

Module 1

ESL Students: Changing and re-shaping identities (identities under construction)

Reflection by Craig Dwyer

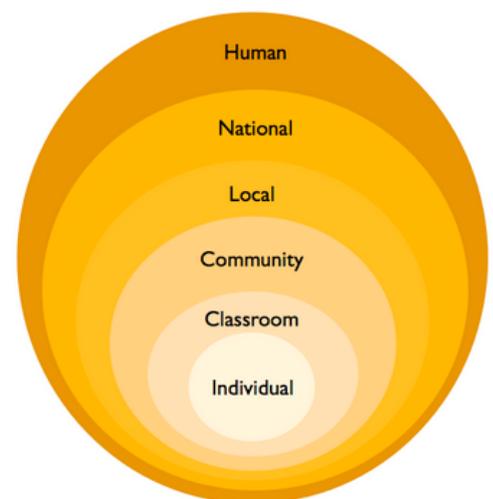
The first thing that struck me about this article was the sense of *nestedness*. We live in various contexts in our life. Looking at myself, I am a father, husband, teacher, son, friend, colleague, etc. It has been a mainstay of modern philosophical thought to separate factors and reduce to them in order to understand them more fully. This focus on logic and reductionism has resulted in astounding advances in medicine, technology, exploration, energy, among other issues facing our modern world. This reductionism has also permeated the world of education, and has attempted to make linear the processes of teaching, learning and knowing. By separating these different roles and compartmentalizing them into neat little packages, we lose touch with the grander picture. The roles and identities we hold affect all levels of our being. The teacher and the father cannot be separated, for they influence each other and are influenced by each other.

It reminds of the dynamics of a cell membrane. The membrane of the cell would appear to be individual to the inside of the cell. It acts as a barrier, it separates the cell from the outside world, offering protection and controlling the input and output of essential nutrients. Yet, the inside of the cell provides the necessary building blocks to create the membrane, and the membrane allows the traffic of nutrients to allow the inside of the cell to thrive and survive. They exist in a space of co-necessity. One creates the other, and the other creates the one. It is auto-poietic.

Learning could be viewed in the same manner. It does not happen in a bubble, devoid of the context of the world around us. We shape our own interpretations of the world based on the world we live in. Vygotsky would say that our social circles (nested circles, one inside the other, but not separate from, rather intertwined and dynamic) are the foundation of our construction of knowledge. In this light, our nested circles of who we are play a vital role in how we interact within the social constructs in which we find ourselves. School itself has its own nested layers of culture and social interpretations.

For our ESL students, this sense of *nestedness* applies on even more levels. They are existing in a space (schools, classrooms, learning environments) that may be distinct from the social construct in which they have learned about the world and formed their constructions of knowledge. The culture of school may provide different challenges to the culture they have grown up in, the one that they draw from to figure out their identity. The difficulty for educators would be to ensure that the nested circles of identity and cultural understandings are occasioned to be permeable membranes where movements from, rather than static forms that the student must learn to integrate into.

The question for me remains; How can we make the various nested systems that a child brings to the learning environment work in an auto-poietic manner with the nested systems of the culture of school? How do we occasion the two to be dynamic and how do we find a sense of harmony?



These nested layers of learning can apply to the individual or to the institution of school

Module 2

A Functional model of language

Reflection by Craig Dwyer

Continuing from my previous reflection, it was interesting to see that my notion of *nestedness* returned with an image of the nested layers of language! The relationship between the Language, Register, and Culture would appear to be auto-poietic. They create each other, and they live in a space of harmony.

Genre

I appreciate the authors sense of the fluidity of culture. It does not have to be a myopic view of culture, such as Irish, Indian, Japanese, by rather we can see culture as existing in several fields at the same time. It is complex. A class has its own culture, a group of friends have their own culture, and even a dyad of people may have their own culture. It is not something that is easily pinned on one thing and labelled. These cultures will have many redundant features (similar languages, interests, popular culture), but they will also have very diverse features. That interplay between redundancy and diversity, coupled with the fluid motion of culture would be a difficult aspect of understanding for an ESL student, especially as they flow in and out of different cultures in the space of a given day in a school environment.

Field

I can see how difficult the ESL student would find it switching between the everyday field to the highly technical field. When developing language, one would assume that we start with the left side of the continuum and move towards the right as we grow as linguists. School would complicate this movement by asking students to move to fast. We have expectations for each grade level, benchmarks and standards, that would work against an ESL student, tagging them as below grade level, or lagging behind. This is a construction of the grading system we use, which is not child centric, but rather is based on a factory model view of moving along an assembly line and picking up knowledge and skills as you go. Even the image of this continuum is very linear and conveyor belt oriented. The stigma that gets attached to students who can't move across the continuum as fast could have damaging long term effects.

Tenor

Again, talking from a social justice or critical pedagogy perspective, the implicit position of power that comes with the formal language is another way that society uses language as a sorting mechanism to separate the haves and have-nots. In our international school setting, we are certainly not sorting students into haves and have-nots (because lets be honest, the vast majority of children that come to international schools are at the higher end of the socio-economic ladder), yet, I wonder about how we are presenting the idea of that power relationship. By being overtly formal with our school community in our communications, are we not saying that the school is in the position of power? Is the school as a entity placing itself above the members of its community? What would it look like if a school tried to put itself on a level lower that members of the community? This thought will make me think twice when I write my next email/letter to parents.

Mode

This section follows my previous trains of thought. I look at this continuum and I see the left side as being far more interesting that the right. The spontaneous, give and take of conversation is where new ideas emerge, and where creativity lives. Yet, schools work to pushing students towards the formal end of the curriculum. Why? Shouldn't we pursuing the creative and evolving side, helping kids to converse in dialogical ways rather than monological ways? Aside from that, the tension this creates for an ESL student must be huge. They want to learn the language, to converse with people and make human connections, but schools keep pushing them towards this formalized, precise, organized model of language that is only used a fraction of the time (in relation to the overall time spent conversing) in certain contexts, but is essential for success.

Module 3

Using Small Group Work

Reflection by Craig Dwyer

I found the before you start section to be intriguing. There were a couple points raised that made me pause and stop.

“The expectation that students can work effectively in groups without prior tuition in cooperative learning skills is unreasonable and unrealistic”

I must say I wholeheartedly disagree with this statement. Human beings are a social species who have evolved over millions of years to be social and work effectively in groups. This communication and sense of collectiveness is one of our greatest natural strengths. The author thinks that this is not the case for one reason; *our education system is not set-up for collaborative group work*. It is set up for the purpose of sorting, classifying, categorizing, naming, and individualizing students. We do this through a variety of tools such as individual testing, student numbers, individual seats, standing in line, homework, etc.

When the author(s) state that students cannot work effectively in groups without prior tuition, they are specifically referring to the goals of education, not the natural disposition of human beings. They are discussing the students ability to work within a system that is controlled and regulated by a central authority, and where the mandate is compliance, not collaboration. If they would change the view of education, release themselves from the goal-based individualized focus (which I see as septic and counter-intuitive to humanity) then perhaps they will find that, yes, students can work in cooperative situations with others. In fact, they are really good at it.

Really good. Much better than us. But that fact puts the teacher in a position of lessened authority, and the strength of a centralized system is only as strong as the center hub. This decreased authority will lead to a feeling unraveling of the whole process. Rather, what if we focused not on the control of our learning environments, but rather follow the advice of Einstein “I never teach my students, I merely provide the conditions in which they can learn.” This framing of education calls for a more open way of being in the classroom, but frees human minds to activate their creative potential.

“You need to know your class as individuals”

Of course you do, but by focusing solely on the individual, you are missing an entire aspect of learning that exists above it. It is like studying a single tree and then making sweeping generalizations about the entire forest based on the knowledge of that single tree. Collectives and groups are incredibly influential on learning systems, and when accessed, open a massive pool of potential ways of learning. By being as individual as possible, and through recursive reflection about not only the topic, but also on themselves as learners, a collective of learners provides a much richer environment.

Instruction Manual

While reading the rest of the article, I felt it read like an instructional manual for my coffee maker. Here are the things you should you do, and the ways you should do it. Even the language is littered with mechanical metaphors, suggesting learning is akin to operating a machine.

A small sampling:

“Procedure, Trouble-Shooting, high and low levels, structure, operations, productive, outputs”

“In summary, group work can be intellectually stimulating, productive of learning, and of interpersonal and language skills development - but only if the task is appropriate and organized effectively, groups are well constructed, and students are adequately prepared, supported, and debriefed.”

In other words, the central designer, or the teacher, must maintain a highly regulated control over the learning environment for students to achieve highly regulated outputs.

Module 4

Talk about literacy in the content areas

Reflection by Craig Dwyer

I found the cycle to be very interesting. I appreciated how the author allowed for differences in the model to be explored, and presented not as *the* way of teaching and learning, but *a* way of structuring occasions. I still see the purpose of this to be the content, or the curriculum, instead of what to me are the more prescient purposes of education; meta-cognition, self reflection, and learning to learn. The model itself is well scaffolded, though I would argue that the language of it is not child friendly. Students draw great influence from having access to the pedagogy, and having the cycles and frameworks that the teacher uses as *named* artifacts. These artifacts then become a learning goal in and of themselves. The language used could be tweaked and played with, allowing a space for students to see and feel how they are learning, and reflect on the process of their own learning, empowering them to notice and be aware of what learning looks like.

I see a strong synchronicity between this model and that as suggested by Kath Murdoch. The Murdoch model allows students in on the process of inquiry, and gives the stages a name, moving from a teacher artifact, to a collective artifact that would allow for inquiry and self-reflection to be named and public. It also allows for students to notice when the cycle gets murky, and self-regulate their inquiries, allowing them to level jump and strengthen their skills as inquirers.

I would re-categorize the stages as:

1) Negotiating the field

I would call this stage **Tuning In**. Finding out what the students know about the explicit topic. There a variety of strategies to do this, including brainstorming, list making, and mind-mapping.

2) Deconstruction

Here we are essentially **Finding Out**, or analyzing the given text. We can name its properties, ask more questions, and research the purposes and uses of the text.

3) Joint Construction

Together as a collective, we would start **Sorting Out** what we have found, and start to practice the skills required. We have already named the properties, so now we can use them.

4) Independent Construction

This would fit under **Going Further** and **Acting and Applying**. We would begin to use these texts in a situation that we are passionate about, reverting back to the properties and joint work.

What is missing?

I would add a fifth stage to this; **Synthesizing and Reflecting**. In this stage we would critically look at the text type and begin to redefine and open up new space for further explorations. It would be recursive, and allow us to compare our initial thoughts to where we have come, making the learning journey visible.



Module 5

Supporting ESL students with written and visual texts across the curriculum

Reflection by Craig Dwyer

This article talks about developing explicit strategies to investigate genres and text types. In order to develop control over (though I disagree with that term, one does not control a genre, but rather lives within its boundaries and changes it while at the same time being changed by it) we need to understand the rules (again, Newtonian language suggesting that learning is like a clock, rather than an organic living thing) to be able to explore the field. I agree completely. Genres and texts need to be made explicit, and analyzed explicitly. I am failing to see how this is in the realm of ESL students though, as this applies to every learner.

The strategies presented are very well organized and allow for great depth of inquiry into the genre. Also, I see them as very open-ended, potentially occasioning a space in which a new emergent realization may come about. They are not prescriptive tasks, but rather proscriptive. Additionally, each of the activities allows for a space to engage with issues and subjects outside of the literacy curriculum.

- identify the purpose, structure, content, and reader of a printed travel advertisement and compare the choices for producing an online version

This activity has the potential to:

- allow students to investigate advertising, and how marketers use human emotion to sell
- led us into a discussion on capitalism, and the money systems inherent in them.
- occasion a discussion about honesty and ethics in advertising
- open space to discuss different countries or regions and discuss how and why people have certain perceptions about them, and if those perceptions are grounded in reality, or based on stereotyping.

It opens a lot of space if the teacher is listening and responding to student needs. Each space that it opens would give a more detailed and richer vision of the genre. The literature genre, which would be explicitly talked about and investigated through-out the unit, is only one aspect of a larger network of ideas and thoughts.

To conclude, I have an issue with this line:

“in the absence of any guarantees about what our students can and cannot access outside of the classroom, the school is the place which determines their success in learning.”

I find this arrogant and inappropriate, and it perpetuates a view of learning that has the potential to act as a means of sorting children by socio-economic class. Schools do not own the concept of learning. Learning is as human as walking, or being conscious. What is a guarantee? Should parents be giving children tests at home to prove they are learning outside of school?

This line suggests that what the school teaches is the most important thing to learn. Why? Because that is what school assess. We assess it, therefore we value it higher, and therefore if you do not do well on it, we deem you as unable to learn. This has profound ramifications for an individuals life, and can act as a way to separate them from the things they love. Simply because the things they love are not values by schooling as an enterprise.