

Chapter 63

Challenging Traditions: Constructing an Identity through Innovative Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author presents the case of Mariana, a Uruguayan non-native speaking teacher of English working at Lake Primary School in Uruguay. This chapter describes an action research process during which the author and a colleague reconstructed the experience of introducing a new approach to the teaching of emergent literacy with six-year-olds. In order to generate data, apart from holding a series of interviews and class observations, they engaged in Cooperative Development sessions (Edge, 2002, p. 18) using the framework to engage in “a mixture of awareness-raising and disciplined discourse” as a further means of facilitating the understanding of professional development processes. During and after the data generation period, the author analysed the data and shared the interpretations with her colleague, who examined them critically, adding her own views and clarifying as necessary. In the midst of the explorations of pedagogical experiences, the author and her colleague allowed other discourses to emerge, and were thus able to draw conclusions regarding Mariana’s identity as a non-native speaking teacher, her ability to deal with change and innovation, her relationship with peers, as well as her newly-discovered roles as researcher, leader, and change agent.

INTRODUCTION

I have always been interested in professional development and the empowerment that comes from deep engagement in the process. The present action research study is framed within a broader research project on institutional change being conducted at a bilingual primary school where I am Head of the English Department. At the time

of the study, the institution was undergoing a series of changes in management and reviewing its policies in order to increase its effectiveness. Being in charge of Professional Development (henceforth referred to as PD), by engaging in participatory action research projects with teachers of English on topics of their interest and mine, I intended to facilitate their professional empowerment by raising their awareness and sense of agency, fostering

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Challenging Traditions

an understanding of the importance of reflective practice or 'reflective action', as described by Fullan (2007, p.41).

The chapter is organised as follows. I start by describing the institutional context in which the present research was conducted and the managerial transition which constitutes the broader research project I was leading. I then introduce the co-text that serves as background to this report, including the analytical framework. Afterwards I present Mariana, the main character in this story, through her own description of her teacher-self, before inviting the reader to be part of our journey of discovery of the many forms professional development can take in times of institutional change.

It is my hope that this research will not only highlight the importance of making teachers voices be heard, but also that through the research process itself, teachers such as Mariana will be empowered professionally.

THE CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING LAKE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Lake Primary School is a private school in the capital city of Uruguay, whose mission and vision are based on three pillars: ethics and values, academic excellence and the importance of sport and recreation in character building. From pre-school to secondary school, it aims at building the necessary affective support and creating a safe environment for students to acquire the learning skills that they will need throughout their academic life, as well as the life skills that will make them responsible, sensitive and sensible citizens.

As an insider in this context, it is important for me to ensure the reader is provided with a complete picture of my role and Mariana's role in the present research, as well as the affordances inherent in our interactions. My roles in the present study were complexly intertwined, as were the potential influences they could exert on the research. It is my contention, nevertheless, that the

attempt to understand and reflexively explore my role as a researcher is an aspect of the process that needs to be foregrounded in order to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the report. My position as Head of English implied I was able to work with teachers in close collaboration, being in charge not only of the language curricula but also of PD at an institutional level.

Although given my position, my professional relationship with Mariana was unquestionably asymmetrical, I had striven to establish a more horizontal kind of relationship than had traditionally been the case in this school, in that for example, I involved teachers in the modernization of the curricula in such a manner that their opinions were not considered any less important than my own when the time came to make decisions. It was in this light that when in 2010 the need had arisen to change the approach to the teaching of emergent literacy, despite being advised to make decisions based on my expert authority, I decided to listen to the teachers involved and finally implement the programme we all felt was most suitable. In this fashion, at the time this study was conducted, I believe teachers knew that ours was not an authoritarian relationship and that my intention was to guide and support them in their development as professionals. Moreover, the very fact that Mariana and I embarked on this research together to some extent evidenced my approach to PD and the kind of leadership I wished to provide. Rather than conducting research 'on' Mariana in order to draw my own conclusions and keep them to myself, we decided to embark on this action research project together, in order to facilitate her professional development as well as to increase my own understanding of how best to facilitate PD processes among teachers. Therefore, our roles as co-researchers in this process were in complex interaction with our respective roles as teacher and Head.

As regards the school itself, it is noteworthy that PD had not traditionally been assigned too prominent a role for a variety of reasons. As an

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