared for, practiced and later reflected on their mid-term and final presentations.

The 14 Points also formed the backbone of course syllabus. It was copied and distributed to the EPS students on the first day of class. Most subsequent classes involved examining these points and completing tasks focusing on each one. Students were also instructed, in their planning groups, to use the 14 points to give feedback to peers after their mini-presentations (practice runs of their presentations, without computer

slideshow). The mini-presentations and subsequent group feedback helped students prepare for their performances, but also served as training sessions in the use of the assessment criteria. It was hoped that such use of the 14 points in mini-presentations (and class activities) would serve to help students internalize the key assessment criteria to be used. As the semester progressed, students became very familiar with the differing aspects comprising the key elements of public speaking the course focused on (voice control, body language, content, and effectiveness).

The assessment diet used for the EPS course was comprised of three elements, shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: *Assessment breakdown for the EPS course*

Assessor	Percentage of final grade
1. Teacher	**60% (30% per presentation)**
2. Peers (6-8 students)	**30% (15% per presentation)**
3. Self	**10% (5% per presentation)**

While the majority of the weight for grading remained with teacher assessment, almost half (40% in total) of the final course grade was based on student-generated assessment input. Peer assessment made up 30% of students' final grades for the course. Based on Yamashiro and Johnson's (1997) 14 points, a peer rating (PR) sheet (see **Appendix 1**) was used by students to evaluate and score classmates presentations. Students were rated by from six to eight of their peers, depending on attendance numbers on presentation days. Students were prohibited from assessing presentations from peers in their planning groups, as this group would already have heard mini-presentations related to their topic, and given feedback advice. Ratings sheets were collected after mid- term and final presentation classes, average scores were determined from peer scoring, and the PR sheets were copied and distributed to provide peer feedback to presenters.

Student self-assessment was also incorporated into the assessment diet for the course. This was comprised of two self reports, worth 10% of the final grades. After both the mid-term and final presentations, students were given a report sheet with a number of questions asking about their presentation preparation and delivery. For the mid-term report, they were also asked to list three things they hoped to improve in the final

presentation. The final report asked them to also write about whether they were able do better in those selected areas. Students were assessed on a five point scale (5=excellent, 1=poor) by the teacher based on the depth and degree of analysis in responses to the questions on each report. Essentially, one week after their presentations, students were able to receive scores and feedback from six to eight peers, as well as the teachers' assessment.

Table 5. *Peer assessment procedures followed for each of the two presentations.*

Peer Assessment Procedures
1. Prior to mid-term and final presentation classes, peer rating sheets were copied and prepared, in sets of eight.
2. Students were divided into groups (12-14 per group), and put in separate classrooms. Students were responsible for setting up recording equipment and recording each presenter.
3. Peer rating sheets were distributed to selected students (who were not members of the presenters' planning group). Peer raters usually numbered six to eight students depending on attendance on the day.
4. During and after each presentation, students were instructed to fill out the PR sheet for each presenter. Presenters were instructed to complete the self-assessment report and submit it in next weeks' class.
5. PR sheets were collected at the end of class and given to the teacher. Video-recordings were brought to the audio-visual center and made available to students, if they wished to see their performance. Video-recordings were also used by the teacher to assess presentations not seen live on presentation days.
6. Prior to the following class, PR sheets were grouped together for each individual presenter and copies of the sheets were made for instructor records. PR scores were recorded for each presenter and an average PA score from 5 (very good) to 1 (poor) was determined.
7. During the following class, self-assessment reports were collected from the previous weeks' presenters. Then, PR sheets for the previous weeks presenters were returned to students. A teacher assessment sheet (using the same peer rating criteria) was also given to students during this class. It should be noted that, in order to maximize objectivity, peer rating sheets for individual students were not examined by the teacher prior to completing the teacher assessment for each presenter.

To gauge student perceptions of the peer assessment process, in the final class a student survey (see **Appendix 2**) was distributed and completed by 53 students. The survey was divided into three sections 1) being a rater/ being rated by peers, 2) the PA process, and 3) additional comments (open-ended). The following four-point Likert scale

was used on the survey to gauge opinions: 1=agree, 2=tend to agree, 3=tend to disagree, and 4=disagree. Scale options 2 and 3 gave students the opportunity to express some reservations with the level of agreement or disagreement for each item.

Results

Completed by 53 students in the last class for the EPS course, the student survey was designed to elicit student views of the PA framework implemented. A sample copy of the peer rating sheet was distributed at the same time, in order to remind students of the peer assessment criteria and score sheet structure as they responded to the survey items.

The survey consists of a total of twelve items plus a section for additional student comments. As mentioned, a four-point Likert scale was utilized. Tables 6 and 7 below summarize student responses to survey items. Numbers and percentages for each item are presented, as well as combined agreement or disagreement response total for each item.

Part 1 of the survey included eight items focusing on students' perceptions of being both a rater and being rated by peers. Responses to these items are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. *Survey Part 1- being a rater/ being rated by peers.*   (N=53)

Survey item	1.Agree	2. Tend to Agree	3. Tend to Disagree	4.Disagree	Combined totals
1. Assessment items on the sheet (e.g. pace) were easy to understand.	37 (70%)	14 (26%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	Agreement = 96% Disagreement = 4%
2. It was difficult to decide the overall score (5 4 3 2 1) for each presenter.	13 (25%)	20 (37%)	17 (32%)	3 (6%)	Agreement = 62% Disagreement = 38%
3. Relationships with presenters (friendships, etc.) may have influenced overall scores and comments I gave.	4 (8%)	15 (28%)	14 (26%)	20 (38%)	Agreement = 36% Disagreement = 64%

4. I was comfortable being a judge and scoring my peers presentations.	14 (26%)	21 (40%)	17 (32%)	1 (2%)	Agreement = 66% Disagreement = 34%
5. I was comfortable having my presentations judged and scored by my peers.	19 (36%)	21 (39%)	11 (21%)	2 (4%)	Agreement = 75% Disagreement = 25%
6. The overall scores my peers gave me were fair and reasonable.	16 (30%)	26 (49%)	10 (19%)	1 (2%)	Agreement = 79% Disagreement = 21%
7. Assessing other students' presentations helped me plan and deliver my own.	32 (60%)	19 (36%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 96% Disagreement = 4%
8. PA scores and comments from my first presentation helped me prepare my second presentation.	30 (56%)	20 (38%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 94% Disagreement = 6%

Survey part 2 focused on the peer assessment process as a whole, and the issue of aggregating PA scores into final course grades. Table 7 shows student responses to this section.

Table 7. *Survey Part 2: the peer assessment process*   (N=53)

Survey item	1.Agree	2. Tend to Agree	3. Tend to Disagree	4.Disagree	Combined totals
9. Students should **not** be involved in assessing peers; assessment should be solely the teachers' job.	0 (0%)	9 (17%)	27 (51%)	17 (32%)	Agreement = 17% Disagreement = 83%
10. Making PA scores a part of student final grades is a good idea.	14 (26%)	31 (59%)	7 (13%)	1 (2%)	Agreement = 85% Disagreement = 15%
11. Making PA worth **30%** of the course's final grade is:		**a. Too high** 13 (25%)	**b. Fair** 40 (75%)	**c. Too low** 0 (0%)	
12. I recommend using PA in future Public Speaking classes.	28 (56%)	21 (38%)	4 (6%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 94% Disagreement = 6%

Part 3 of the survey invited additional written comments (in English) about PA. Many students, 36 of 53, wrote further commentary in this section. The 36 written comments were grouped into three categories of student feeling about this PA experience: positive (19=53%), negative (10=28%) and mixed (7=19%). A few examples from all three categories provided here in Table 8 will give the reader a taste for some of the feelings expressed.

Table 8. *Survey Part 3: Sampling of students written comments (verbatim)*

+	*PA helped me to make my presentation better. I think it is good system for us to improve our presentation skills.*
+	*PA is helpful for both presenter and rater. It helps both improve their skills. I hope it will be used in future public speaking classes.*
-	*I think assessment of the peer is not fair. Therefore I think rate of assessment should be changed between peer and teacher.*
+/-	*Peer assessment process is a good way to improve our presentations. But it is difficult to evaluate presentations precisely. I don't know whether my evaluation to other students is right or not.*

Discussion

This discussion re-focuses attention on the two key questions of this case study: how students felt about the PA process implemented in the EPS course, and whether it helped promote student learning in becoming more effective public speakers.

While recognizing that survey research may be criticized for using a blunt instrument to yield only superficial information, survey responses from a group of 53 students, which targets their views and opinions, can indeed provide much insight into their perspectives on classroom events and processes. While the students in this case study were forthright in their survey responses and the survey was effective in gauging student feelings about PA, two points should be kept in mind. Firstly, through the realities of professional power relationships in the classroom, teacher views of assessment will influence student attitudes (Sadler, 1998). The fact that PA was advocated by the teacher on a number of occasions throughout the semester, should be considered as a possible source of influence in student survey responses. Secondly, as Fry (1990) noted in his study of peer assessment, student views of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of PA will vary depending on individual values, objectives, and capabilities.

As noted, the Likert scale used in the survey is a four-point, agree/disagree forced response scale. With an even number of responses and no middle choice, students are forced to decide their degree of agreement or disagreement for each item. Twelve declarative statements, written and revised based on a reading of PA literature, were used in the survey.

Overall, survey response data indicate that a majority of students had a positive reaction to the PA format used in the EPS course, yet also expressing some reservations with this type of participatory assessment. While being a positive assessment experience for most, a minority of students expressed a dislike or dissatisfaction with the process. Also, the data shows that for many students the process did indeed serve the purpose of promoting student learning, the first priority in assessment for learning (Black et. al., 2003). Student perceptions about peer-assessment, both positive and negative, are often congruent with student views expressed in the PA literature discussed earlier.

This discussion will be separated into two parts, following the format of the survey. The beginning and larger section will deal with student views on being a peer assessor and being assessed by peers (survey items 1-8). The second part will deal with the larger issues of student views of peer assessment (items 9-12). Student comments from section three of the survey will at times be used to elucidate points share student perspectives in their own words.

Part 1: Student views on peer assessing and being assessed

The 14 key points for public speaking, from Yamashiro and Johnson's (1997) syllabus, related to voice control, body language, content and effectiveness, were reproduced for the peer rating sheet used in the course. As mentioned, these key points were also used as a basis for the weekly classes as well as used for students to informally assess and give feedback to group members' mini-presentations. These facts are reflected in student responses to **item 1** on the survey, asking whether assessment items were easy to understand. A total of 96% of students agreed that this was the case. Of all items on the survey, this one had the highest 'agree' score of 70% (37 out of 53 students). PA is most effective when the criteria is clearly understood by all students, and for presentation assessment the criteria should be made clear from the outset of the course (Race et al., 2005; Papinczak et al., 2007). There seems to be a consensus in the PA literature that a firm understanding of assessment criteria results in greater validity (Langan & 10 Associates, 2005). In making use of the 14 points from the first class and continuing to focus on them in subsequent classes it seems that such familiarity helped students to have a clear understanding of the rating criteria. Using the 14 points in group work to

informally assess and provide feedback to group members mini-presentations gave students mark-free opportunities to rehearse. It was also useful in giving students practice to develop the assessment abilities required for peer rating. Liu and Carless (2006) also stress this strategy of embedding peer assessment within regular course processes, asserting that by doing so students are more likely to develop the necessary expertise in making sound judgments.

The peer rating score sheet (Appendix 1) uses almost the same scoring system utilized by Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) for rating presenters on individual points, and for arriving at an overall score of: **5** (very good), **4** (good), **3** (average), **2** (weak), and **1** (poor). While providing a range of scoring options, one obvious weakness here is it is not clear what the differences are between scores on this continuum. This may have impacted responses to survey item 2. A large number (62%) of respondents showed agreement with the survey **item 2** idea that 'it was difficult to decide overall scores for presenters'. The reason(s) for the expressed difficulty in deciding overall scores is unclear; whether due to the 1 to 5 rating system used, students' lack of PA experience, insufficient time, or simply the inherent, often complex, nature of making assessment judgments.

As previously noted, a possible disadvantage of a using PA is that reliability of scoring may be affected by student bias caused by the relationship between the assessor and the person being assessed. This point was the focus of survey **item 3**, asking students whether the scores they gave may have been influenced by relationships with presenters. A total of 36% (19 of 53 students) expressed agreement that such influence may have been a factor in their PA scoring. In reviewing the literature on peer feedback, Nilson (2003) concluded that "Apparently most students are loathe to find fault with one another's products, or at least loath to express these faults". In particular, students do not want to be responsible for lowering a fellow student's grade" (p. 35). This may be take on heightened importance if the fellow student is a friend, and peer scores make up 30% of students' final grades.

With regard to this EPS course there are also several relevant points to consider. One is that these students had already experienced a year together in a sophomore pre-requisite course and were well known and friendly to each other. An additional factor is the methodology of the peer assessment of oral presentations used in this case study.

While students did not write their name on the peer rater sheet, peer assessment was not anonymous due to the fact that student could directly see the person they were assessing. Additionally, while the rater sheets provided as feedback were anonymous, presenters knew which 6-8 students were assessing them and therefore knew who their judges were. These factors may have injected the 'relationship factor' into the scoring process, leading to occasions where, as one student wrote on the survey, '*The students and also I tended to be modest in giving scores*'.

Because these student-generated scores were used for summative purposes in determining final grades, reliability becomes a more serious issue. Do student responses to this survey item weaken the reliability of peer scores and consequently students' final grades? Perhaps. Yet, a majority of 64% of students (34 of 53) disagreed that their ratings were influenced by relationships with presenters. Prior to the first cycle of presentation classes, and the final performances, students were told of the importance of being honest and fair in their peer ratings. The issue of rater bias may also be connected with a related item on the survey, number 6, which deals with perceived fairness of the scores given by peers.

Survey **item 6** asked students whether 'The overall scores my peers gave me were fair and reasonable'. During a quick preview of the survey items, it was pointed out to students that the word 'reasonable' referred to a sensible judgment based on the content of the presentation and the quality of delivery. Survey results show that 79% of students (42 of 53) thought the peer ratings were fair and reasonable. In a study of peer-assessment of essay writing, Mowl and Pain (1995) write: "The research shows that even with subjective methods of assessment . . . students are generally capable and conscientious self-and peer-assessors, as long as they are adequately prepared and reassured about the value of the exercise" (p. 330). The fact that most students were satisfied that peer scores were generally fair and reasonable indicates that this group of students were, on the whole, 'capable and conscientious' assessors of their classmates presentations.

Just one student gave a score of 4 (disagree) for item 6. However, 19% (10 of 53 students) *tended* to disagree, showing they felt that peer scores for their presentations were, at least to some degree, unfair and unreasonable. One student wrote, '*I think that*

PA is sometimes unfair because some people are too strict and some people are too kind'. Other students expressed similar feelings in their written commentary on the survey. While the influence of student relationships is a factor here, the simple fact that individuals vary in their perceptions must also be noted. This fact may have led to varying overall peer scores returned to students the week after their presentations. Adherence to the assessment criteria, that is, stricter or looser application of the 14 points when deciding on overall scores, may have varied with individuals in the peer assessment group. Additionally it may simply be the fact that some students may be more skillful, accurate assessors than others. Student dissatisfaction with peer scores due to an elevated evaluation of their own performance, may also have led to determining peer scores to be 'unfair', even though they may have been accurate. It is worth remembering the simple truth that because assessment involves making judgments, it will inevitably be subject to some error and bias (Harlen, 2006). Overall, however, almost four out of five students surveyed in this case study were satisfied that peer ratings of their presentations were fair and reasonable.

Peer assessment, and assessment for learning in general, involves a changing role for students; one in which they are "brought into the heart of teaching and learning processes and decision-making" (James & Pedder, 2006, p. 28). Students' feelings about this change and how comfortable they were in the roles of being an assessment decision-maker, and of being assessed by peers are the focus of items 4 and 5 on the survey.

In **item 4** students were asked to respond to the statement: 'I was comfortable being a judge and scoring my peers' presentations'. A significant number, 34% (18 of 53) responded that they were not comfortable in judging their peers presentations. The majority (35 of 53) agreed with the statement but the largest response grouping for this group (40%) selected 'tend to agree'. These numbers indicate a significant degree of discomfort at judging peers being common in the group as a whole. Such discomfort may be a result of lack of confidence or experience in rating peers, or the stress caused by fear of hurting, or being hurt by, classmates (Wen & Tsai, 2006; Nigel & Pope, 2005). Power relations are also a factor, as students often dislike having power over their classmates or peers exercising power over them (Liu & Carless, 2006). In the context of this EPS class, students are directly looking at and evaluating classmates (perhaps friends) oral

presentations. The nature of this arrangement may have caused some students to be uncomfortable in this peer assessor role.

Students also expressed some discomfort in related survey **item 5**, probing student feelings of being on the receiving end of peer assessment ('I was comfortable having my presentations judged and scored by my peers'). A total of 75% agreed to being comfortable (40 of 53) with assessment by classmates. One student wrote: '*I think it is OK that other students judge me. In general I have feedback only from teacher. Therefore, other students' comments help me to make better presentations'.* However, a quarter of the students in the survey were uncomfortable with peers assessing them. Such feelings may have been caused by such previously mentioned factors as: worries about peer objectivity, peer assessment capabilities, and relationships between presenters and assessors. Interestingly, one student commented that the fact of being scored by peers may increase the presenters' stress and feelings of discomfort; *I think sometimes students cannot feel comfortable while they are presenting because they know many people are assessing them.*

The summative element of the PA framework in this case study may have heightened presenter stress, as this comment above perceptively noted. Liu and Carless (2006) note that in such situations, "the audience for the learners work is no longer just the teacher, but their peers. Learners may resent the pressure, risk or competition peer assessments could easily engender" (p. 287).

Items 4 and 5 clearly show levels of student discomfort in peer assessing classmates and being assessed by them. Previous peer assessment research has shown that students often dislike having some degree of power over their peers or peers having power over them (Falchikov, 2000). Comparing responses to items 5 and 6 on the survey, it seems that students were less comfortable acting as peer assessors and judging classmates (34% disagreeing) than being comfortable having peers assess their performances (25% disagreeing). Scoring peers performances seemed to cause greater student discomfort, perhaps heightened by the summative uses of peer scores. Students may not have wanted to be responsible for possibly lowering the grade of a classmate. As a result, increased student stress may have been caused by doing peer assessment compared to receiving it.

According to assessment for learning theory, students learn when they become teachers and examiners of others, and in order for formative assessment to be valid it must lead to further learning (Black et al., 2003; Stobart, 2006). This brings us to responding to the second question focused on in this case study: Did students feel that the PA process implemented was helpful in their learning to become better public speakers? We can form a response to this question by examining, in particular, student responses to survey items 7 ('Assessing other students' presentations helped me plan and deliver my own') and 8 ('PA scores and comments from my first presentation helped me prepare my second presentation').

For **item 7**, 60% of students agreed that rating their peers presentations helped their own presentation planning and delivery. This number was the second highest 'agree' score of all 12 items on the survey. A further 36% tended to agree, leaving only two students (out of 53) tending to disagree that PA was beneficial in this way. Student written commentary on part 3 of the survey reflects the positive responses to this item. For example, one student commented: *PA is helpful for both presenter and rater. It helps both improve their skills.* This student view reflects the fact that having the opportunity to apply assessment criteria to the work quality of peers is likely to lead to improvement in the quality of the rater's work also (Gibbs, 1999). Similarly, the experience of commenting on the work of peers helps students develop some degree of objectivity in relation to assessment criteria, which can then be applied to their own work (Nicol & MacFarlance-Dick, 2006). Rust, Price, and O'Donovan (2003) showed that engaging students with marking resulted in a significant improvement on their grades in similar assignments. Totaling 96% of survey respondents in agreement with item 7, clearly students thought that being a peer assessor was helpful in planning and delivering their own presentations.

The formative/summative tension of this PA framework has already been noted, and it was hoped that the summative use of PA scores would not detract from the assessment for learning potential of the processes put in place. According to Black et al., (2003)

> It is essential to keep the formative use in the forefront; a new practice might help collect better information about students thinking, but if it stops short of using, or of showing students how to use that information to improve each students learning, it misses the whole point (p. 109).

The formative use of this PA instrument was kept in the forefront and did promote further learning by the students rating their peers. If the main validity check for AfL is the successful support of student learning (Gardner, 2006), then student views indicate that this PA process met this crucial marker.

Item 8 on the survey asks students whether feedback from peers (scores and comments) on their first presentation helped them prepare for the second one. More than half (56%) agreed that this had happened, while 38% tended to agree that peer feedback was helpful in this way. One student wrote (verbatim): *The comments in PA are more helpful and effective to make a better presentation. Not only score, but also peer comments are very important, I think.* One of the key reasons for using PA is that it provides a way of getting much more feedback to students as compared to a sole teacher assessment: "swifter feedback in greater quantity" (Topping, 1998, p. 255).

Because it involved scores being used for final grades, the summative purpose of this PA process is evident. But the formative purpose, and the washback effects promoting, and not just measuring, student learning are also strong here. Stobart (2006) warns teachers to be careful of assessments that are intended to be formative, but in practice are not because they do not generate further learning.

Student responses to items 7 and 8 on the survey help to conclude an affirmative response to the second key question of this investigation; that for some students, at least, this PA framework was 'assessment for learning' and did indeed promote and encourage student learning of effective public speaking skills. According to Stiggins (2007), when students participate in the thoughtful analysis of quality work: they become better performers; they better understand shortcomings in their own work; take responsibility for improving and become conscious of their own improvement. This case study shows evidence of students engaging in thoughtful analysis of the performance of peers, as well as their own work, and in turn becoming better performers as a result of this process.

Part 2: Views about the PA process

The four items on part two of the student survey relate to the larger issues of student involvement in PA and using peer markings for summative grading purposes. We will

first deal with the issue of student views on the use of PA scores in final grades (in survey items 10 and 11).

As noted, the issue of whether PA should form a significant part of students' final grades is a contentious issue in the PA literature. Survey **item 10** elicits student perspectives on the issue, stating: 'Making PA scores a part of student final grades is a good idea'. Overall, students favored this proposition with 85% agreeing (45 of 53). However a majority of these, 59%, selected the 'tend to agree' response, indicating some degree of reservation about this summative use of PA scores. It should be remembered that by the time of survey completion, students had gone through two cycles of PA, and their responses reflect student awareness and experience with some of the potential PA problem areas already noted.

Item 11 on the survey asked student to express their opinion about having PA worth 30% of their final grade; whether this number was too high, a fair amount, or too low. A majority of students, 75%, (40 of 53) viewed this percentage as fair, while 25% thought it too high. Some students indicated that they thought the 10-20% range would have been a better PA contribution to final grades, as the following student comment (verbatim) shows: *'I like PA process. After I judged my peers, it is effective for my presentation. But 30% is a little bit high. 15% - 20% is good I think.* In hindsight, I would concur with this view, and if repeating this experience with similar classes in the future would keep it in this percentile range, after considering some of the reliability issues that became apparent in this case study.

Items 9 and 12 on the survey seek student views regarding their involvement in the assessment process. **Item 9** presents a negative view of PA for students to respond to ('Students should not be involved in assessing peers; assessment should be solely the teachers responsibility'.). A total of 83% of students disagreed with this statement. Responses to this item show student understanding of the potential benefits of their involvement in the assessment process, compared with the traditional teacher-only assessment format. The following student view was also expressed by similar commentary from other students on the survey: *'It is good way to know how my friends or other students think about my presentation. Moreover, I can know many advices or opinion, not only from teacher, but also students'* (sic*).

Some 17% (9 of 53) tended to agree that assessment should be the sole domain of the teacher. The survey does not examine reasons for this view, but presumably these may include some of those previously mentioned. There may also be a cultural element to some students' dissatisfaction with peer assessment. Stobart (1996) writes

The culture of schooling will also impact on the effectiveness of formative assessment. Entrenched views on teaching and learning may undermine or support formative assessment, as might deeply embedded assessment practices. For example, in a culture where the dominant model of teaching is didactic, moves towards peer and self-assessment by learners may involve radical and managerially unpopular, changes to the classroom ethos (p. 137).

Japan is a culture with such a didactic model of teaching, and assessment has been and remains dominated by teacher-only practices. Yet, ironically, this fact may also be responsible for the positive attitude of some students towards peer-assessment; the refreshing change of being active participants and decision-makers in the assessment process and learning from it.

Finally, **item 12** on the survey asked if students would recommend using PA in future public speaking class. An overwhelming 96% agreed, yet 38% of these chose the 'tend to agree' response. Despite reservations about some elements of the PA process, responses here show that it was mostly a positive assessment experience for the students in the EPS course, and they feel that future classes also should have similar opportunities to engage with and learn from peer assessment.

Conclusion

While students can learn from being assessed by their classmates, peer-assessment is more about learning than about assessment and the key actor is not the person being assessed but the peer making the judgments (Liu & Carless, 2006). The PA investigation by Langan et. al. (2005) concluded that "benefits of learner inclusion and active learning dimensions merit [peer assessment] inclusion in future courses" (p.31). Considering students perspectives on using PA in public speaking classes, this case study reaches a similar conclusion. One student had the following comment (verbatim):

Actually I wasn't comfortable to PA, but I think it is really a good system. It is new idea for me, and the score advice, comments my peers gave me was very helpful and correct. So I want you to continue this system.

The student survey generated a range of student perspectives and commentary about peer assessment, and the particular version of PA used in the Effective Public Speaking course. Overall, student feedback may be viewed as quite positive, with many students expressing a liking and satisfaction with the inclusion of such a participatory assessment model as part of a course. Also, perhaps most importantly, survey responses seem to show that for many of the students involved, the PA process did indeed help support and promote student learning about constructing, delivering and judging effective presentations.

Despite the potential problems that may occur, the pedagogical and practical arguments for incorporating PA into course frameworks are strong and clear, particularly with such performance-based assessment as discussed in this case study. With careful attention to design and implementation, the 'learning from assessing' that results will make up for the efforts made and problems encountered. Readers are encouraged to experiment with and report on attempts to incorporate peer assessment for learning in the courses they teach, and include the perspectives of the students involved.

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Appendix 1: Presentation peer rating sheet (based on Yamashiro & Johnson, 1997)

Public Speaking Class   **Peer Rating Sheet**

Speakers Name:_____ Presentation topic:_____

Score scale: 5 (very good)   **4** (good)   **3** (average)   **2** (weak)   **1** (poor)

Circle a number for each category, and then consider the numbers you chose to decide an overall score for the presentation.

1. Voice Control					
1. **Projection** (loud/soft)	5	4	3	2	1
2. **Pace** (speech rate; fast/slow)	5	4	3	2	1
3. **Intonation** (patterns, pauses)	5	4	3	2	1
4. **Diction** (clear speaking)	5	4	3	2	1
2. Body Language					
1. **Posture** (standing straight, relaxed)	5	4	3	2	1
2. **Eye contact**	5	4	3	2	1
3. **Gestures** (well used, not distracting)	5	4	3	2	1
3. Contents of Presentation					
1. **Introduction** (grabs attention, has main points)	5	4	3	2	1
2. **Body** (focused on main ideas, has transitions)	5	4	3	2	1
3. **Conclusion** (summary of main points, closing statement)	5	4	3	2	1
4. Effectiveness					
1. **Topic choice** (interesting for audience)	5	4	3	2	1
2. **Language use** (clear, correct sentences/slide information)	5	4	3	2	1
3. **Vocabulary** (words well-chosen and used)	5	4	3	2	1
4. **Purpose** (informative, teaches about topic)	5	4	3	2	1
5. Visuals					
1. **Effective use of slides** to support presentation	5	4	3	2	1
Overall Score	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**

Comments (optional, in English):
Appendix 2: Student survey: Peer assessment of presentations

(Note: A sample copy of the PA rating sheet was distributed to students to review as they responded to this survey)

During this Public Speaking course, as well as planning, organizing and delivering two presentations, you have also been asked to assess the presentations of your peers. I am interested in student views of this peer assessment (PA) process. Please look at the sample peer-rating sheet again, consider the following statements, and respond in a way that **honestly** reflects your views. **Thank you for your feedback**.

Choose one of the following numbers and write it after each statement:

1 = agree   2 = tend to agree   3 = tend to disagree   4 = disagree

(Note: for item **number 11** below, please circle the letter.)

Part 1: Being a rater/ being rated by my peers

1. Assessment items on the sheet (e.g. pace, language use) were easy to understand. __
2. It was difficult to decide the overall score (5, 4, 3, 2, 1) for each presenter. __
3. Relationships with presenters (friendships, etc.) may have influenced the overall scores and comments I gave. __
4. I was comfortable being a judge of my peers' presentations and giving a score. __
5. I was comfortable having my presentations judged and scored by my peers. __
6. The overall scores my peers gave me were fair and reasonable. __
7. Assessing other students' presentations helped me plan and deliver my own presentations. __
8. PA scores and comments from my first presentation helped me prepare my second presentation. __

Part 2. The Peer assessment process

9. Students should not be involved with assessing their peers. Assessment should be the sole responsibility of the teacher. __
10. Making PA scores a part of student final grades for the course is a good idea. __
11. Making PA worth 30% of the final course grade is:
    a) too high   b) a fair amount   c) too low
12. I recommend using PA in future Public Speaking classes. __

Part 3. Do you have any other comments on the peer assessment process? (in English)

Shila's Story of Teaching English/ESL in a Singapore Primary Neighbourhood School

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Abstract
This article focuses upon the teaching practices of Shila, a primary school teacher who has taught English in a Singapore 'neighbourhood' or government school for the past fifteen years. In Singapore, English has been mandated as the first language of instruction; however, Shila indicates that less then 10% of the students who enter Primary 1 in her school speak English regularly at home. In this research, Shila stories many of the strategies she has successfully used during her fifteen-year career to teach English to her ESL students from Primary 1 to Primary 4.

Narrative Inquiry, a methodology not currently referenced within the context of Singaporean teaching research, is used to develop Shila's story. Critical to narrative inquiry is the development of a relationship between the researcher and research participant: "Narrative inquiry is a process of collaboration involving mutual story telling and restorying as the research proceeds" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). In the context of Narrative Inquiry, it is significant to note that I was a practicing primary teacher/principal in Alberta Canada for 25 years before moving into university teaching and international consultancies. These are my "narrative beginnings" as an educator coming to bear upon this research (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 25). This common experience of 'coming from the field' has allowed me to 'travel across borders' (Lugones, 1987, p. 11) of understanding with Shila to explore new possibilities for practice at the Primary level within the Singapore English language classroom context.

This article explores one Primary Singapore teacher's story of practice as it comes to bear upon the teaching of English to a diverse population of non-English students within the context of a Singapore 'neighbourhood' school. It has been my intention in conducting this inquiry to add to our understanding of the landscape of schools as it

pertains to the teacher personal and professional knowledge landscape within the Singapore context.

Keywords: narrative teacher education primary best practices

Introduction

This article focuses upon the teaching practices of Shila, a Primary teacher who has taught English in a Singapore 'neighbourhood' school for the past fifteen years. The term 'neighbourhood school' has traditionally been used by Singapore teachers to denote government schools which are in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods, or within government housing developments that are apartment style rather than those government schools which are in 'elite' upper or middle class areas of the city where residents live in condominiums, terrace houses and individual homes.

In Singapore, English has been mandated as the first language of instruction; however, Shila indicates that less than 10% of the students entering Primary 1 in her neighbourhood school speak English regularly at home. In this inquiry, Shila stories many of the strategies she has used successfully during her career teaching English to ESL and other Singaporean students from Primary 1 to Primary 4. Also included are some of Shila's stories about ESL students that serve to illustrate her understanding of her personal practical knowledge or a practitioner's way of knowing their school and classroom (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994) coming to life within her classroom.

It is also important to note that while the process of self-enlightenment in her practice occurs for Shila in this research, the critical focus of this article is how the story of Shila's practice coming to bear on the lived experience of teaching English in a Singapore 'neighbourhood' or a government primary school may inform others about teaching within the context of Shila's teaching world. Only by understanding more about the people in educational organizations, is it possible for us to come to some greater understanding of "the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 5).

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

This research supports *narrative inquiry* as a methodology and term as described by Connelly and Clandinin (2006, p. 477):

> Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experiences in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and they interpret their past in terms of their stories. Story, in the current idiom is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adapt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 4) further say of stories and people: "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience." It is through the transaction of learning from each other that the researcher and participant can begin to understand specific experiences within the context of stories told and retold in community.

A critical component of narrative inquiry is the narrative conversation that flows back and forth between the researcher and teacher co-researcher as together, they seek to construct a common meaning about the human experience narrated by the teacher co-researcher. While Ochs and Capps (2001) focus more upon the analysis of specific narrative conversations, not a component or the purpose of narrative inquiry, they do offer a description of the interactive narrative process that occurs to support the notion of communally constructed stories in narrative inquiry proposed by Clandinin and Connelly:

> In conversational narrative, Bakhtin's ideas about literary dialogue are realized more intensely in that actual, continuous dialogue allows interlocutors to go beyond responding to an already inscribed ("ready-made") text to collaboratively inscribe turn by turn one or more narrative texts. (Ochs and Capps, 2001, p. 30)

Within this interactive conversational process, new understandings about the content and context of a situation *can* begin to open up possible new imaginings for future stories to be lived. These new understandings have the potential to change the direction of the lives of both the researcher and the teacher co-researcher's as new possibilities begin to

emerge out of the conversation: "A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Ochs and Capps (2001, p. 2) further explain the collaborative narrative conversation process as follows:

> *Living Narrative* focuses on ordinary social exchanges in which interlocutors build accounts of life events, rather than on polished narrative performances. The narrators are not renowned storytellers, and their narratives are not entertaining anecdotes, well-known tales or definitive accounts of a situation. Rather, many of the narratives under study in this volume seem to be launched without knowing where they will lead. In these exchanges, the narrators often are bewildered, surprised, or distressed by some unexpected events and begin recounting so that they may draw conversational partners into discerning the significance of their experiences. Or, narrators may start out with a seamless rendition of events only to have conversational partners poke holes in their story. In both circumstances, narrative are shaped and reshaped turn by turn in the course of conversation.

The resultant living out of new stories emerging through the process of collaborative conversation can become endless as differing perspectives continue to influence understanding, thereby changing the direction of the story.

Narrative inquiry is a form of empirical narrative where the stories, themselves, become the data for research interpretation (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Data for narrative inquiry can be gathered from field notes, interviews, story telling, letter writing, autobiographical and biographical writing, and historical artifacts such as, letters, philosophy statements, newspaper articles and metaphors. Shila's stories of her practice embedded in this article have been collaboratively storied back and forth between us, as she as teacher co-researcher and I as researcher negotiated our joint understanding of her lived experiences through our continued conversational and written narrative interactions. Her recollections are supported by student writings and photographic samples collected over her fifteen years as a Primary teacher of English language in Singapore. Each historic artifact and conversation transcript has been dated for authenticity.

Narrative Inquiry relies upon "apparency, verisimilitude and transferability as possible criteria" to consider when assessing the quality of the research" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p. 7). The audience should be able to relate to the inquiry and to believe it. "A plausible account is one that tends to ring true. It is an account of which one might say, 'I can see that happening'" (1990, p. 8). Narratives leave the audience with a sense that they are not finite. They are simply segments of a person's life waiting to be restored in the

future. Together, Shila and I have storied and restoried her story of practice as new recollections have changed how her story told today, will be lived out tomorrow.

It is important to note that during the process of collaboratively developing Shila's stories, we, Shila and I, have attempted to preserve to some degree, her original language in order to allow the reader to more authentically enter her world within a Singaporean English primary classroom. It is also important to note that within the original taped conversations, Shila spoke in an integrative manner when describing her practices. The various dimensions of language (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004, p. 10) speaking, listening, writing, reading, viewing and representing were not separated by theme during her teacher talk. In order to simplify Shila's practice for our audience, we, Shila and I, have either storied one language dimension at a time in each of her story segments: reading, representing (music, movement and drama) and writing, or the transition from one language dimension to another: reading into writing.

The Professional Knowledge Landscape

It has been my intention in conducting this inquiry to add to our understanding of the professional knowledge landscape as it pertains to teachers' personal and practical knowledge within the Singapore Primary School context. The professional knowledge landscape is a metaphor used by Clandinin and Connelly (1995, p. 4-5) to describe space, place and time as well as the positioning of people and their relationships to one another in the world of teaching:

> Understanding professional knowledge as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and a moral landscape.

The professional knowledge landscape includes:

> …two different kinds of places: the in-classroom where teachers work with students and the out-of-classroom communal, professional place. We describe the out-of-classroom place on the landscape as a place defined by plot outline of what we call a sacred story of theory-practice in which theory is above practice: university teachers, policy makers and researchers hold knowledge to be given to teacher and student teachers; practice is applied theory; university teachers,

researchers and others are the ones authorized to judge the stories of teachers and student teachers. We wrote that the sacred story assumes a metaphor of the conduit (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992) through which theoretical knowledge constructed by the university is handed down to the professional knowledge landscape of teachers and student teachers, one that shapes the professional lives of teachers, students teachers and university educators. (Clandinin, 1995, p. 27).

Abdullah and Jacobs (2004, p. 1) speak to the conduit metaphor by suggesting that "because teachers, like students, too often have not been involved in 'a' decision, they feel little ownership of the change and have little stake in deciding what changes to implement, whether or not those above them in the educational hierarchy formally acknowledge this. Indeed, after the classroom door closes, many a top-down edict for change flies out the window" as teachers apply their own professional knowledge to 'make change' within their classrooms. While Abdullah and Jacobs are referring to Singapore teachers in their study, from a Canadian perspective, I also understand the closing of doors where teachers and children make sense of curriculum together in the 'in-classroom place on the landscape of schools'. Shila's story becomes the focus of this article as we, Shila and I, 'open the doors' of her classroom through collaborative story telling about her practice to explore the reality that lies within.

In Singapore, education and teaching are tightly controlled by the Ministry of Education. For example, the draft STELLAR 2006/2007 restricted new curriculum for English in lower primary schools in Singapore, not only directs which stories are to be used by the teachers to teach reading, but is also explicit in terms of which grammar concepts should be taught with each story, which vocabulary words should be introduced, what student activities should be completed, and even what the 'teacher talk' in presenting each story to the students should look like. Singapore teachers are trained to follow prescribed techniques.

Within the research, I could find no Singaporean teacher stories of practice. I must then wonder about the notion of teacher individuality within this environment. As such, I can certainly understand and resonate with Clandinin and Connelly's (1994) suggestion that "almost all reformers had in place mechanisms to prevent teachers' biographies from making a difference, that is, ways to prevent teachers' stories of themselves from influencing and modifying the developers' grand schemes for reform" (p. 151). Clandinin

and Connelly (1995) further suggest that a view that practice is only applied theory can invalidate the personal practical knowledge of many teachers. Teacher voices that tell about teaching in the classroom are silenced as voices of "educational researchers" and other "experts" speak out loudly. These loud voices offer stories about what "good teaching" is that cannot be discredited or discounted because over time, and through word of mouth, they are accepted and referenced as being "preferable." The universality and taken-for-grantedness of the supremacy of theory over practice gives it the quality of a sacred story (Crites, 1971). Crites (1971) makes the point that sacred stories are so pervasive they remain mostly unnoticed and when named are hard to define: "These stories seem to be elusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told, because they live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of celebrants. These stories lie too deep in the consciousness of people to be told directly" (p. 294). The relationship of theory to practice has this quality and for that reason we say that the professional knowledge landscape for teachers is embedded in a sacred story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 8).

   Some teachers choose to live out their teaching lives behind closed doors with the children. Their secret stories of what education is to them are told in 'safe places' because they may conflict with the stories mandated by 'experts' who live on the out-of-classroom places on the professional knowledge landscape. Teachers may hide their secret stories of teaching because they fear retribution or loss of prestige from those positioned above Grumet (1988, pp. 88-89) proposes the following suggestion to counter this trend: "We must construct a special place for ourselves, if our work as teachers is to achieve clarity, communication, and insight of aesthetic practice – if it is, in short, to be research not merely representation". This, then, is our special place - a place where together, Shila, my teacher co-researcher, and I, as researcher, are able to restory in safety, her best practices that lie behind the closed doors of her Singapore Primary English classroom.

Narrative Inquiry. Research Relationships and My Narrative Beginnings
"Narrative inquiry is a process of collaboration involving mutual story telling and restorying as the research proceeds" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). In narrative inquiry, "both the practitioners and the researchers feel cared for and have a voice with

which to tell their stories" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Shabatay (in Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 149) offers a description of the caring 'relationship' needed between researcher and research participant in narrative inquiry: "We are able to think, imagine, and feel how the other is thinking, imagining and feeling. We do this neither by projecting our own feeling onto the other nor by remaining detached but by being open to that which is taking place in the person before us."

It is of significance to note that I was a practicing primary teacher/principal in Alberta, Canada for 25 years before moving into university teaching and international consultancies. These are my "narrative beginning(s) that speak to (my) relationship to, and interest in the inquiry" (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 25). As such, we, Shila, and I, together bring with us a history of coming from 'the field' in teaching. This common experience of living in Primary classrooms with children and driving curriculum from behind closed doors forms our bridge of understanding across other defined borders of practice.

Travelling to Worlds: A narrative metaphor

The narrative inquiry journey is often explained through the use of a metaphor. It seems appropriate that the metaphor used by me, a researcher from Canada, when working with a teacher from Singapore be one that encompasses 'travelling to other worlds'. Lugones, 1987, p. 11) writes: "Those of us who are 'world' travellers have the distinct experience of being different in different 'worlds' and of having the capacity to remember other 'worlds' and ourselves in them." From this perspective, one can see that my 'travelling' to the 'world' of my Singapore co-researcher has involved more than a physical traveling across space and place. It has also involved travelling in a collegial sense where distance and time blur and we are able to stand on the same plain looking outward at the same situation from our differing perspectives, but in such a way that we feel bonded together. From this position, I have come away with a deeper understanding of Shila as person within her 'world'. De Walter (in Clark, 1998, p. 16) speaks about this interchange process: "People can interact in discourse as travellers if they write and read in ways that render participation in discursive exchange a transformative act crossing an alien place rather than the more defensive act of occupying familiar places." Through the storying

we have done together, I became a part of Shila's 'world' just as she became a part of mine.

Shila's Story of Teaching Practice – The Beginning

In the following section, Shila stories her narrative beginnings as a primary English teacher in Singapore. She includes many descriptors about the context of the school within which she began and has continued her career, the socio-economics of the families whose children attend the school, and the challenges for the ESL students within her English classroom. She also discusses the grade configuration her school has adopted which she believes to be so beneficial for her ESL students.

I began teaching as a Primary teacher in a 'neighbourhood' school. Most of the time, the classes I took, the students, came from low social economic backgrounds; very few of them will have parents who are degree-holders or who worked in white-collar jobs. Their mothers, most of them are housewives; the fathers are hawkers (I mean they sell at the hawker centres) and blue-collar workers. Very few are engineers; maybe in one class there could be one parent who is a teacher. So their economic backgrounds vary, you see.

And at home most of them speak mother tongue languages: Chinese, Malay or Tamil. The Indians speak English most of the time but the Chinese and the Malay, most of them speak their mother tongue language. They only use English in school. Even in the canteen, when they speak to their friends, they speak using their mother tongue languages; they are more comfortable with it.

When I started teaching, I was given a P1 class. In my school, we taught alternate years, P1 and P2, and after that, P1 and then P2 again. They were the same children, unless one transferred in. So, they were moved, en bloc, with me. I think that moving with your children through two grades at the Primary level is beneficial. The class is easier to control, and management wise, if the class is very good, the children can cooperate with the teacher. It's nice to follow-up with the class from P1 to P2 because you can see the progress. In P1 you can see the progress within a few months and after that, towards the fourth term, you can see the progress of these children even further. If you were to follow-up to P2, that is even much better. You see the fruits of our teaching with these children.

Primary school in Singapore is very difficult for children who have no background in English. I recall one experience with this China boy. He couldn't speak English. He would show signs and I would have to have an interpreter beside him…so when I talked to him, the other boy would help me to interpret to this Chinese boy in English. Then after a while, it won't take a few weeks, the child was able to speak two words, three words in phrases. I remember that 'I, you' he knew how to pronounce. If I asked him to sit; the word sit, he doesn't know. But after many times, when I looked at the others, when I asked them to sit, he knew that sit means really 'sit down', then he would follow. So he would pick up from there. After a few

months, he was able to speak in proper sentences, not that fluent but he tried his best to speak. These are the children who are very motivated to learn.

I was very careful in choosing a child as a buddy for a non-English speaking Primary child like this Chinese boy. I tried to look for one who feels comfortable speaking English and who could respond to me in English and also to this particular child. The buddy was very friendly to others so I'd talk to him first and he didn't mind helping out with this child.

The growth in the Chinese boy over the two years with his class was quite amazing. I was very happy when, in P2, the boy improved more. It is a satisfaction to see these children grow over a period of two years. In P2, he was more independent. Yah, he was brave enough to approach the others because he could speak and they could understand what he was speaking. Yah, there is improvement over there… so it is amazing to see this.

The P1 class, they are all mixed. They have Chinese, Malay and Indian so I make sure that I speak English to them. However difficult it is, I try to explain and simplify my words in English. I really pressure them to speak English. It's a general rule - nobody speaks non-English in class except for the weak ones. Like this particular boy, I buddied him with another boy.

I stayed in P1 and P2 for about 10 years. Then I taught in P3 and P4 for the next five. Some of those years, I was given the same lot from P3 to P4; some I was given a P3 class again. One of the years, I got a P3 and the following year I got another P3 class but not a better one, a weaker one. So we have that exposure to conduct a weaker class and a better class.

Last year, for example, I had this P4 kid from China. She was in my class and she understood English but she couldn't speak so I tried this guided reading program with her. I called her individually and she did improve. I also got a few of my students to be her friends, to communicate with her, to be with her wherever she went and after a few months, there was a tremendous improvement in her and she did pass her English after that.

I realize how important having the children for two grades was. I know their strengths, and I also know their weaknesses so when I took them in P3, I knew some students who were weak in language areas for instance, so I can make some plans to get them improved so they can go to P4. So when I get them again in P4, I can manage to carry out whatever I want to do with these kids.

Reading in the Singapore Primary Classroom: Shila's Story

"In order for students to learn to read English, they first must know English" (National Reading Panel Update, 2001, p. 24). I wonder what 'knowing English' within the Singapore context is, as Shila indicates the following of her students at the Primary 1 level: "They are all mixed. They have Chinese, Malay and Indian so I make sure that I speak English to them." Shila stories two strategies for teaching reading in Primary 1 and 2 below:

I remember, I made a booklet of simple passages with some difficult vocabulary words inside. During silent reading, I will call these children, especially the weaker ones, and I'll let them read. Those difficult words that they can't pronounce or they don't know, I highlight them and then I get them to bring the booklets home and ask their parents to help them in their reading. Hopefully, they will get help - maybe not from their parents but from their aunts or their uncles or from their siblings, from their neighbours – it's just a hope. But there are parents who try hard to get anybody to help out with their children. I communicate with the parents personally so when the next session we have this reading period comes, I'll test on the passages again; if they are able to read, I'll sign. If not, I'll still highlight the words, the difficult ones and then put a tick or circle them so that they will read again until they manage to get the whole passage done.

I've also used buddy reading during the reading period. When the weaker ones are with the booklets, I get a few students who are able to read to partner with the weaker ones to help them to read. Any progress or any weakness, I get the buddy to report to me - what is it that this child is not able to read? That strategy I also remembered doing with P1 and P2.

In the following section, Shila elaborates on how she differentiates the teaching of reading in Primary 3 and 4 according to the specific needs of her students (noted in Tileston, 2005, p. 15). She also recalls using individualized novels (supported by Currie, 1997) with the more advanced students concurrent with leveled readers (supported by Pinnell and Fountas, 2002; Ricky, 2002) for her weaker students to improve at-level reading abilities. She closes this part of her story by explaining how she created a Power Point story-telling presentation to encourage all of the children to read.

At P3 and P4, I bought a set of literature books and got some students, the better ones, to read these books and I gave them some bookmarks with different activities on them to carry out after reading the books. The weaker ones, I got them to do level readers and once in a while I just checked on their reading.

The top 20 students in my class of 40, the better readers, got stories from Rohl Dahl and other authors. I didn't have a focused lesson; I just gave them bookmarks. These bookmarks had different activities that told them what to look for - the characters, the setting, the plot. Each person had a different activity on the bookmark so after reading the whole book, I got them to present it in a small card, what they understood from the character and setting. This is to make sure they really read, you know. Practically everyday, I put aside 10 minutes for them to read. This is when the better ones would take their books and read. After they had finished a book, I transferred some of these books to those who had not gotten them, so they would have a break.

I also prepared a Power Points for P3 about this one story and I taped my voice. I got them to listen to the tape, so when they listened to the teacher's voice and the story at the same time, right, they would get very excited and then they would want

to try to read it. So I gave them photocopied story parts and got them to sequence the parts. From there I focused on certain vocabulary words inside. And I asked them questions but comprehension is a common area where students have difficulty in answering, especially inferential questions. For a weaker class, I could say 80% could not answer inferential questions. For the better class, I think about 10 of 40 in the class will have difficulty in answering, especially inferential questions.

In connecting Shila's authentic practice to available literature, it is interesting to note that she quite naturally and without direction from any school authority, linked her classroom practice to recognized 'best practice' in areas such as: "a.) efficient activity transitions, b.) emphasis placed on both basic and higher order comprehension skills, c.) teaching strategies, not skills, d.) integration of reading and writing skills, e.) ability-based group assignments and g.) activities made meaningful and challenging" (*Best Practice Beliefs*, Feb 2004, pp. 2-3*).* I have to question what this says about the innovativeness of teachers in Singapore and how many of them, by design or good sense, find their own way towards theoretical 'best practice'.

The use of Representation in English Language Development: Shila on Music, Movement and Drama

Bainbridge and Malicky (2004, p. 362) point out that "drama as playing is a very important type of activity, because it fosters the social and intellectual development of the young child. They cite Vygotsky (1978, p. 102) who states, "Children at play are always above their average age, above their daily behaviour; in play, it is as though they were a head taller than themselves". In this section, we see Shila explaining how her children become 'a head taller than themselves' in English oral language communication into reading through the use of drama:

> I realised that these little primary students, right, they learn better through music and movement so when there's a poem with a rhythm or a song attached to it, I'll get them to read it. I remember this poem, *Little Engine*; they will read the poem and after that they'll sit in rows and they will move like *Little Engine* and we'll sing the song at the same time so they will learn reading through those actions. Then I teach them phonics, right, 'rrr'. I get them to drive 'rrr' so they get it. They get to make sounds with actions so they learn. I remembered doing that but I think it's easier to do actions with P1 and P2. They are really great.
> I remembered having these three performances. One is the *Three Witches*. I had this song and I even sewed this black witch's costume with patches and I got the children to dance on the stage and everybody liked it. And I did this *Three Blind*

Mice play where I sewed this grey-coloured kind of blouse and got them to wear masks or to draw something on their faces and they did these actions. They loved it. When they practice their drama performances, they will have to read the script, you know. When they read the script, they will have to remember some of the words. And when they keep on practicing this script, it naturally helps them to improve their reading, not 100%, but at least they learn some new words and how to pronounce the words - the enunciation, the pronunciation of these words, so it is like kind of a cycle.

   I also got this one class – a few of them - to participate in this 'Save Water School Campaign'; they won first prize and, I think, $50. It was a great reward for them. We had this little girl; she wore a Tarzan outfit. She was looking for water and we had another girl wearing this styrofoam shape of a water droplet and some others were jungle trees. Even the weaker ones, they may not be able to write but they are eager to act, so by getting them to act, they are able to make use of the words that I get them to practice. That way, we get to do all these oral performances that built their confidence to use English. I remembered doing these things and I had fun doing them.

The Language Experience Approach - Shila's Story of Reading into Writing

 The *Language Experience Approach* (Tompkins, 2005, p. 185; Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004, p. 95) is a widely used primary method to scaffold meaningful lived experiences of students into opportunities to create group written stories. In Singapore, LEA is preceded by the *Shared Book Approach* where the teacher and students, together, share the reading of a Big Book with large text (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004, pp. 95-98). This combination of teaching in a cycle from a Big Book during SBA, followed by shared class writing in LEA is referred to as MLEA or the *Modified Language Experience Approach* within the Singapore Primary classroom context.

   Shila continues to story her practice of working with children in Primary 1 and 2 by describing some of the projects she created to offer her students personal experiences that could move them through MLEA:

      Normally, in a week we have SBA for a few days followed by MLEA. There is a five-day cycle sometimes, but 2 weeks normally. After that we change to another theme.
      One such MLEA cycle I created for the children in my classroom focused on a unit about traditional costumes. I would get a few of them to role play, to wear their traditional costumes. I remember the students had to walk in their traditional costumes and then we would discuss about what they wore. After that we followed up with MLEA.

MLEA is the Language Experience Approach, right? I gave them an experience like their traditional walk, their role play, modelling and from there they described their clothing, what a child wore. That would be one day but not the whole day, of course, just about one hour. Then I would get them to sit down on the floor and we would discuss about how the costume looked and I would get them to contribute some phrases or even if they can contribute sentences, I would write them down on the white paper and make sure I wrote in proper sentences, proper English. Then, after doing the whole MLEA experience, I would get them to go into their groups and they would write about their favourite costume together also.

Some students, they come from literary backgrounds, so they can speak, they can contribute words on their own but some we really need to guide to pick words from the book. So the children will remember the words we have created together, they each have a word bank book. At times, I would also paste some simple verbs on the wall, just one column, and then in another column there will be just the adverbs so when they write, I could point to them and say, 'These are words you can use'.

Shila brings the personal experiences of the children to bear upon her teaching of English language in the classroom through valid and meaningful written experience as well as vocabulary that comes directly out of the students' own knowledge base.

The Writing Process in the Singapore Primary Classroom – Shila's Wonders

Of the six strands of language (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004, p. 11), according to Shila, writing is the strand where Singaporean students appear to be weakest. She reflects upon this problem: "They can speak and they can read but they can't write well…We don't have time for that." Shila indicates that the children write "a proper composition" only once a "fortnight" and complete the full writing and publishing process (Graves in Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004) only once a term "because process writing takes a lot of time…but actually it works a lot." She suggests that this is a problem that needs to be addressed:

You know, they are reading the literature, I get them to read these novels and everything, and it really improves in their content writing. There is a marked improvement and it's commented on by other teachers who mark my compositions, but the grammar part, that's where their weakness lies. They can speak, they can read, but when they write, there will be loopholes. The contents is there because they have been reading a lot, right; the storyline is very interesting but the way they construct their sentences is not.
The problem is that in a common classroom, each day we have at most 4 periods of English or 2 hours. The higher the level we are, in P4 or 5, the lesser periods we have for language – only 2 to 3 periods per day which is one and a half hours – not enough. Even if you have 2 hours per day, it's not enough to do a first draft to guide

them. Then to do a 2nd draft for that particular day is really not enough. We have other things to cover like worksheets because we must have some tangible things - evidence to show that there is some work done.

There is one strategy that I did try for this process writing. I would give them a three picture story; the last picture will be a question mark, right. And I would have them find the conclusion of the story. So for the first picture – introduction - the students sit in fours. Myself and yourself and the other two, we would be working together writing our own introduction. Then the second picture, we would write ourselves and then after everything was done, we would put them all together and choose the best as a group. The students are required to choose the best phrases and the best story outline and then create one story together as a group based on what each contributed. They really liked that. The result were very good, in fact much better than if the children were to work individually on their own stories.

Another strategy I tried in P3 and 4 was I'd get them to bring their fiction story books and then they would have a personalized notebook. Then I would get them to record any sentences or statements that have very strong vocabulary words or those that introduce a story or any paragraph that they liked best. They would copy them down into their notebook so they'll have a kind of dictionary of their favourite statements or sentences. Then I would encourage them to make use of these words in their stories. Some will have difficulty but the more aware ones, right, they will take these few sentences from their own dictionary and use them in their writing.

Still another activity I did with my students was to have them make greeting cards. This activity did not take a lot of time but it was enjoyable. Here is one of the cards made for me by a P2 students for Teacher's Day, 1995:

"Teacher's Day are special but the day only one day around the years. This will bring you happy day with you this year. I thanks you for teaching me this two years. This day will bring you more wishes with you. Your heart was so kind and I wish you and your children happy every day. I Shi-Hui wish you a happy teacher's Day!"
(Sept 1, 1995)

Isn't that wonderful? Here's another card from Hamzah. He writes: "The thing you show to me really care. Thank you for being my teacher." And one from Pei Rou who says "We are having fun. I love you." This last card is from Yin Lin; I love this card!

"Here's wishing you a happy teacher's day on the 1st of Sep. I guess you must have had a great time on this day celebrating with children once again. Happy Teacher's Day and Best Wishes! Here I took the opportunity to wish you a Happy Teacher's Day with lots of Good Wishes. Though we have known each other for only a few months, I find that you are fun. Its nice knowing you. Last but not least, may your dreams come true!"
(Sept 1, 1995)

It is amazing to see this considering where these children have come from!

My Wonders about Shila's Story and Possibilities for the Future

"Narrative inquiries are always composed around a particular wonder, a research puzzle" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 124). My research puzzle in this article focuses upon the phenomenon of 'teaching practice within the Singapore primary classroom context.' Shila's story leaves me with many 'wonders' to contemplate.

My first series of questions within my research puzzle has to do with the colloquial terminology of 'neighbourhood school' used by Shila to separate the government schools by socio-economics. Is this terminology widely used by Singaporean teachers? Is the funding for the 'elite' versus neighbourhood schools' different? Do teachers apply to transfer to 'elite' schools because they believe the quality of students will be better in the higher socio-economic government schools? What is the ratio of ESL students to first language English speakers in the 'elite' school by comparison to the 'neighbourhood' schools? This whole notion of school casting in Singapore is fascinating and worth pursuing.

A second series has to do with the apparent tight control by the Singapore Ministry of Education of teaching strategies to be used by the teachers. I have to wonder how extensively the official 'story of Singapore schooling' differs from that told by Shila. I also have to wonder if teachers who demonstrate unique teaching strategies are rewarded within the Singapore teaching evaluation system.

Finally, I am left to consider the concept of first language English in a country where, " It is so unlikely that even 10% of the children have any background in English" in a government school like the one where Shila is teaching. What does it mean to be an English speaking country with an official first language of English where so many children come from homes where their mother tongue is something other than English. I wonder how the quality of English is affected by the political positioning of English as a first language versus English as a Second Language for Singapore students.

Crossing Borders of Understanding

Clandinin (2007) suggests that "Borders are abstractions. They exist as clear demarcations of territory only on maps but do not show up so clearly in the real world"

(p. 58). The borders Shila and I have crossed while telling our stories of practice to one another during the development of her stories are: a.) physical - place to place, b.) temporal - forwards and backwards in time within our own, and across each other's story, and c.) internal and external to our own stories - struggles within and outside of ourselves with our own and other's beliefs, our own and other's cultures and our own and other's communities. I resonate with Clandinin's description of a narrative borderland (2007, p. 59) noted below:

> The idea of a borderland is helpful for understanding the tensions that exist for those of us who work within the broad plotlines of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquirers frequently find themselves crossing cultural discourses, ideologies, and institutional boundaries. In this work, they often encounter both deep similarities and profound differences between their own experiences and those with whom they work, neither of which can be reduced to the other."

Sometimes it feels as though I have traveled a very long way from the Canadian Primary classroom where I had my 'narrative beginnings' as a teacher, crossing so many border in order to come to this place in my life. Then I have the opportunity to work with a colleague like Shila who shares her story of living and working with children in a Singapore Primary English classroom with me, and I realize that I never really left the classroom. As I travel back to the in-classroom place where Shila and her students live, love and learn together, making sense of the curriculum that surrounds them, I begin to understand that even though I am in a different place, space and time, as Singaporeans would say, my experience revisiting and restorying teaching in the Primary classroom with Shila leaves me with a feeling of "same, same…but different!"

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