

Tales of Tutors: The Role of Narrative in Language Learning and Service-Learning

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Abstract: *This article examines the role of narrative in the learning process of language tutors in a university service-learning course involving collaboration between an institution of higher learning and public high schools in an urban setting. The tutors' personal narrative reflections offer multiple perspectives on interactions of tutors with high school students, tutors with cooperating teachers, and cooperating teachers with high school students. For near-peer tutors, more advanced students close in age to those they assist (Imel, 1994; Whitman, 1988), narratives not only provide a vehicle for structured reflection upon their contributions to the language learning process and classroom setting, but also develop their insight into broader personal, institutional, and social issues that impact education systems.*

Key words: *language tutoring, narrative, reflection, service-learning, storytelling*

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Introduction

Increasing commitment by colleges and universities to building bridges with the communities around them has generated a growing variety of alliances between academic departments and local institutions. Service-learning figures prominently in such collaborations. Academic service-learning resembles other forms of campus-community outreach such as volunteerism, fieldwork, clinical placements, and internships, yet it emphasizes more the balance between learning and service goals. This is seen in definitions of service-learning from Campus Compact, a national coalition of institutions of higher education that promotes community-based learning and engagement, and from the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. Both definitions stress beneficial service within the community along with enrichment of academic learning through serious and structured reflection:

Service-learning means a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to *reflect* on the service experience. (Campus Compact, 2000, p. 15; emphasis added)

We view service-learning as a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service-learning is a

course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material *through reflection activities* such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 122; emphasis added)

Service-learning should then provide participants an opportunity for reflection on their involvement in their service projects. Models such as those shared by Donato and McCormick (1994), Arries (1999), Hellebrandt and Varona (1999), Irizarry (1999), Lizardi-Rivera (1999), Mullaney (1999), and Nelson and Scott (2008) offer vehicles for encouraging productive reflection; for example, analysis of literary texts, journal writing, synthesis papers, and use of portfolios. This article examines the role of narrative for facilitating reflection by foreign language tutors who during one semester participated in a service-learning course in an urban setting and worked with high school students of French, German, Japanese, and Spanish.

Narrative as a tool for reflection and analysis has been explored across many disciplines. Philosophers and literary critics have taken such approaches to narrative as post-structuralist (Barthes, 1977; Culler, 2002; Derrida, 1977; Genette, 1979; Todorov, 1990) and psychoanalytic (Lacan, 1977). In addition to studying formal components of narrative (Chatman, 1978; Leitch, 1986), scholars have debated whether narrative imposes coherence (White, 1981) or offers a false sense of coherence (Kermode, 1981; Ricoeur, 1981; Scholes, 1981; Turner, 1981). Linguists and psychologists have narrative stimulating new patterns of thinking, imagining, and acting (Bruner, 1990, 2002; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Linde, 1993; Sarbin, 1986; Schafer, 1981; Spence, 1984). The value of narrative as an analytical tool in social science research has been emphasized as well (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Brock et al., 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Daiute

& Lightfoot, 2004; Elliot, 2005; Erickson, 1986; Fairbanks, 1996; Freeman, 1993; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003; Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Richmond, 2002; Riessman, 2008; Tyler, 1986).

The role of narrative in making interpretive sense of one's context through examining holistically the complexity of language learning in the school setting emerges in the experiences of seven tutors enrolled in a service-learning course entitled "Tutoring for Community Outreach." Narrative proved to be the key medium for structured reflection by the tutors. Telling and reading stories contributed to the tutors' generation of written narrative and ultimately collaborative writing. Tutors reflected upon their own role as near-peer associates in the language learning process and gained insight into the personal, institutional, and social dimensions of education systems. Storytelling, story reading, and story writing allowed the tutors to act as social theorists making sense of the environment they encountered and their participation in it.

Course participants began the semester relating their motivations for taking the service-learning course and sharing stories about their own high school settings and learning environments. Several course readings provided the students with model stories about language learning and educational environments to help shape the writing of their personal reflections. Throughout the semester, tutors maintained a journal of their experiences in the schools, their responses to the assigned readings, and their perspectives on the discussion topics for the course. During the latter part of the semester, tutors reread their journal entries and each tutor generated a focused narrative reflection to contribute to a collaborative writing project. The collaboration developed into this article, which shares the process of their story production and the actual stories.

The course, "Tutoring for Community Outreach," described by Polansky (2004)

(see <http://ml.hss.cmu.edu/tutoringforcommunityoutreach/>), is a flexible model that enables undergraduate students with diverse languages and competencies and a wide variety of academic and career interests to work as tutors with local public school pupils from grades 1 through 12. Tutors may foster the study of Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Spanish, or ESL. During the first week of the semester, tutors meet with the course's university faculty supervisor to arrange their community outreach activities. During the semester-long course, students earn 6 or 9 units, these credits counting toward their major, additional major, or minor in their target language field. The students work in the schools 4 or 6 hours per week, participate in a weekly 50-minute group session on campus to discuss assigned readings and service-learning activities, attend occasional individual meetings, prepare for school site work, keep a journal of experiences, research certain aspects of language learning, and complete a final synthesis project. The course grade is based on the student's participation at the school site and fulfillment of the plan set at the beginning of the semester, participation in weekly sessions, journal submissions, and final synthesis project.

The Tutors as Storytellers: Profiles and Backgrounds

The 7 participants in the course during this particular semester represented a diverse group of language majors, double majors, or minors who combined their study of Chinese, French, German, Japanese, or Spanish with computer science, decision science, electrical and computer engineering, English, information systems, or business. Among the 5 females and 2 males, ages 18 to 22, were 4 Caucasian students, 2 students of Asian heritage, and 1 of Hispanic heritage. Recounting in the introductory class session how they came to enroll in the service-learning course, they shared a variety of motivations. While most

indicated that they were fulfilling a language acquisition course requirement for the major in modern languages, in addition they related that they wanted to give something to the community, to make a difference in the lives of youth, to integrate community service into college life, to obtain a firsthand view of an inner-city public school, to connect with interests in education policy, to build on past positive tutoring experiences, and to gain some experience in academic instruction by sharing knowledge of a second language and culture.

Based on the stories of their own high school backgrounds, it became apparent that most of the tutors were about to enter an environment considerably or radically different from what they had personally experienced. Only 1 of the tutors had attended an urban public high school like the two public schools where she and classmates would be tutoring 6 hours per week over the course of 15 weeks. Three tutors had come from either somewhat diverse or quite homogeneous and affluent suburban high schools. The 3 others were graduates of smaller secondary schools with dramatically different settings and demographics. One of the tutors had attended a small rural combined junior high and high school of about 500 students with the vast majority being Caucasian students. Another tutor had gone to a small high school of 95% Hispanic students in a Texas border city. Another tutor described her time at a Catholic high school of approximately 1,000 predominantly upper-middle-class Caucasian women. The initial sharing of stories set a foundation for comparison and contrast with the high schools where the tutors would be working.

Both tutoring sites were socioeconomically and ethnically diverse. Five of the tutors worked at one high school with approximately 1,500 students with roughly 37% African American, less than 2% Asian, less than 1% Hispanic, 2% multiracial, and 57% Caucasian students. Two of the students were placed at a high school of about

1,100 students with approximately 67% African American, 4% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 3% multiracial, and 23% Caucasian students. The placements of the tutors depended upon their availability during the school day and the needs of the cooperating teachers. Activities of the tutors in the school settings varied. Some worked one-on-one or in small groups outside the classroom with at-risk pupils. Others helped provide enrichment in individualized or small-group settings within the classroom to a broad range of pupils from gifted to academically challenged. A number taught whole-group class sessions under the supervision of the cooperating teachers.

The tutors' early oral narratives of their own secondary school milieus and their reading of narratives helped set the stage for them to build "an interpretive sense" and unfold the teaching and learning situations of their service-learning experiences as language tutors (Erickson, 1986, p. 135). According to Fairbanks, "One of the compelling interests of storytelling resides in the power that narrative generates to bring to life for readers classrooms and schools in all their complexity" (1996, p. 339). Throughout the semester, in the process of exchanging service-learning stories during the weekly on-campus class sessions, the tutors increased their knowledge and appreciation of complex structures, practices, and personal relationships encountered in school environments. A number recognized explicitly this significance of narrative reflection and its impact on self-development as well as the challenges associated with fostering the learning of an additional language. One tutor wrote:

The reflection process gives us an opportunity to trace our development throughout the months of our experience. It gives us the opportunity to identify the important and valuable aspects and events throughout the learning process. In addition, these reflections allow us to not only memorialize our experiences, observations,

and realizations, but also to communicate them so that others may learn from what we have done. Hopefully reflections on our experiences can communicate examples of factors and situations that have been both effective and ineffective for language learning to take place. They can also serve as a snapshot in time of the reality of a public school language program, and the problems the program and programs like it face in promoting communicative ability in a second language.

Another tutor expressed this perspective in a way that emphasizes the role of reflection in building community and enhancing the shared experience to promote the process of language learning:

Learning a language never happens in isolation; it is a work in progress that engages an entire community or peer group. During our reflections, we tutors supported each other and worked together through some of the challenges that each of us was facing. It was comforting to know that some of the obstacles were universal, and interesting to learn about those that were language-specific. Undoubtedly, both my students and my reflection group kept me engaged during this semester and taught me many relevant lessons.

The introductory activity of sharing stories orally helped establish a framework for continuing narrative exchange throughout the semester. Tutors told their school site stories during the weekly on-campus class sessions and incorporated them into their journal writing. Course readings further encouraged their reflections and provided models for narrative writing.

The Tutors as Story Readers: The Course Readings

During the semester, students read two books and a variety of articles from newspapers, the Internet, and periodicals of teaching and applied linguistics that ad-

ressed practical and theoretical concerns and treated day-to-day activities and the wider contexts of language learning and service-learning. By their own accounts of the course readings, the tutors were most influenced by the narrative reflections they read. The readings were assigned strategically through the 15 weeks:

Week 1: the article “Back to the Blackboard” (Shaw, 1998)

Weeks 2 through 7: the book *Stories Teachers Tell* (Hartman, 1998)

Weeks 8 through 11: the book *Letters to a Young Teacher* (Kozol, 2007)

Week 14: the article “Negotiating Displacement Spaces: Exploring Teachers’ Stories About Learning and Diversity” (Brock et al., 2006)

Shaw’s “Back to the Blackboard” (1998) provided students with an initial model of journal writing for their personal reflections and opened discussion about expectations versus reality, the importance of flexibility, the position of intermediary between a cooperating teacher and pupils in a school setting, and learning and teaching styles. The article offered a comparison point for their own beginnings and challenges as language tutors interacting with tutees and classroom teachers in a familiar yet unfamiliar environment. The themes of this first reading reemerged in the final stories composed by the tutors.

During the first half of the semester, as the tutors read the narratives in *Stories Teachers Tell* (Hartman, 1998) written by teachers of different languages and levels, they drew connections with their school site experiences and reflected upon them in their weekly journals. Moreover, the volume’s introductory pieces by Hartman and Fairbanks about the evolution of the collection and the significance of narrative activity enhanced the tutors’ appreciation for the medium of storytelling and the collaborative process. Like Fairbanks (citing Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, pp. 4–5), the tutors used stories “to think more deeply about the meaning of teaching and learning

and to grow and change, both personally and professionally” (1996, p. 18). Echoing the observations by Hartman, the tutors saw “everyone’s stories . . . so connected to each other” and came to realize that they had “many of the same feelings and concerns” (1998, p. 7). The volume became a key stimulus for the final writings of the tutors. One tutor shared, “I think many of us thought about framing our stories like miniature stories from *Stories Teachers Tell* when we were writing them.”

During the second half of the semester, Kozol’s letters (2007), containing stories, anecdotes, and advice to a first-year teacher in an urban setting invited additional reflection and contributed substantially to the development of the tutors’ story construction. Into the narratives of his “real world” experiences Kozol incorporated contemplation of bigger issues such as racial segregation, achievement gaps, and the impact of education policies. His reflections helped the tutors contextualize their personal narratives. One tutor gave explicit attribution to the inspiration of Kozol in addition to *Stories Teachers Tell*: “Looking at readings by Jonathan Kozol and narratives from *Stories Teachers Tell* has helped me reflect upon the daily experiences as a foreign language tutor in a high school. Almost every dilemma that an educational author has presented has made me stop, think, and relate their experience with my experience but as a young tutor.”

During the latter part of the semester, recognizing the engagement of the tutors in the reflective process, the course instructor invited the tutors to undertake a collaborative writing project in which each would develop a narrative reflection and invite others to connect with his or her story. In the final weeks, tutors wrote and refined in response to peer comments two to three pages capturing focal experiences during the semester of language tutoring. In the second-to-last week of the semester, to complement the development of their tales, tutors read a final article by multiple authors that had grown out of a service-

learning and language learning experience. The piece, “Negotiating Displacement Spaces: Exploring Teachers’ Stories About Learning and Diversity” (Brock et al., 2006), was produced by two university instructors and their six students who were U.S. teachers enrolled in a course entitled “Literacy Across Languages and Cultures.” The article described how the course had engaged participants in a cross-cultural learning experience in Costa Rica, led them to explore literacy instruction, and positioned them to reexamine their own cultural frames of reference and their thinking about instructing children whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds were different from theirs (Brock et al., 2006). The fundamental composition process and content of the reading exposed the tutors to a framework that resembled broadly their collaborative writing project as well as their experiences as language tutors. The tutors appreciated how the article integrated the stories of the student-authors, and they saw themselves as a team of writers with their course instructor. Through their story production they were sharing in a process akin to that of the coauthors of the article, and through their reflections they were exploring a fundamental question that echoed the question posed in the conclusion of the reading: “What kinds of identities and story lines make us, as educators, more effective with children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds?” (Brock et al., 2006, p. 59).

As readers of the tales of their fellow tutors, each encouraged the others to revise and focus their reflections further. This workshop process resulted in a growth like the “hothouse effect” felt by the teacher-storytellers described by Fairbanks (Hartman, 1998, pp. 6–8). The tutor-storytellers gained respect for and confidence about the craft of story writing, they had opportunity to contemplate the value of their stories, they came to appreciate the roles of others in clarifying their thoughts and tales, and they gained fuller understanding of the “diverse connect- edness in the foreign language community”

(Hartman, 1998, pp. 6–8). In their narrative reflections, the tutors offered multiple perspectives on interactions of tutors with high school students, tutors with cooperating teachers, and cooperating teachers with high school students.

Tutors as Story Writers: Tales of Tutors

The seven accounts that follow are individual tales, illuminating parts of the larger story of the service-learning experience of the language tutors. These accounts are the narrative part of the final collaborative writing activity of the course. The group then collaborated regarding ordering the stories and arrived at a consensus to begin with a wider view of the educational context and concerns that related to the learning of additional languages, continue with more concentrated narratives about tutor-student and teacher-student relationships, and end with a reinforcing tale of the language learning process that tapped into the broader personal, institutional, and social issues presented in the earlier stories. Except for edits to remove identifiers and refine punctuation and occasional awkward phrasings, the seven narratives that follow stand in the form they were submitted during the closing period of the semester.

Institutionalized

To be honest, I hadn't given high school education much thought before I started tutoring this January. Looking back at my own experiences, it was easy to assume that everyone at least attended and learned some information before graduating, whether they liked their classes or not. My high school, however, was all-girls, Catholic, and private, not to mention comfortably located in a suburb of New Jersey. The high school where I tutored is one of the largest public schools in its region, with a considerable minority population, and remains very much divided.

The divisions are based on the results of a tracking system. Those whose IQ scores

are above a certain threshold are labeled “gifted” and provided with the option of taking special courses, which are known for their smaller class sizes and superior access to media and technology facilities. According to the school's Web site, 28% of students qualify for these courses. To take courses in the second tier, students must have earned a grade of B or better in the previous-level course. A teacher recommendation is also required. Finally, there is the level that is open to all students.

My weekly interactions were limited to the second-tier and standard-level students, based on the needs of the teacher. For instance, in French II, I tutored those who missed a few days of school or who had fallen so far behind that they were unable to catch up during class time. In German I, my 45 minutes were mostly spent in the room with the students. Because of these varying degrees of exposure, I had the opportunity to interact with both teachers and students in a unique way, and gained some insight into how the school seems to work. In particular, over the past 4 months, I have noticed a few disturbing trends.

First, small class size is a necessity for those who are beginning to learn a language. Unfortunately, only the courses in the highest tier are capped at 15 people per room. My French II class has 28 students, four of whom have been deemed “hard to control” by their peers. The teacher is exasperated and puts a lot of energy into keeping the kids under control. It was in this environment that I first met Marla, a second-semester transfer who had trouble counting to 10 during our first lesson. After a few weeks, the teacher said that Marla had become not only an A-plus student, but also an active participant in the classroom discussions. If all it took for Marla to succeed was a little individualized attention, it raises the question: How many of the other students could be doing as well? In this case, I suspect that the large class size is acting as an obstacle for many others as well.

Second, there is a general segregation of students along racial lines at the school.

The gifted students have been described by one of my tutees as “the ultimate in rich, white kids.” It comes as no surprise that probably 95% of my students were African American in the second-tier and standard levels. During our sessions, these students openly called the school “racist” and said that their white teachers “do not understand [them].” From what I have seen, some of the complaints ring true. On a field trip with a gifted German class, not one of the students was black. When observing a level 5/6 Spanish class that the teacher praised as “the very best kids,” not one of them was black. Barring no difference in the ability of all people to learn, regardless of race, it would be expected that some sort of mixed bell curve would have formed. Instead, the crème de la crème of the school are white and “gifted,” while everyone else is pushed to the wayside.

Last, I have witnessed some of the teachers approach their students in a very severe manner. “Guilty until proven innocent” sometimes feels like an appropriate mantra. I have been mistaken for a student a few times, and consequently yelled at in a way that left me feeling angry and small. One of my students, Anna, revealed that a male teacher made fun of her weight during a lesson. She was outraged and hurt. Besides this, some teachers who gossip in the faculty room will use very demeaning language in order to “warn me” about some of my students. In spite of their negative outlooks, to this day, I have found all my students to be friendly, eager to learn, and receptive to my place within their classroom.

Frequently, teachers of all subjects express their frustration with large class sizes and unruly students. Aside from confiding this to me, action against the aforementioned unfair situations does not seem to have been initiated. One of my teachers explained to me that this comes from being “institutionalized.” It happens, she says, after spending too much time in a system where funding is an issue, where teachers are expected to serve in loco parentis, and where the administration turns a blind eye.

From experience, I can say that my own feelings of outrage were gradually quelled to become a sort of acceptance. As a student tutor, what can I really change here? Or rather, should I be expected to change anything? There is someone who is ultimately responsible for these issues, but finding whom to blame exactly is difficult.

Whose Fault Is It?

Growing up in a different country’s educational system has awakened me to the growing issue of why some language departments in American public schools are not very successful. Entering the educational system in Mexico is a privilege, not a requirement. Learning a second language is acknowledged by students to be a necessity and an opportunity to expand their cultural understanding. Students, not only in their language classes but also in their regular classes, work very hard not just to pass a class but to excel. I remember that every classmate seriously competed to become number one in their class. Walking through the school one could feel the positive energy flowing in each and every classroom no matter if it was public or private.

When I moved to the United States in high school I did not notice a great difference in the school systems of the two countries because my new high school setting was very unique. The students who attended my high school were upper-class Mexicans who paid to go to a private school in the United States. As a result, high school education was still seen by the students as a privilege and not as a requirement. I finally experienced some of the problems in American education when I became a foreign language tutor in an urban public high school.

Each day I attend the high school for my tutoring lessons I always ask myself what is lacking in the foreign language classroom environment for every single student to succeed. Is it the teachers, is it the parents, is it the educational institutions in the United States, or is it the outdated textbooks? Every week I come up with a different answer.

Some weeks I think the responsibility of a child's learning is in the hands of the parents. I believe parents who are at school meetings, school plays, presentations, and who sit down and work with their children give them a sense of pride that pushes their kids forward to do better in their school work. But on the other hand, most parents of lower income, who sometimes have two jobs, do not have the time and resources to spend hours upon hours teaching material that is supposed to be taught at school by the teacher. Can we really blame the parents?

At the end of my tutoring sessions I go back into the class to drop off the student I was tutoring and I like sitting back to evaluate the interaction between students and teachers. I see many types of teachers: New teachers who are [so] nervous in front of a class that they mess up their teaching plans for that day. Teachers who do not seem to care to build a relationship with their students. Teachers who break under the pressure because they cannot handle the wild behavior of high school students. But there are also teachers who are phenomenal in every way. They not only care about the educational progress of their students but also about their well-being. But even with these phenomenal teachers there are students that just cannot succeed.

Other times I feel that the root of most of the foreign language educational problems lies in the hands of the government that funds American education. If we reduce the money spent poorly in other branches and put that money into improving the quality of schools, this might finally change the schools in the United States. If this is a first-class country, why do we have students without teachers, several classes having class in a gymnasium because there are not enough classrooms, and outdated textbooks? This list could go on for many pages but what good would it do if the government thinks it is spending taxes in the correct way?

No matter where the fault may lie, the bottom line is that many students are not learning and developing in their school environment. This is where I come in, a col-

lege student who is interested in helping out a student who is left behind sitting in a corner of a class too afraid to speak up. My job is not so much to teach the material necessary to obtain an A on a test, which would not hurt, but to teach my students not to be afraid of a foreign language, helping them develop confidence enough to step into a classroom and be able to interact with students and teachers in a different language. My goal is to open their eyes to the possibility of succeeding not just in a foreign language but in all subjects in the academic environment.

The student I tutor, a sophomore in high school, is a quiet, polite boy who does not utter a single word during class because he is too afraid to mess up. But in the one-to-one tutoring in the library he lets his guard down and is able to learn to write, read, and speak in a different language. After several weeks of building his confidence he is able to stand in front of a classroom and be part of a skit. How this student's confidence can be built in only several one-on-one tutoring sessions is remarkable. Whose fault is it that many students sit back and are afraid to participate and learn in a classroom environment I do not know. All I know is that if one way to get a student succeeding in a school environment is through tutoring, the school system better start obtaining a lot more tutors for all those students who are sitting in corners forgotten.

Private Challenges

My experience as a Japanese language tutor has allowed me not only to teach but also to observe and communicate with students. My interaction with the students has given me a great impression of their personal lives. Some of these insights come from my time spent during early morning home-room, when attendance is taken and students are allowed to visit other classrooms for supplementary instruction. During this period I met a student who really impressed me. Todd had voluntarily come for help and was eager for more learning resources. "I can do it," he said to me, "it's not that hard, I

just need the tools.” After Todd left I learned that he had been out of school, eventually with a homebound study arrangement, for a total of 9 weeks. He had been overwhelmed with learning a new language, especially Japanese, with 3 strange alphabets and a foreign grammatical structure. All the work that Todd was said to have done had been somehow lost in transmission between his home teacher and the school, and he was in the process of making up for the instruction and homework he had missed. I still wonder how a student I judged to be capable and bright could have become so discouraged as to withdraw from school. How could this be the same student who had told me that he “can do it. It’s not that hard”?

When Erica began showing up repeatedly late to class, looking tired and uneasy, I was afraid that she, too, was feeling overwhelmed by Japanese class. While she was the only white girl in her class, she had worked well with her peers and had always been the first to finish her class work. Had I been taking her distinction for granted and missing the cues of her exhaustion? I soon learned that she had a stalker among her schoolmates and to avoid him she had been coming late to class. Her family and teachers had agreed to a plan where she would take a different route to class each day. I no longer feared that Erica would stop coming to school, but this relief came with the unpleasant notion that Erica was troubled most not by Japanese class but by her jeopardized physical safety.

The situations of Todd and Erica are not isolated. They are only 2 of many students facing personal challenges that can discourage their commitment to school. Added to the unique struggles of individual students I noticed common challenges affecting the general student body. One common challenge concerns the daily commute to school. A majority of students do not come from local neighborhoods, but from farther districts throughout the city. I was unaware of this until a one-on-one session with a student who seemed tired and

disinterested. He explained that he had gotten up at 5:00 that morning as usual. Such are the demands of commuting traffic for students who do not live in the local area. To meet the recommended 8 hours of sleep a day, students would have to go to sleep by 9:00 p.m., but it is unlikely that students will sleep this early in the evening and even less likely that they will feel awake for school the following morning. Moreover, we can be sure that these adolescents lead unhealthy lifestyles of recurrent sleep-deprivation while they are expected to be ready to learn at an unnaturally early hour.

Students do not subsist on unhealthy sleep patterns alone but also on unhealthy diets. Students often walk into homeroom complaining of an empty stomach before eating candy bars and washing them down with artificially flavored juice drinks. Others go hungry. When I tutor in the afternoon class, I see that afternoon snacks are no improvement from breakfast. These snacks are sure to be paired with a lunch menu that serves “cheese fries and double hot dogs mmm. . .” as I remember from one morning announcement. When students eat one to two meals a day with this kind of selection, one can only hope that they at least enjoy wholesome dinners when they return home. I am not naïve enough to count on it.

From unsatisfied basic needs to personal challenges, students undergo difficulties that often transcend their expected maturity level. My time as a tutor has reminded me that it is important for teachers and tutors to consider that students come from a wide range of difficult situations. These are students who accept the struggle with physical strain, academic stress, social hazards, and financial burdens. These are high school adolescents who know full-grown challenges.

Stooping to Expectations

One Wednesday morning toward the beginning of the semester, I encountered a student named Kartrice. Kartrice had passed the first semester of Spanish 1 the

year before but had failed the second. As a result, she had been out of Spanish all semester and was joining my class for the first time in January. The Señora sent the two of us into the hall with the instructions that I should “review all of the first semester material with her so that she’ll be caught up and in the same place as the rest of the class”—a daunting task, to say the least.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Kartrice was an incredibly intelligent girl who not only remembered all of the grammar and most of the vocabulary she had learned the year before, but also that she was actually far *ahead* of where the class was at the time. Her comprehension and production skills were the best I had seen all semester, and we essentially spent the period having a conversation in Spanish utilizing the first-semester (and some second-semester!) grammar and vocabulary. To practice numbers we exchanged phone numbers and talked about the ages and birthdays of family members. We used adjectives to describe people we know—Kartrice’s boyfriend, my little brother, etc.—and both of us generally had a good time, laughing as we exchanged funny descriptions and anecdotes.

When I reported the success of our review session to the teacher, however, she didn’t believe me. I was told that Kartrice usually just sat insolently in class (like the rest of the students) and didn’t take much interest in learning. Since that day, I have unfortunately observed the same thing. Kartrice often refuses to participate in class, and my understanding is that her grades are poor. When I tutored her, she rose to my expectations effortlessly. Thus I believe that her usual academic indifference can be explained by the fact that her teachers *expect* her to behave that way, so why do otherwise? Unfortunately, these low expectations are cheating Kartrice out of the education that she not only deserves, but also could probably excel at if given the chance.

Kartrice is not the only student who is not achieving to her potential. The first time I visited the school and met the cooperating

teachers I would be working with for the semester, one teacher told me that he had “a couple of low-lives [I could] work with.” George turned out to be the first “low-life” identified, and I’ve been working with him ever since. George failed French 1 last year and then switched to Spanish 1 (which he was also failing), but he is by no means stupid. While I occasionally have to explain the material in more than one way, and sometimes we have to review things we’ve covered in the past, George generally picks up concepts pretty quickly and always leaves our lessons understanding more than he did coming into them. We usually have time to do the assigned lesson and worksheet, and also to discuss something cultural, or to play a game that reinforces skills, or just to chit-chat about what’s going on in George’s life or what he wants to do in the future.

After George and I had been working together for 8 weeks, his teacher casually mentioned to me—in George’s presence—something about how I’d be working with this “B” student again. George, who was failing when I first began working with him in January, was up to a “B”? Incredible! George was absolutely ecstatic. He jumped up, hugged me, ran down the hall to tell the security guard (with whom he’s apparently friends, I assume, because he is late to class so much and consequently spends so much time in the hallways), ran into another classroom to tell another teacher (who coldly told him to get out of her classroom “right now”), told the foreign language department head, whom we met in the hall and who made him shake my hand after he had shaken hers, and then finally settled down, still grinning. It was clear that both of us felt an incredible sense of accomplishment at the news.

That moment was great, but my understanding is that there are few like it in George’s academic experience. He is absent often, and his grades are generally poor. His teachers hardly expect that he’ll show up to class, much less that he’ll learn a lot when he is there. George told me once that he

wants to be a lawyer, but I'm not sure that he knows how difficult that will be with his academic record. I'm not even sure that any adult in his life has told him that academic achievement in high school has huge implications for the future: for college, and ultimately for career options. The fact is, George will probably never be a lawyer. And it isn't because he is unintelligent, or because he is somehow intrinsically incapable of achieving his dreams. It is because no one expects him to accomplish much, especially in school, so generally, he doesn't.

I want to make it clear that I don't think teachers are entirely to blame, or that students have no responsibility for their own learning. What has become clear to me during my time tutoring this semester, however, is that my students are, to a certain extent, being held down by a system that has labeled them as "underachievers" who cannot, or for some other reason will not, learn much in school. They are *expected* to earn substandard grades and to behave badly in class (when they even show up)—and it is no surprise when these expectations are met. I understand that not all people are "natural" students, but based on my experiences working with these youth, I also understand that some of these chronic "underachievers" are capable of much more. If more was expected of them, perhaps they would rise to those loftier expectations, instead of stooping to those that are currently holding them back.

The Awkward but Useful Position

Coming into a high school as a tutor, not far removed from my own high school experience, made my role within the classroom in relation to my students sometimes difficult to define. I was certainly in a position of some higher influence, but I definitely did not have the status or authority of a teacher or even a student teacher. I quickly realized that these ambiguities aided me in my ability to work with and relate to my students by allowing me to converse with them at a more casual, peer-to-peer level that cannot happen between a student and his or her actual tea-

cher. However, this more open relationship that I began with my students put me into some extremely uncomfortable situations in association with my own relations with the host teacher. It was these situations though, that affirmed for me the importance of open relationships for building students' motivation, understanding, and progress.

One day a week, one of my host teachers would have me teach a lesson to the class. This class typically had many discipline and motivational problems, but I had been having relative success with my lessons in the past several weeks. On this particular day in the class, we had gotten slightly diverted into an engaging discussion about the Japanese custom of bowing. Several of the students seemed very intrigued at this "oddity," in their eyes, and one girl perked up and asked, "Why do Japanese bow?" However, when I motioned that Sensei could explain better than I, and invited Sensei into the discussion, the students immediately turned off, looked at me, and said "never mind then, if she needs to explain it." I hesitated briefly, looked to Sensei who just smiled and motioned for me to continue. Slightly confused and shaken, I avoided the comment and continued with the lesson. This dichotomy between the respect that the students showed me and the lack of respect they showed for their teacher made me extremely uncomfortable, and I didn't know or feel like it was something I could or should discuss with the teacher.

I also silently observed a very heated run-in between a student who had seemed slightly behind and my host teacher. The student was very considerate and motivated when working individually with me, but did not act so at all with the teacher. The debate involved the girl's constant attendance and tardiness issues. My host teacher remained very composed, articulate, and considerate, while providing very honest ideas and potential solutions, while the girl remained stubborn as a brick wall, being very aggressive and condescending with the teacher. However, the conversation did appear to be going in one direction,

with the teacher quickly providing “answers” before really giving the student a chance to present the problem. The following week, the same girl attended my after-school tutoring session in a frenzied state. She was intent on leaving without accomplishing any of her work. I asked her to sit down with me and talk to me about what was on her mind, upon which she sat down and broke down. During a very honest heart-to-heart talk, she told me that she was having very strained relationships with her family at home, and that none of her teachers would take the time to listen to her or try to understand. She was afraid of taking a bad report home to her father, upon which I asked if I could help her with her work so she would not have to bring a poor report home. She calmed down, agreed that being a good idea, and I helped her finish her work for the day. I feel that giving her that opportunity to speak to me as a supportive friend, rather than an authority figure who claims to have “solutions” to problems not fully understood, allowed this girl to sort out her thoughts and gave me a chance to understand her and help her.

In comparison with what I’ve observed of some other teachers and administrators in the school, my host teacher was quite respectful when talking to her students. However, like many of the teachers and administrators I got to see interacting with students, the adults seemed much quicker to tell the student what to do, or chastise the student before ever listening to what the student had to say. It seems that in this school’s culture it is not possible for my host teacher and many of the staff to drop their barrier of authority and really listen to the students before prescribing to the kids what they should do. It may simply be because of age difference, but it seems to me that the teachers and administration fear dropping their strong front because of the possibility of losing control of the environment. They would quickly enforce hard and fast policy before considering the situation of the student, and taking the moment of open vulnerability to *really* listen.

On the other hand, the students also seem unwilling to communicate across the barrier of authority that exists between themselves and their teachers. Like the student I described above, they often become immediately defensive, rash, and inarticulate. This creates misunderstanding that severely damages the students’ motivation in school. This is why I felt my position as a tutor, acting as an intermediary and providing a bridge between the students and the teacher, was critical to make positive change in the classroom. It was my near-peer status and lack of a true position of authority that gave me the opportunity to be open and honest with the kids, and provide a relay of information between the teachers and the students. For this reason, I find the role of a near peer-level tutor in the high school classroom to be not only useful but important.

Reevaluating Learning

It was the first day that I would be tutoring, and there I was sitting across from the first student I would tutor. We were to review *hiragana*, phonetic Japanese characters, which the class was supposed to have learned by then. Up until that day, I was used to tutoring math, where everything was in practice and the application of a specific method. I had, up until then, learned to teach first through explanation and then drilling through examples. It was what I was comfortable with, and what I grew up with as a student. Even in my own high school Japanese classroom I was taught through repetition; the theory was that once the basics were memorized comprehension will come from its application through things like conversation and essays.

Thus, just as I was taught, I started out by drilling my first tutee by going through the flashcards and telling him to identify the characters. Yet as I drilled through the characters I heard the self-conscious “I don’t know” with every flashcard that passed by and the diminishing will to even try to guess at the end. My enthusiastic efforts to try and tell him it was all right to be

wrong so long as he tried only proved to be of little help as he still forgot many of the characters the second time around. What was I doing wrong? In my own experience in a large, selective public high school, teachers could not afford to waste much time making sure each of the 30-something students understood. It was up to us to go home with the notes and reinforce what we had spent all day copying down; characters were never explained but merely said to be “something you had to go home and memorize.” It had worked for the most part; writing it over and over again allowed for students eventually to grasp the meaning of each character.

I tried again by applying the characters to whole words and using them in practical sentences like “*ringo o tabemasu* [I’m eating an apple],” trying to show the connection between the small phonemes and its place within the larger scheme of things. Yet as I was fumbling for the clear connection between the characters and communicating in Japanese I continued to see the student’s confusion grow and the overwhelming feeling of not knowing what’s going on. I knew then that even though I was trained to learn and teach under the mantra of “practice makes perfect” and “memorization leads to understanding” I had to let go of such methods and realize the role of student interest in the learning process. I could not just explain things away and say memorization was all that had to be done. I realized then that effort means the willingness to try and that it comes from one’s interest and not one’s academic obligation. I realized then that in high school I, as did most of the students in my class, was willing to memorize mindlessly for the sake of further comprehension because for whatever reason we were in love with the language. And I realized then that it was a different story for the kids I tutored; they needed to be given the motivation and the self-confidence to try.

With this lesson in mind, I began to change. I played games to reinforce characters, and used friendly conversation to learn sentence patterns and vocabulary. I had

essentially stopped the drills and only used them for quick refreshers of what we had solidified in the previous session. Here too, I let down my hair, asking the student how to say something in Japanese so many times that it became a joke. With each passing week, I saw the confidence come back little by little, and the smile of being able to read better than some of the other kids creep across his face. Through games he saw playful enjoyment, and learned to laugh at his own mistakes; through conversation he learned to speak with a louder voice, and saw that it did not hurt when he responded incorrectly. By letting go of my drills, I saw the lack of fear when he didn’t know the answer and the ability to laugh at his own mistakes. It was then that I learned that actual learning comes from something more than rote memorization and the need for a good grade. It comes from liking the subject matter and actually *wanting* to improve.

The Difference

At the heart of both tutoring and language learning are relationships. To learn another language is to learn a new way to communicate with other people, and through that communication, relationships are formed. To tutor someone is to enter a relationship with that person wherein one becomes a partner in the student’s learning process. It is difficult to learn to speak a language if one has no one with whom one feels secure in talking. Likewise, it is the relationship and the partnership that are essential to making tutoring work when things like classroom instruction fall short.

The student I have worked with the most in tutoring is Rick. Rick is a very reserved person, and though I have tutored him for a number of weeks, I still do not know much about his life outside of school. He shares little about himself. If I ask him how his weekend was or how yesterday was, he usually relates events involving other people, or simply states that he is tired. His answers are polite, but it is tough to gain a clear picture of him from them.

When I have a chance to observe Rick in class rather than in one-on-one tutoring, I notice a very basic difference in how he conducts himself in the two situations. Working one-on-one, he tries, he responds, and though not enthusiastically, he does so willingly. In class, however, he makes almost no visible effort. If asked a question by the teacher, there are many times where he will simply not respond. I get the impression that his mind is on everything but Japanese when he is in the full class and being addressed by the teacher.

I know from experience that Rick can learn Japanese. The first few times that Rick and I worked together, our time was dedicated to his learning *hiragana*, a phonetic Japanese writing system. Lessons were at first a frustrating attempt on my part, where I'd simply ask Rick what a character was, wait for an answer, and then correct his mistakes. Eventually I switched to activities that got a better response, like associating pictures with the characters and playing a tic-tac-toe game using the *hiragana* characters. When the time came that we moved from *hiragana* into studying adjectives, I was pleased by the fact that studying these words required knowing *hiragana*, and Rick seemed to remember some of the characters we studied together.

This experience was satisfying, but it also caused me to reflect upon the contradiction between the way Rick approached learning Japanese in the class and the way he approached it in tutoring sessions. Rick is a student who does not participate in class, who does not do homework, but who can learn to tell time in Japanese more or less perfectly in a class period of tutoring. I have wondered, "What can explain this difference in his response?" and I have come to find an answer in that heart of tutoring and language learning relationships.

As a tutor, I have a chance to respond to Rick individually in ways that a classroom teacher might not. Teachers are often forced by their circumstances to approach their class as an aggregate. Though they may try, like my host teacher, to reach out to stu-

dents, to be approachable and understanding, the demand of conducting each day's class from start to finish means that they will move on at some point.

Where a teacher has to move on, though, a tutor can meet students where they are, help them to do what they can do, and reassure them that learning is about their growth and not about punishing them for not knowing. As I can do with Rick, a tutor can set aside the lesson for a short while and just talk to the student, make conversation, and eventually return to whatever the student is learning as it comes up in the conversation. A lesson that has become less of a task the student does not want to do and more of a shared activity being approached together is no longer just a lesson, but a basis for relating to each other. This creates the kind of nonthreatening relationship that allows for language learning to occur, and that makes a student a more active participant in his or her own learning.

Language is nothing without people speaking, writing, reading, and understanding. Likewise, language learning does not happen well unless students have something to say and someone to hear or read it. This exchange is communication, and that communication is the basis of a relationship between student and teacher, student and tutor, student and native speaker, person and person. It is a great strength of tutoring, then, that a tutor and student are placed from the start into a personal relationship. It is in recognizing that relating to students is not just helpful for language learning but that it touches the very heart of that learning that the difference between Rick being tutored and Rick in class is made clear.

Conclusion: Reflection Upon the Process of Narrative Reflection

It is noteworthy that all the tutors' stories followed the same basic pattern: The writer made his or her observations of the situa-

tion as he or she experienced it and then went on to offer an assessment and to attempt causal explanation for what was observed. The causes they arrived at clearly reflect the individual experiences they had as language tutors, the assumptions they brought with them, their efforts to reason about the situations, and their efforts to assume the standpoint of the students they were tutoring, the students in the classroom, and the host teachers. The tutors had varied experiences and offered diverse opinions and reasons for what they saw. Their assessments differed, yet intriguingly, each of them tended to give a single or simple explanation although with some acknowledgment of the complex dimensions of their concerns as they related to the language tutoring experience. In summary, their explanations touched upon institutional rigidity, tracking, racism, students' private challenges, low expectations, class size, and teaching methods, and how these factors impact on the relationship-building process for successful language learning. The way in which the tutors attempted to give coherence through their stories with the tendency to single out a particular causal factor connects with the literature on narrative that discusses not only how it helps unify experience (White, 1981), but also the risk of creating a false sense of coherence (Kermode, 1981; Ricoeur, 1981; Scholes, 1981; Turner, 1981).

The tutors embraced narrative as the vehicle to produce vivid and focused expressions of their experiences. In their portrayal of real life and level of sensitivity brought to the situations described, the writings are eye-opening. Through narrative reflection, each tutor-storyteller stepped into a role as a social theorist seeking to make comprehensible the circumstances and actions that he or she experienced. Narration allowed the tutors "to relive, control, transform, (re-) imagine events, to reclaim and construct chosen identities, social interactions and communities" (Gready, 2008, p. 136). While the tutors learned a lot from their observations

and were led to analyze the language learning experience and the classroom situation in urban public high schools, a perceptive reader of their stories probably will conclude that all the explanations as well as others not mentioned may be worth considering. For instance, several of the stories focus on the teachers' difficulty appreciating the problems of particular students either because of the classroom setting or an inability to change expectations of student possibilities. Additional explanations could also be entertained, such as the role of peer pressure or patterns of hierarchy to which students become accustomed and vulnerable in and out of their school settings. Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) asserted, "The way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember, and prepare for future events" (p. xi). This is clearly reflected in the narratives of the tutors.

With the semester's end, some collaboration continued to develop the current article. In a future course offering, it would be beneficial to build in more opportunity for tutors to compare their assessments and causal accounts, to explore possible disagreements, and to consider additional explanations. In addition, it might perhaps be valuable to extend the tutors' engagement in narrative creation and analysis by inviting tutees and cooperating teachers to share their reflections on the narratives of the tutors and contribute their own narratives. This kind of extended reflection would broaden perspectives and further advance the role of narrative as "a meditative vehicle by which the complexity and taken-for-grantedness of ordinary events may be explored" (Tyler, 1986, p. 132).

Toward the end of the semester the instructor asked the tutors to respond to the question, "How has the activity of reflection, in particular in dealing with narrative, impacted on your experience as a language learner in this course?" Student feedback about the course indicated that the incorporation of narrative reflection through storytelling, reading, and writing contrib-

uted positively to meeting the learning objectives for the course:

- engage in a community outreach service-learning experience to gain deeper understanding of the cultural contexts in which language learning occurs
- partner with the local schools in the learning of world languages by either elementary, middle, or high school students and gain insight into how to work with students with diverse needs and learning styles
- gain appreciation of different education systems and approaches to world language learning and teaching
- reflect on strategies for promoting successful language learning
- reflect on topics related to education in an urban setting and teaching as a profession
- draw connections between the field of education and other professional fields and disciplines

One tutor wrote, “The activity of reflection has allowed me to consider the nature of my influence and the efficacy of my teaching methods and to then refine and mobilize these reflections for an educational cause.” Another responded, “Reflecting on our collective experiences throughout the semester, I think, helped all of us not only to do the best we can in our respective classrooms but also to get the most personal understanding out of what we’ve all done and witnessed.” Affirming the value of reflection through reading, hearing, and telling narratives in enhancing understanding, critical exploration, and analysis of the language learning process and its interconnections with complex personal and social contexts, one tutor’s response provides confirmation of the significance of narrative as used in this study:

Reflection has been what has made me evaluate and reevaluate the way I tutor and what it means to teach someone a language and how to use it. If the class were not structured to make us think

about our experiences and to return to what we have done, it would be harder to be motivated to change the way I tutor. Reflecting on each week has also helped me to form a coherent vision of what I have been doing over this semester. I think that it is from this coherent understanding of the semester that I have learned the importance of relationships in language learning as I shared in my reflection. Reflecting on experiences makes them more than just isolated incidents; it draws them into a larger, more useful narrative.

Narrative leads inevitably and valuably to thinking in terms of causes, even if there is danger of forcing undue coherence upon the experiences. Putting the experience in story form focuses attention on gaining a unified tale. The sharing of the narratives by several participating tutors counteracts too-ready confidence in single explanations because tutors compare their different and sometimes competing causal explanations. Producing the narratives is itself creative reflection, and then discussing the narratives in class conveniently fosters further reflection on the language learning process from varied perspectives.

There was an unanticipated pedagogical result of having the tutors focus upon developing narratives. What one finds in the narratives told by the tutors regarding students experiencing challenges in public urban high schools is that when these students are given an opportunity such as they had with the tutors to tell their own narratives, their language learning process may be enhanced. Students unresponsive or less engaged in the classroom setting reacted favorably to the show of interest and raised expectations of the students’ possibilities for language learning. The focus of the service-learning course on narrative reflection naturally led tutors to incorporate narrative into their teaching techniques. Since the tutors were involved in narrative reflection upon their service-learning experiences, they tended to encourage their tutees to

relate their own stories to the tutors. Frequently the tutees were encouraged to interact with their tutors in the target language in a storytelling, conversational mode. One can see in a number of the tutors' tales that in order to adapt to the needs of their tutees, the tutors moved away from some of the instructional techniques they would have been inclined to utilize and adopted more tutee-centered narrative interaction. This seemed to build motivation, rapport, and confidence that impacted constructively on the language learning process. Two salient examples are the tutor of Japanese who moved away from drilling to a more narrative conversational exchange and the tutor of Spanish who practiced numbers and adjectives through exchange of anecdotes. Though the sample was small, the tutors' tales suggest that other tutees like those in their stories may be helped to move ahead positively in their acquisition of an additional language when given opportunity to participate in telling their own narrative surrounding their life and involvement in learning a new language.

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