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## Teacher anxiety revisited: A permeating sacred story

教師の不安再考：浸透する秘密の物語

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**Keywords :** Narrative Inquiry, sacred story, cover story, JSL teachers, anxiety

### 要旨

「教師はすべてを知っている」、「教師は決して間違えない」という思い込みは、教師にも学習者にも広く浸透している。これは克蘭ディニンとコネリー (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995a; 1995b) のいうところの「秘密の物語」と考えることができる。「秘密の物語」はあまりにも当たり前と思われていて、教師や学習者の意識にのぼることは少ないが、彼らの認識や行動に深く影響を与えている。本稿では「すべてを知っていて、決して間違えない教師」という「秘密の物語」が、教育経験のない教育実習生から経験の長い教師にまで影響を与え、彼らの不安の原因になっていることを、彼らの語るストーリーを例として挙げつつ示し、「秘密の物語」の克服法について提案を行った。

### 1. Introduction

As a Japanese as a second language (JSL) teacher educator I have heard many stories of beginning teachers' anxiety and lack of confidence. A few years ago I came to suspect that the cause of my Japanese-speaking pre-service teachers' anxiety might be my positioning of them as people with deficiencies, lacking experiences of learning Japanese, teaching, and living in a second language (Aoki, 2009). As I keep listening to teachers' stories, though, I have come to think my positioning is not the sole cause of their feeling. Teachers who did not work with me as pre-service teachers tell similar stories. Experienced teachers also tell stories of embarrassing moments. These stories of anxiety and feelings of unconfidence seem to have a common underlying assumption about teachers, i.e. a teacher is someone who knows everything and never makes mistakes. This assumption can be considered as what Connelly and Clandinin (1995a; 1995b) call a "sacred story". In this paper I will first tell a story of how I have become aware of the

extent of influence of this assumption. Then I will explain in more detail what a sacred story is, show how the one of the all-knowing never-erring teacher permeates in teacher stories, and suggest a way to free ourselves from this rather unhelpful sacred story.

## 2. A new awareness

The other day I was talking with an experienced JSL teacher and he said something like this<sup>1)</sup>:

When I sat in on a class before my teaching practice the teacher said when she wasn't able to answer a question from students she would tell them that it was going to be her homework. She said she'd take it as an opportunity for her to learn. That's how I learned doing that was acceptable. It was impressive and I still remember it after all these years, but I myself couldn't say that. I'd evade a question when I feel I can get away. Of course I'd say "I don't know" to a question I didn't expect at all. To a student who wants to use a teacher for a dictionary I'd say "I'm not a dictionary. Please look it up in the dictionary for yourself." But I suspect I have some resistance to honestly saying I don't know. [...] When someone has a question I'd ask the whole class. There may be someone among the students who can explain. So I try to encourage everyone to think. That way I can earn time<sup>2)</sup>. I often use this strategy. I invite everyone to contribute example sentences and categorize them. In the process I try to find out an answer myself.

Listening to this story I remembered an event where I experienced a feeling similar to this teacher's:

Listening to your story I thought I did the same thing. It was about two years ago. A student in the teaching practice was late. So I was talking to her learners until she came. They were very advanced learners and were going to take the first level of the Japanese Proficiency Test. I asked them how their sessions normally go. They said they worked on a practice test book at home and asked any questions they had in the session. I said OK then, ask your questions. It's a practice test book of the Japanese Proficiency Test. Their questions are inevitably about grammar. I've

never been interested in grammar. It's one of the few areas that I haven't been able to feel enthusiastic about ever since I started teaching. So there are many things I don't know. In addition to that I haven't been teaching Japanese for a long time. So my teaching is rusty. There are many questions I used to be able to answer off hand but not now. So I said "well, then" and went and fetched a grammar dictionary. I told them an answer to their question might be in that book. They looked it up and read an entry. I asked if they'd got it. They said "yes". So I said "good".

The ability to find an answer by looking up in the dictionary for oneself is important. So instead of answering their question introducing them to a dictionary and giving them an opportunity to experience looking up and finding an answer for themselves is important. So what I did was pedagogically extremely valuable. At the same time, though, I had another motive. I didn't want to honestly tell them that I didn't know because I'd never thought about it.

What makes the original story resonate with mine (Conle, 2000), or what is common in the two stories, can be summarized as follows:

- 1 ) Both of us are experienced teachers and fairly confident with what we do in a classroom;
- 2 ) Both of us believe that what we did at that particular moment was pedagogically justifiable;
- 3 ) Still both of us feel that what we did was also a cover-up of our lack of knowledge.

Why did we have to feel in the way we did when we should not? I would contend that what made us feel we were covering up our lack of knowledge is our deep-rooted assumption that teachers are expected to know everything. This assumption can be considered as what Clandinin and Connelly (1995a) call a sacred story. In the next section I will explain what sacred stories are and how they could affect teachers' work.

### **3. Sacred stories and teachers' professional knowledge landscape**

Clandinin and Connelly (ibid.) observe that teachers tell three kinds of stories; sacred,

secret and cover stories. The idea of sacred stories was originally put forth by Crites (1971). Clandinin and Connelly (1995a, p. 8) claim that “sacred stories are so pervasive they remain mostly unnoticed and when named are hard to define.” In other words they are considered as universal and taken for granted by most, if not all people involved. Crites writes as follows.

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 the celebrants. These stories lie too deep in the consciousness of the people to be directly told.

(Crites, 1971, p. 294, quoted in Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 8).

The sacred story that Clandinin and Connelly (*ibid.*) take issue with in their argument is the one that theory should lead practice. Because of this sacred story, they maintain, teachers are forced to live in two distinctly different, though semipermeable, worlds (*ibid.*). Craig (1995, p. 17) describes these two worlds in a concise way.

As a teacher I live in two different professional places. One is the relational world inside the classroom where I co-construct meaning with my students. The other is the abstract world where I live with everyone outside my classroom, a world where I meet all the other aspects of the educational enterprise such as the philosophies, the techniques, the materials, and the expectations that I will enact certain educational practices.

Clandinin and Connelly highlight the difference of languages in the two worlds as “propositional, relational among concepts, impersonal, situation-independent, objective, nontemporal, ahistorical, and generic” (*ibid.*, p. 14) in the world outside the classroom and “language of story, which is prototypical, relational among people, personal, contextual, subjective, temporal, historical, and specific” (*ibid.*, p. 14) in the classroom. In other words, knowledge that counts in the classroom is narrative whereas the one valued outside the classroom is paradigmatic (Bruner, 1986).

Living in the two different worlds creates dilemmas for teachers. Stories of classroom events and students, secret stories as Clandinin and Connelly call them, will portray

teachers as “uncertain, tentative, nonexpert characters” (ibid., p. 15) if they are told in the abstract world outside the classroom. Teachers could talk about goals, plans, strategies, evaluation and so on, or tell cover stories in Clandinin and Connelly’s terms, in order to present themselves as “certain, expert professionals” (ibid., p. 15). But these cover stories are seldom, if ever OR perhaps never, relevant to teachers’ actual practical concerns and helpful to solve any problems because it is by living, telling, retelling and reliving secret stories that teachers make meaning of their classroom experience and reflect on it. Cover stories could even have adverse effects on the workplace culture as I will discuss later in this paper.

Sacred stories that fill the world outside the classroom deeply affect teachers’ professional lives. Teachers’ knowledge, therefore, Clandinin and Connelly claim, cannot be understood without looking at the out-of-classroom world. In order to capture the nature of the matter Clandinin and Connelly (ibid.) have coined a term, professional knowledge landscape, to cover both in-classroom and out-of-classroom worlds. In this landscape inhabit colleagues, administrators, inspectors, parents, sponsors and so on as well as the teacher and her/his students. And this space is filled not only with teachers’ personal practical knowledge but also with “curriculum programs, administrative structures, policies, and lists of teachers’ certifiable knowledge, skills and attitudes” (ibid., p. 10) imposed on teachers by those positioned higher up in the educational hierarchy by the sacred story of theory-driven practice, researchers, policy makers, curriculum and test developers and material writers.

Whereas the sacred story which Clandinin and Connelly examine is mostly concerned with the world outside the classroom and the dilemma teachers experience arises out of the fact that they constantly cross the border of inside and outside, some sacred stories seem to prevail in the classroom as well as outside. The one of the all-knowing never-erring teacher is such a story. In the next section I will show how learners as well as teachers are affected by it.

#### 4. Folk theory as a sacred story

In reflecting on his experience of teaching practice an undergraduate student made the following comment.

I'm interested in grammar and have given much thought to it. In the first semester, when a learner asked, for example, how A and B are different, I panicked if I didn't know. I would think hard why they are different in my mind. There were times when I felt I wouldn't be able to explain even if I had known the answer. Then my panic amplified. I'd flush and feel desperate...

I never told him that teachers should know everything. The cause of his panic cannot be anything but the sacred story and it is most likely to have been in the baggage he had brought with him to the teaching practice because his story refers to the very beginning of the teaching practice. I would think that the sacred story of the all-knowing teacher is in "the arms and legs and bellies" of ordinary people as well as teachers. In other words it has a status of folk theory (Bruner, 1986). Another undergraduate students, who was giving a private tutorial to an international student, writes about her experience.

One day S asked about the difference between [three sentence structures]. I had looked them up before, but I was unable to explain concisely with good example sentences. My explanation was lengthy. As I feared S said, "That's too difficult for me. Please explain again." I tried to explain more simply, but I wasn't able to focus on important points. It was obvious S still didn't understand from his facial expression. Then he said, "You can only teach advanced learners, can't you?" To hear his words I felt very sad, humiliated and ashamed. I was on the verge of tears and wasn't able to say anything for a while. S noticed my feeling and said, "I'm sorry. That was only a joke." But that made me even sadder...

This learner's remark may have been meant to be a joke, but still it is obvious that he was affected by the sacred story of the all-knowing teacher. And because this student was also affected by the sacred story the joke had the power to hurt her.

A variation of the sacred story is the all-knowing native speaker. The following story

was told by a graduate student who had taught at a university in Thailand for a few years in resonance to a story of a junior high school student who accused his tutor of her inability to answer his question by saying, “You are a teacher, aren’t you?”

In Thailand my students often said “You are Japanese, aren’t you?” At one point I taught an extracurricular special class for four of the very best students who were going to take the EJU (Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students). I was teaching it on top of my regular classes. So I’d go to class without any preparation. The grammar point they were working on seemed to be very difficult for them. They asked me what the difference was between this and that. I didn’t know. So they asked me if a particular construction was acceptable in this or that context. I said no where a grammar book said yes, and I said yes where a grammar book said no. It was like they were testing me. I said something like “Was I wrong? That’s strange…” Then they said “You are Japanese, aren’t you?” So I said, “This is so difficult that even a Japanese person couldn’t answer [...]”

In this story the learner assumes that a native speaker should always be right and the teacher develops a counter-argument based on the same assumption. They share the same sacred story.

Teachers cannot know everything. So, as does the sacred story of theory-driven practice, the sacred story of the all-knowing teacher creates dilemmas for teachers and induces cover stories for their defence. In the next section I will discuss a possible seriously negative effect of cover stories.

## **5. The best defence is a good offence?**

While Clandinin and Connelly (1995a; 1995b) discuss the serious consequences of the sacred story of theory-driven practice, they only briefly mention that cover stories are not educative because “they do not lead to the possibility of retelling and reliving” (1995b, p. 162). Cover stories, however, could be used in a more harmful way, at least in the Japanese context.



A graduate student who taught abroad for a few years tells this story of her experience.

Soon after I started teaching there I saw a colleague putting readings of Chinese characters in a Word document. I didn't know that was possible. So I said, "Oh, I didn't know Word has such a sophisticated function!" Then she said, "What? You didn't know? You've taught Japanese in Japan and you didn't know?" To hear her remark I felt a bit ashamed and sorry and I felt low.

This is a small remark, but it is nonetheless based on the sacred story of the all-knowing teacher. It positioned this student as someone who does not know, and had an effect of conveying a message that "I'm a better teacher than you." In reality, though, there must have been things that this student knew and her colleague did not. This remark concealed the imperfection of knowledge on the part of the colleague. So it can be considered as a cover story. Fortunately this student's concern as a novice teacher was more with her relationship with her students and this remark does not seem to have shaken her so badly. But to a different novice teacher it could have had a devastating effect.

An experienced teacher shares her observation of her colleagues' attitudes towards novice teachers as follows.

New teachers start with an elementary class at our school. What experienced teachers say in conversations with elementary teachers sometimes makes me wonder if they are bullying. Finishing a teacher training course or graduating from a university teacher education programme doesn't mean that you suddenly become able to answer all questions from learners. Those novice teachers don't yet have a wide range of repertoire of how to teach particular items. So, for example, they do ask what seems to us to be off the mark questions. Some teachers give advice; Perhaps it would be easier to understand for students if you do this for such and such a reason. Others just tell a novice teacher off; The dictionary says this. And you did what? No wonder the students were confused. Still others take an attitude as if they are testing a novice teacher. With impatient body language they'd say something like; Do you know how many usages this form has? [...] Some novice

teachers couldn't take it and quit.

It seems to me that teachers tell cover stories not only to defend themselves but also as a form of aggression. Their motivations may vary, but when they feel they have to position themselves as superior to other teachers, some teachers tell cover stories of the all-knowing teacher to intimidate their colleagues. These cover stories are effective because both the teller and listener share the same sacred story, as with the joke referred to in the previous section. This teachers' behaviour, if repeated by more than one teacher without being questioned, will constitute a workplace culture. Then the workplace, or teachers' professional knowledge landscape, will become a very difficult place to live in for those who do not play the game.

## 6. A concluding remark

Teachers cannot know everything nor do they have to. It is unfortunate that teachers are affected by the sacred story of the all-knowing never-erring teacher. We need to think of ways to free ourselves and others from it. It would not be easy. Folk theories die hard. Workplace cultures do not change overnight. Going against a prevalent sacred story could cause conflicts as Clandinin and Connelly (1995b) point out. So, by way of conclusion, I will suggest a very gentle way: Try to spot cover stories. Avoid telling them whenever you can. You may sometimes find yourself in a situation where you must tell one. Then be aware that you are telling a cover story. Use it strategically. When you spot other people telling cover stories stop them if you can. If you feel you can't, just think it is only a cover story. You don't have to feel intimidated. These will change your perception of your professional knowledge landscape. And your small actions will eventually change people in the landscape. After all it is by stories that we construct reality.

### Notes:

- 1) All quotations in this paper, written or transcribed from audio recordings, are originally in Japanese and have been translated into English by the author.
- 2) Underlined parts were said with laughter.

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