

The Ghosts of Teachers Past: Finding One's Voice as a Teacher

By Daniel Xerri

Do teachers really only teach the way they were taught? Perhaps not, according to various sources detailed in this article which challenge this maxim. But it's certainly true that as teachers find their own voice, they are more likely to derive satisfaction from their career.

At the NILE@21 conference, Rod Bolitho's plenary focused on the transitions in the life of a teacher. He explained that teachers go through a number of transitions in their career and some of these are quite difficult to negotiate, especially at the beginning. Building on White's (2008) article on teachers' professional life cycles, Bolitho claimed that one of the main challenges for novice teachers is that of discovering ways of not remaining bound to how they were taught when they themselves were students. Shaking off the influence of one's own teachers might not be a priority for those new to the profession, preoccupied as they are with surviving the classroom; however, the sooner they find their voice as teachers the more likely it is that they will derive satisfaction from their career. Teacher education and the educational climate in general need to facilitate this process by providing novice teachers with the means for them to discover their voice.

Apprenticeship of Observation

Lortie (1975) coined the term 'apprenticeship of observation' to describe how pre-service teachers join the profession holding certain preconceptions of teaching formed over the many years they sat in class as students. These preconceptions often lead to intuitive and imitative teaching behaviours that they adopt by default despite having successfully completed a teacher education programme. The main ramification of this idea is that novice teachers are unwittingly incapable of finding their own voice as professionals.

Nonetheless, recent research challenges the maxim that educators only teach the way they were taught. For example, amongst higher education faculty, teaching is a product of knowledge derived from their experiences as →

instructors, their experiences as students, their experiences as researchers, and from their non-academic roles (Oleson & Hora, 2014). Cox (2014) found that “teachers teach the way they themselves preferred to be taught, or the way they think students learn best, demonstrating that teachers are taking a much more metacognitive approach to teaching” (p. ii). Training helps teachers to develop this metacognitive approach by exposing them to current, evidence-based pedagogy and enabling them to



reflect on their own learning (Cox, 2014). If they are convinced of the soundness of this pedagogy they will adopt it as a better way of teaching their students (Cox, 2014). This implies that teacher education has a crucial role to play in the formation of teachers, not only by equipping them with the knowledge and skills they require in the classroom but most importantly by developing their beliefs about what qualifies as effective teaching and learning. In this way, novice teachers have a better opportunity of shaping their own voice as professionals.

Voice

On many creative writing courses and in some writing manuals, a writer's voice is celebrated as being vital. Morgan (2014) reports that the

best courses produce writers who possess a unique voice, in this way countering the accusation that such courses merely generate clones. Defining voice, however, is somewhat tricky. Freese (2013), for example, says that “A writer's voice is something uniquely their own. It makes their work pop, plus readers recognize the familiarity.” Klems (2012) affirms that “Voice is your own. It's a developed way of writing that sets you apart from other writers (hopefully). It's your personality coming through on the

page, by your language use and word choice.” Edgerton (2003) is fully convinced of “the tremendous role your personality plays when you arrange words and sentences” (p. 7). If applied to teaching, this would mean that one's personality infuses the way one teaches, distinguishing it from the voices of colleagues and predecessors.

However, due to practical considerations not everyone can afford to be so idealistic. Partly taking his cue from Bloom's (1997) *The Anxiety of Influence*, Berlatsky (2014) asserts that “for the vast majority of working scribblers, writing is less about finding your own voice than about figuring out how to say something someone, somewhere will pay you for, or at least listen to. If there's a voice, it's always an adjusted and negotiated voice, rather than a pure effusion of individuality.” Similarly, teachers can never fully escape the voices they were exposed to when they were students and trainee teachers, or the voices they are exposed to through interaction with more experienced peers. Despite the fact that some teachers might feel anxious at not being original when teaching, they should realize that creativity is not just a question

of producing a voice that is unique. They can exercise creativity by reworking the voices they were and are exposed to in order to stamp their mark through synthesis and reconfiguration (Xerri & Vassallo, 2016). Rather than attempting to enable every teacher to develop a unique voice, teacher education should provide trainees with the metacognitive capacity to evaluate their beliefs about teaching and learning. In this way, they will stand a better chance of innovating education despite the challenges that they will encounter in an educational climate that is sometimes bent on stripping teachers of their autonomy.

Teacher Autonomy

Teacher attrition is a problem affecting a number of countries around the world, with many of them struggling to keep teachers in the profession beyond the first five years. The cost to a nation of teacher turnover is quite high (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). Research suggests that the main reason why novice teachers decide to leave the profession is constituted by emotional factors: anxiety, joy of teaching, confidence, making a difference in students' lives, commitment, burn out, frustration, and stress (Myers Giacometti, 2005). These factors affect teacher satisfaction, which depends on both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, the former playing a more significant role in boosting motivation (O'Reilly, 2014). Teacher satisfaction "is influenced by the extent to which factors such as school climate and support are oriented to allow for teacher autonomy in the classroom" (O'Reilly, 2014, p. iv). In Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is one of "three innate psychological needs...which when satisfied yield enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Providing individuals with choice and opportunities for self-direction enhances intrinsic motivation because it allows them to experience autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to a teacher who left the profession, "Teachers in schools do not call the shots. They have very little say. They're told what to do; it's a very disempowered line of

work" (as cited in Riggs, 2013). This seems to suggest that teachers need to be provided with an adequate measure of autonomy so that they feel in charge of the choices that shape teaching and learning in their classrooms. This autonomy might help to empower teachers to discover their own professional voice as early as possible rather than spending an inordinate number of years trudging in the footsteps of their own teachers.

Conclusion

In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the Ghost of Christmas Past enables Scrooge to revisit his past in order to impress upon him the need to change his ways. In the process, readers get to understand why Scrooge came to be a resentful and hard-hearted miser. In some ways this can act as an analogy for one of the most pivotal roles that teacher education is tasked with performing. Pre-service teachers need to have ample opportunities to evaluate their beliefs about teaching and learning and to understand how and why these were formed. It is by examining the beliefs that might have become entrenched as a result of their schooling that novice teachers can find the means of vanquishing the ghosts of teachers past. ■

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