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# Can We Praxisize Second Language Teacher Education? An Invitation to Join a Collective, Collaborative Challenge\*<sup>1</sup>

Judy Sharkey\*\*

The purpose of this essay is to begin a conversation on how we might make praxis, or “praxizing,” i.e., fostering and sustaining an ongoing dialogical relationship between theory and practice, an integral part of second language teacher education. This project is firmly located in critical sociocultural theories of, and approaches to, language learning and teaching, and requires active, participatory and collaborative inquiries by teacher educators and teacher learners across the multiple levels and stages of teacher learning from entry level courses to teaching practica and beyond. Examples of praxis/praxizing are included as well as some of the challenges to doing this work.

Key words: praxis, teacher education, teacher learning, sociocultural approaches to learning

El objetivo de este artículo es iniciar una conversación sobre cómo podemos convertir la praxis, o “praxisización”, es decir, la promoción y el sostenimiento de una constante relación dialógica entre teoría y práctica, en un componente integral de la formación de maestros de segundas lenguas. Este proyecto se inscribe en teorías y enfoques críticos socioculturales de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de las lenguas, y exige, de los formadores de formadores y de los profesores en formación, el planteamiento de interrogantes activos, participativos y colaborativos, a través de los múltiples niveles y etapas del proceso de los profesores aprendices, desde los semestres iniciales hasta la práctica docente y etapas posteriores. Se incluyen ejemplos de praxis/praxisización, así como algunos de los retos que este trabajo implica.

Palabras clave: praxis, formación de maestros, aprendizaje docente, enfoques socioculturales del aprendizaje

L'objectif de cet article est d'engager une conversation sur le thème suivant: comment peut-on convertir la praxis, ou « praxisition », c'est-à-dire la promotion et le soutien d'une constante relation dialogique entre théorie et pratique, en un composant intégral de la formation de maîtres en secondes langues. Ce projet s'inscrit dans des théories et des approches critiques socioculturelles

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1 This article is an expanded version of the author keynote presentation at the International Conference of Professional Development for Foreign Language Educators: Challenges for the New Millenium held at la Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia in August 2008. The topic was inspired by the author's participation in an experimental collaborative action research project with a group of six pre-service English teachers at the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes (UAA) in Aguascalientes, Mexico. Dr. Sharkey spent four months at UAA as a Fulbright Scholar, a program funded by the State Department of the United States of America.

de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage des langues, et requièrent des interrogations actives, participatives et collaboratives de la part des formateurs de formateurs et des professeurs en formation au travers des multiples niveaux et étapes du processus des apprentis professeurs, depuis les premiers semestres jusqu'au stage de professeur et aux étapes postérieures. L'ont peut inclure des exemples de praxis/praxisition, tout comme quelques-uns des défis que ce travail implique.

Mots clés: praxis, formation de professeurs, apprentissage des professeurs, approches socioculturelles de l'apprentissage

There are many challenges in trying to praxize. ....[T]he first challenge was trying to understand the meaning and purpose of praxis. I did not understand what praxis had to do with my practicum, but later on, I found the benefit and how praxis could improve my teaching... The second challenge to praxize was how to have the opportunity to combine theory with practice for beneficial teaching and learning. (Arnold, pre-service teacher, final paper, 5/12/08).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 40th Anniversary edition of the *TESOL Quarterly*, Johnson (2006) argues that one of the challenges for second language (L2) teacher education in the 21st century is not whether pre-service teachers should study theory in their programs but that teacher education programs should “create opportunities for L2 teachers to makes sense of those theories in their professional lives and in their work” (p. 240). She rejects the theory vs. practice debate and calls for the use of praxis because it “captures how theory and practice inform one another and how this transformative process informs teachers’ work” (p. 240).

In the spirit of Johnson’s call and the overarching theme of this volume of *Íkala*, the purpose of this essay is to begin a conversation on how we might make praxis, or “praxizing,” i.e., fostering and sustaining an ongoing dialogical relationship between theory and practice, an integral part of L2 teacher education programs, and how this endeavor might serve our larger project of improving educational opportunities and experiences for our teacher learners, their students and teacher educators. Such a project is firmly located in critical sociocultural theories of, and approaches to, language learning and teaching, and requires active, participatory and collaborative inquiries by teacher educators and teacher learners across the multiple levels and stages of teacher learning from entry level courses to teaching practica and beyond. To do this work means re-examining our assumptions

about learning and teacher learning—both how they are defined and assessed. Furthermore, it also means that we make this re-examination open to public scrutiny.

This essay is not meant to be an exhaustive, comprehensive argument on the role of praxis in the new millennium. Rather, it is an invitation for readers to consider the offer, the possibilities of the challenge, and to join the project. As poet Antonio Machado counsels us, “*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*” Let our individual and collective collaborations shape our path. The following questions organize the essay:

What are the roots of this particular project? What is Praxis? What does it mean to praxize? Where does “praxis/praxizing” fit into current issues in language teacher education? What do we need to do to praxize language teacher education and what would this look like? What are the challenges to doing this work? I end the essay with an invitation to join this project.

## 2. WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF THIS PARTICULAR PROJECT?

As a language teacher and a teacher educator, I have long been interested in Freire’s (1988) notion of praxis: reflection and action on, and in the world in order to transform it. However, in the spring of 2008, praxis as a concept and a lived reality became more relevant when I had the opportunity to work with a group of six pre-service English language teachers at la Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, in central Mexico. The students were in their final semester of their English Language Teaching degree program and were completing their second forty-hour teaching practica. I served as their tutor.<sup>2</sup> We were also participating in an experimental collaborative action research seminar that evolved into an inquiry into praxis. Mid-way through the fifteen-week semester, we had developed the question, “can we praxize the practicum?” Our inquiry emerged from reading and discussing numerous journal articles on current

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2 In the United States, we use the word “supervisor,” but at la UAA, the term used was “tutor.” I prefer this more collaborative term.

issues in the field, one of which was Johnson's 2006 article that included her position on new directions for teacher education. "Praxis" was a new concept for the students, one that they expressed interest in investigating. We did not simply *study* praxis but we sought to create opportunities to make sense of the concept through our teaching: for Arnold and his classmates the focus of their praxizing would be their practica; for me, the focus would be my work as tutor and as the instructor in the research practica. How could analysis of my students' efforts to engage in praxis inform my pedagogy as a teacher educator? Rich individual and collective learning occurred but not without its challenges, as indicated in the opening excerpt from Arnold's final paper. One clear message from the group was that praxis/praxizing could be a powerful piece of language teacher education but waiting until the last semester of a program was too late. We needed to start this work sooner. As our group was grappling with our challenge of trying to praxize the practicum I was invited to participate in the upcoming International Conference of Professional Development for Foreign Language Educators: Challenges for the New Millenium to be held at la Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. How serendipitous! It afforded the perfect opportunity and challenge for me to formalize our inquiry and use it to generate a larger discussion with colleagues in the field.

This article is not a summary of our project in Mexico but the experiences of the students informed my thinking and I have tried to weave their perspectives into the different sections of this paper. So, I begin with what Arnold identified as the first challenge: *What is praxis?*

### **3. WHAT IS PRAXIS? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PRAXIZE?**

Praxis is a way of seeing and acting on the world. It is a transformational process that captures the dialogical, ongoing, cyclical, catalytic relationship between practice and theory. One is not privileged over the other, and indeed, one is diminished without the presence of the other. The purpose of praxis is purposeful, intentional change, and change that seeks to enhance rather than limit human possibilities. McNiff & Whitehead (2006) characterize praxis as "morally, committed practice" (p. 200).

Praxis is often associated with action research and reflection/reflective teaching, and indeed, these concepts are interrelated. For example, reflection is integral to praxis and action research can provide a useful structure or framework for praxis to occur but reflection does not necessarily lead to praxis; and action research can be a time-limited project rather than a philosophy or perspective. Although these concepts have appeared with increasing frequency in journals, books, and conference presentations, there is inconsistency in how they are conceptualized and enacted. Thus, it is worth taking a moment to clarify how I am defining those terms within this larger project.

The Educational philosopher John Dewey (1933/1998) defined reflective thinking as active, persistent inquiry combined with an attitude of intellectual responsibility that entails acknowledging the social and moral consequences of one's beliefs and actions. Thus, when teachers reflect on a lesson or their practice, they must go beyond description of what happened or "how did it go?" and consider questions such as "From this lesson, what did I learn about myself as a teacher? What did I learn about my students (individually and collectively)? How will this inform subsequent lessons/actions?" Then, in order to foster critical examination of these interpretations, we must ask ourselves what concepts, ideas, or beliefs about teaching, learning, students, teachers, and curriculum inform these interpretations and who is best/least served by these interpretations. (For an overview of how different traditions of reflection, from efficiency to social reconstructionism shape the questions posed, see Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This Deweyan notion of reflection is integral to the type of praxis I am advocating here.

Action research is systematic inquiry into one's work, and typically includes the following steps or stages: identifying an issue, formulating a question to pursue, planning and implementing an investigation or action plan, analyzing/reflecting on the endeavor and articulating implications/strategies for future practice. Ideally, it is a cyclical, self-generating process where each new project can generate new issues/questions to investigate. It is often described as empowering for its practitioners because they have ownership of the inquiry (Arias & Restrepo, 2008; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006): it is self-initiated and directed. However, similar to "reflection," action research is defined and

enacted according to various traditions or schools of thought. Three of these traditions are: technical problem solving; practical-deliberative; and critical emancipatory (Masters, 1995). The third tradition, often called critical action research, includes analysis and questioning of social/political contexts and how the cultural values and ideologies of these contexts shape policies, practices and possibilities (Mills, 2000).

Action research within the practical-deliberative and critical emancipatory traditions can provide useful structures for fostering praxis, and one could argue that praxis is one indicator of an effective action research project within these traditions. However, praxis can occur outside of action research or of any type of formalized inquiry. What then are some examples of praxis?

Numerous examples of praxis can be found in published accounts of teacher research and action research, particularly from the practical-deliberative and critical emancipatory traditions. A text that offers a range of examples of teacher praxis, within and outside of formalized projects is *The TESOL Quarterly dialogues: Rethinking issues of language, culture and power* (Sharkey & Johnson, 2003). The collection was designed to highlight teachers' knowledge of their classrooms as they engaged in intellectual inquiry. The text is a series of dialogues on ten different articles (included on a CD) originally published in the *TESOL Quarterly*, all of which reflect critical sociocultural approaches to language education. Educators at various points in their career wrote of how an article caused them to rethink or reconceptualize language teaching and/or learning. Then, the author(s) of the original articles responded to these readers' ideas, often remarking on how participating in the dialogues helped them deepen their thinking on the issues and questions raised by the responses to their original articles.

The dialogues have various formats: they are single and multi-authored; they are in narrative and dialogue format. And, they illustrate the dialogical, multidimensional and multidirectional dynamic of praxis. For example, after reading Amy Cecilia Hazelrigg and Jim Sayers' responses to his 1989 article on the politics of language teaching, Alastair Pennycook writes "One of the (mixed) pleasures of reading thoughtful discussions on one's own work is



finding how much they add to the original text. . . .(R)eaders often add all the real contexts that you never managed to deliver—those poignant moments and examples that make your ideas solid but that you failed to deliver on at the time” (pp. 28-29).

In another example of the dialogical nature of praxis, three teachers at an elementary school (students ages five to ten) in Wisconsin, a state in the midwest region of the United States, wondered how to include their ESL families’ cultural knowledge into their classroom practices in ways that would support their learners’ linguistic and academic development. In pursuing their question, they designed inquiries for their individual classrooms but used the structure of a teacher learning community to share their activities, processes, insights, and to ask for feedback. In summarizing the value of their endeavors they write:

The stories we tell are not unique but they are compelling. They illustrate that simply being sensitive to cultural differences is not enough; it takes a rigorous ongoing examination of assumptions, practices and environments to effect real change. We advocate for teacher research whether as a single defined initiative or as an action research cycle, knowing that no matter what we find, and what new practices we implement, there will always be more to discover, understand, and change (Hawkins, Johnson, Jones, & Legler, 2008, pp. 173-174).

By reading numerous examples of praxis and identifying and discussing the roles that theory, research, action/practice and critical reflection all play in the dynamic, teacher learners may begin to understand the concept of praxis and its role in teaching/learning. But here is where we need to shift from noun to verb, from praxis to praxize. Teacher learners may be able to read and discuss examples of praxis, but what types of knowledge, skills, and dispositions would they need in order to praxize?

To praxize, teacher learners have to be able to talk back to theory, to challenge the concepts and principles that are presented to them as explanations of language development, of language acquisition, etc. Then, they would have to know how to--and be ready to, make different kinds of pedagogical decisions. To do this work, they need to know and know how to use tools of intellectual

inquiry to examine their contexts, to identify challenges, issues, practices, and to question underlying assumptions. In addition to knowing where and how to find information on their contexts (e.g., demographics, student performance, published curriculum goals, etc), and differing perspectives on current debates, teacher learners also need familiarity and practice with a variety of instruments and techniques for data gathering and analysis. All of this work is greatly facilitated by teacher educators and teacher education programs that value, practice and nurture the type of reflective thinking defined by Dewey and Freire.

A wonderful example of “talking back to theory” is Firth and Wagner’s (2007) explanation of how their seminal work in reconceptualizing second language acquisition (SLA) to include more sociocultural perspectives (1997) grew out of their frustration with the inability of prevailing SLA theories to explain the rich language learning that was occurring in the data they had collected. They write:

Try as we might, our observations of people using English as a lingua franca (i.e., a mediating language that is not a mother tongue [L1] for any of the interactants) just would not fit the theory and concepts of SLA. Yet such data were, surely, of critical relevance for the SLA program (2007, p. 800).

Firth and Wagner’s dissatisfaction led them to articulate a robust alternative to the cognitive/psycholinguistic paradigm that has since led to an incredibly generative strand of inquiry and debate in the field. Sharing this back story with teacher learners not only provides them with an illustrative example of “talking back to theory” but it also invites them into a different type of professional conversation, one that encourages them to think about how they might use their own data to question theories/concepts presented in their programs.

Returning to Arnold’s opening comments in the epigraph, the first challenge with praxis/praxizing is understanding the concept. The second challenge, the place where the learning occurs, is having the opportunities to praxize. And, if we agree to take up this challenge of praxizing second language teacher education, our programs will offer numerous opportunities across the spectrum of our curricula. However, before fully taking up the task of how we would provide those opportunities, I locate this project in the larger subject of language teacher education.

#### 4. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PRAXIS/PRAIXING IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION? TEACHER LEARNING

Praxizing teacher education is a worthwhile endeavor for numerous reasons, and it is particularly valuable for language teacher education in this era of increased standardization of education and imposition of foreign models/standards on diverse EFL communities (e.g., see Gonzalez, 2007). In contrast to simply implementing or transplanting models or concepts, praxizing emphasizes knowledge of local contexts and factors and values the theorizing that teachers and teacher educators generate from and in their own practices and realities. Through praxizing and learning to praxize, participants develop powerful analytical tools to critique educational structures, reforms, and practices -- whether they are home grown or imported/imposed and seek to enact alternatives. In short, praxis nurtures professional, pedagogical agency. This has powerful implications for language teachers and language teacher educators. For example, in asserting the invaluable role of teacher and local knowledge in second language curriculum development, Canagarajah writes,

Teachers in different communities have to devise curricula and pedagogies that have local relevance. Teaching materials have to accommodate the values and needs of diverse settings, with sufficient complexity granted to local knowledge. Curriculum change cannot involve the top-down imposition of expertise from outside the community but should be a ground up construction taking into account indigenous resources and knowledge, with a sense of partnership between local and outside experts (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 20).

Readers with a variety of interests in second language teacher education, including policy and curriculum development, will see the value of praxis for our field. However, for the purpose of this essay, I focus on the role of praxis/praxizing in the inter-related areas of teacher knowledge and teacher learning, agreeing with Freeman (2002) in that “teacher learning is the core activity of teacher education” (p. 1). I begin with a brief overview of the theory-practice issue; then, suggest that this subject is most relevant when connected to teacher learning, and that praxis is the site where we can see how teacher learners are using theories/concepts to inform their pedagogies. Finally, I suggest that a sociocultural approach to teacher learning dissolves the theory-practice dichotomy and provides a powerful alternative.

Questions of “too much theory” or “the role of theory” seem to have a perennial place in teacher education, from classrooms to conferences to publications as recently reflected in a symposium in *TESOL Quarterly*, “The place of theory in TESOL is uncertain—in the association, in the field as a whole, and in this journal... What is and what should be the place of theories in TESOL?” (Canagarajah, 2008, p. 285). As with the majority of debates in professional literature, how a concept or issue is defined frames the discussion. In the theory-practice literature, the discussions tend to fall into one of two categories: theory and practice as distinct entities, or theory and practice as having some type of relationship (Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003). Within this frame, questions often address whether theory precedes or follows practice; whether practice (re)constructs theory; or whether theory and practice exist in a dialectic relationship (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007). In terms of teacher learning, inquiries into the theory-practice relationship are best understood when they are grounded in teacher learners’ experiences and interpretations. Praxis provides a structure for these inquiries, both for teacher learners and for teacher educators. Consider the insights of Ezequiel, a classmate of Arnold’s in our seminar in Aguascalientes:

Before [our inquiry into praxis], I sustained my practice on my beliefs about teaching and what I had learned through the major. There were times in which I taught the way I have been taught by my teachers and I tried to employ some aspects of their teaching to mine. In this way, I knew theory was part of learning to become a teacher. Theory helped to inform the professional about how to carry out learning. When I started to teach, most of my teaching was based on beliefs and familiar concepts. Yet, my understanding of these concepts was not so clear, so I could not employ them in the classroom (Ezequiel, 5/12/08, final paper).

Ezequiel’s reflection captures the numerous tensions and issues in the theory-practice debate in learning how to teach. He found himself teaching the way he was taught and understood theory to be a set of instructions on how to “carry out” teaching. His program followed the traditional sequence of theory first, practice later. Theory was positioned as a decontextualized, static entity waiting to be delivered or applied, like a can of paint to the walls of a (class) room. Yet, it was only in his practicum, when he tries to use the concepts he “learned” in his coursework, that Ezequiel realizes his understanding “was not so clear.”

And, this realization was stimulated through our inquiry into praxis. Once we had decided to “praxize the practicum,” I asked the group to review their previous coursework and identify some of the concepts/theories that they had found interesting, challenging, and/or inspiring. After sharing and discussing current understandings of these, we added a new question to the weekly reflections on lesson plans, “what concepts or ideas did you draw on in writing your reflection?” In our seminar we would then ask each other how/if these concepts/ideas were helping us to understand what was happening in the classrooms and what we would like to see happening. The purpose was not to fit the practica into matching categories but to encourage a dialogue between the experiences and the theories/concepts. I hoped to stimulate or create a process similar to the one that Firth and Wagner (2007) described in their work. They did not stop at saying, “the data don’t fit”; they pushed themselves to generate new understandings and interpretations of second language acquisition. We did not have grand expectations of reconceptualizing the field; we were just trying to understand how practices and theories/concepts informed one another.

Although Ezequiel, Arnold and their classmates had some valuable learning experiences through our shared inquiry, all six participants felt that the effort to praxize was too far removed from earlier coursework. At times they had difficulty recalling what they had learned in their theory classes. Readings and papers were in the distant past. This separation of theory from practice connects to Arnold’s identification of the second challenge: “*hav[ing] the opportunity to combine theory with practice for beneficial teaching and learning.*” In other words, the opportunities to praxize have to come earlier in teacher education programs.

Adopting a sociocultural approach to teacher learning offers a possible solution because within this approach concept development is understood to occur when “abstract principles are interwoven with concrete, **local** experiences” (Smagorinsky et al., p.1399). In other words, there is no separation of theory from practice and “theory” cannot be learned in the abstract. Perhaps it can be studied and quizzed through exams and papers but it is not necessarily “learned.” Let’s remember Ezequiel’s experience—it was not until he was in his practicum and tried to use particular concepts to inform his teaching that he realized he did not understand them so well.

Sociocultural approaches posit that learning is socially mediated and can be defined and assessed through analysis of the learner's participation in social events (Vygotsky, 1986; Wenger, 1998; Werstch, 1991). For example, Judith Kalman, a researcher investigating adult literacy in Mexico City defines "literate" as the ability to use written language to participate in a social world (2003). Literacy is much more than the rudimentary skills of forming letters and decoding words; it is a complex, recursive process involving multiple genres and discourses. It is using the written language in deliberate and intentional ways to participate in the social events valued by the culture. For Kalman's adult participants, this meant writing notes to a child's teacher and/or being better able to advocate for a child's healthcare by asking questions about medical prescriptions. Kalman used three core concepts from sociocultural learning theories—availability/access, participation, and appropriation, to develop a powerful analytical framework for assessing literacy but it could be used to assess other learning, too. Our research seminar's inquiry into praxis led me to Kalman's work because I intentionally sought to include in our readings language and literacy research that had been conducted and published in Mexico, by Mexican scholars, and in Spanish. Kalman's work proved extremely beneficial for my learning because it gave me a new way to understand teacher learning.

Connecting back to the challenge posed by Johnson (2006) regarding language teacher education: it's not whether teacher learners study theory; it's how they use it to participate in their professional (i.e., social) worlds. Praxis is a site where we can see how/if teacher learners are using theory to inform their teaching. But learning to praxize is a complex, typically non-linear, developmental process. As I read and re-read my students' reflections, our seminar notes, and their final papers, I came to see how Kalman's framework could be a useful tool for understanding their efforts to praxize and to appreciate the developmental nature of the process/project.

#### **4.1 Availability, access, participation, and appropriation**

*Availability* refers to the physical presence of and the quality of materials and resources. For Kalman's study, this referred to things like books, magazines, writing supplies and libraries. For teacher education, availability would be the curriculum, the people, and facilities that comprise the program. This would

include the subjects, topics, skills, and perspectives represented in texts; books, multimedia, software and hardware; classrooms, libraries, computer labs; expertise, experiences of faculty; and sites for field-based assignments and practica.

*Access* refers to the opportunities to use the materials and resources. In determining the access adult learners had to literacy, Kalman considered not only the existence of libraries but also the factors that affected the participants' use of them. For example, were libraries difficult to access because of geographic location and/or did their hours prohibit working families from visiting? Did circulation policies restrict choices? When considering the issue of access in a teacher education program, we might ask what factors facilitate or hinder our students' access to content, skills, and people (faculty, academic advisors, target language learners)? Do students have time to meet with instructors and advisors outside of class time? Is there an appropriate amount of technological support? Do facilities such as language labs and multimedia rooms have hours amenable to students who must work full time to support their studies? Is linguistic access an issue? Do readings on more challenging concepts need to be in students L1 *and* the target language? Do students have opportunities to weave "abstract principles into local, concrete experiences"? Do they have opportunities to collect language samples from local contexts—in and outside of classrooms—and analyze them in light of what they are learning? Do they have opportunities to try out or test initial understandings in appropriate contexts? Are there alternative spaces and places for students to meet with classmates and faculty to raise or work through questions and get and give feedback on ideas? Are there conferences, guest speakers, discussion groups (in person and online)?

*Participation* refers to how learners use the resources in social settings to develop understanding. For socioculturalists, participation is where learning occurs (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). For example, Carolina, one of Kalman's focus participants, used her developing literacy skills to have a stronger role in caring for her daughter who was suffering from a kidney ailment. Carolina had to learn how to monitor her daughter's daily medicine, record, and chart her temperature and glucose levels and use this information to interact with health professionals. For teachers, classrooms and schools are the principal social settings in which they participate.

However, participating in a social event doesn't guarantee learning because there are different types of and qualities of participation. And, participation can lead in several different directions, two of which are: mimicry and appropriation. Without critical reflection, participation can lead to which might be faulty or weak understanding, or what Vygotsky called "spontaneous" concepts-principles that do not work across multiple contexts. (For more information about how this applies to L2 learning in the "concept-based teaching" literature see e.g., Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). Mimicry may be a superficial understanding of a concept, but it may also be a sincere attempt by the learner to develop understanding, and it might also be a useful stage for some learners.

A primary objective for teacher learners is to develop what Vygotsky called "scientific concepts" which typically occurs in conjunction with some type of formalized instruction. If teacher learners are to develop conceptual knowledge that will guide their teaching we need to provide them multiple types of opportunities to try out, test, explore the principles and theories they are studying, and, to be able to do this in and out of an institutional setting. This means providing field experiences early in their programs; facilitating interactions with community members; providing instruction in data gathering techniques; and allowing them to try different types of activities in local classrooms. However, a crucial part of participation is learner agency and thus, teacher learners need to assume some responsibility for their own development. Jessica captured this shared responsibility in her paper, "By having the combination of appropriate knowledge, and the desire to improve our every day teaching, we as pre-service teachers can discover the path to our praxis" [Jessica, 5/12/08].

This leads us to *appropriation*, a process that Werseth (1998) describes as "taking something that belongs to others and making it one's own" (p. 53). Kalman (2003) draws heavily on Bahktin's (1981) explanation of appropriation, specifically language and discourses, emphasizing the complexity and difficulty involved in the process. Language is a social tool yet it also mediates individual meaning making. Thus, appropriation is always a dialogical process between the individual and the social. In terms of teacher learning, appropriation represents a level of scientific concept development where teacher learners can use these concepts accurately yet flexibly across different classroom contexts. Asking our students to create professional portfolios, articulate teaching philosophies



supported by examples from their classrooms, asking them to share a video clip of their teaching and explain their pedagogical decision-making, conduct and present teacher or action researcher, are all examples of activities where we can look for signs of appropriation.

Access and participation facilitate appropriation, but perhaps what happens too often in our programs is that teacher learners are expected to make a leap from availability (e.g., the content of their courses) to appropriation (i.e., the successful application of content in their teaching), without consideration of how issues of access and the quantity/quality of opportunities to use the resources mediate their development. The analytical framework of availability/access, participation and appropriation is useful not only for understanding teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective but also for critically assessing our programs. Learners have to do the learning, but we should acknowledge how the content, design, and assumptions about learning that define our programs facilitate or hinder the process.

In summarizing this section, I argue that praxis/praxizing is valuable to teacher education for several reasons but principally in the key area of teacher learning. If praxis is a dialogical relationship between theory and practice, and a site in which we can view teacher learning, we need to critically analyze how this relationship has been defined and debated in the field. A sociocultural approach resolves the dichotomy of theory/practice and offers a more robust understanding of concept development. When we ask teacher learners to praxize we provide both resources and opportunities for them to participate in and direct their own development. In the next section I share illustrative examples from teacher education programs and courses whose activities are in line with this project.

## **5. WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO PRAXIZE LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION AND WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE?**

Preparation is a fundamental issue for a pre-service teacher to be able to praxize in the practicum. The challenge is based on preparation. The more knowledge we have about theory, the more tools we are provided to praxize (Jessica, final paper, 5/12/08).

If praxizing is a worthwhile endeavor, and teacher learners need opportunities to praxize at multiple points in their programs, how do we make this happen? What do these different opportunities look like and where do they fit into program philosophies, courses, and assignments? In pursuing these questions I have begun by critically examining my own practices and looking for examples from other programs and colleagues. A sampling of what I have found so far is assembled here. It is by no means exhaustive and in some instances I have offered only cursory descriptions. I have tried to find a range of conceptual, programmatic, and practical examples with the intent of fostering a collaborative, generative discussion.

### **5.1 Programmatically: Praxis inquiry**

The Faculty at the School of Education at Victoria University in Melbourne Australia defines teacher education as an act of personal and institutional reflexivity (Cherednichenko & Kruger, 2002). They have reconceptualized and redefined their teacher education program around an approach they call Praxis Inquiry (PI) (Cherednichenko, Kruger, Burrige & Carpenter, 2006). The heart of the program is the partnerships that VU has forged with area schools. Teacher learners are placed in these schools at the beginning of their programs, and the teacher education program is built around the students' experiences at these schools, as the candidates become co-investigators and collaborators with teachers and university faculty. The focus for all of these participants is the nature and quality of the learning experiences of the students in these schools. PI is a teacher education curriculum built on the following values:

- teacher learners' questions about students' educational experiences are critical to their learning
- university coursework values these questions and provides appropriate intellectual support to pursue these questions through systematic inquiry; and
- educational knowledge generated in schools is a legitimate, respected contribution to the knowledge base (Guejonsdottir, Cacciattolo, Dakich, Davies, Kelly & Dalmau, 2007-2008).

The program at VU is not specific to language education but their example of designing and implementing a program around a praxis philosophy is instructive if not inspiring.

## **5.2 Conceptually: “Inquiry as stance” and the “Community teacher”**

Praxis as a way of seeing and acting on the world is a philosophical stance. In a similar vein, “inquiry at stance” and “community teacher” are alternative perspectives on teachers and teacher learning that are consistent with a praxis philosophy.

## **5.3 Inquiry as stance vs. Inquiry as project**

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2002) makes a distinction between inquiry as stance and inquiry as project, advocating for the former. The latter is typically a time-bound activity completed as a course or program requirement or it may be attendance at a workshop or seminar on action research. For example, many programs require teacher candidates to conduct an action research project as a culminating project. In contrast, inquiry as stance emphasizes teacher learning as a lifelong process of posing and pursuing questions pertinent to local contexts.

Taking an inquiry stance means teachers and student teachers working within inquiry communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others. Fundamental to this notion is the idea that the work of inquiry communities is both social and political—that is, it involves making problematic the current arrangements of schooling, the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and used, and teachers’ individual and collective roles in bringing about change” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a, pp. 288-289)

Teacher education programs that take up this position would infuse inquiry into all aspects of the curriculum and create inquiry communities whose members would be at varying points in their professional learning: teacher education students from entry level to culminating stages; full-time and part-time faculty; and teachers, administrators, and students from partnership schools and organizations.

An inspiring example of such a community is the one described by Clara Arias and María Isabel Restrepo (2008; under review) at la Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. They describe an inter-institutional action research group—in the critical emancipatory tradition, that “...illustrate[s] how reflexivity, dialectic critique, and collaboration...are put into action.” The learning generated was not only a deeper understanding of the focus topic of evaluating language acquisition, but also and understanding of how participation in the group empowered members “to exert their [professional] autonomy to transform their educational communities” (under review, p.1).

The work of the Arias, Restrepo and their colleagues necessitates the creation of a new term: community of praxis. In their seminal work on social learning theory, Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term “community of practice” to mean a group of people with a common interest or passion that interact on a regular basis over a sustained amount of time and through their interactions learn from and with each other, deepening their knowledge of the shared interest. A preliminary definition of a community of praxis is a professional learning community, operating on principles of collaboration, inquiry and critical reflection committed to praxis as means of transforming educational practices and policies. A community of praxis enacts an inquiry as stance philosophy on a sustained basis, with fluid membership, and multiple opportunities and forms of participation.

Another endeavor that communities of praxis would support is self-study, a type of teacher research undertaken by teacher educators with the dual purpose of personal professional development and a deeper understanding of teacher education practices (Cole & Knowles, 1998). The aim is to “provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). By engaging in self-study, teacher educators acknowledge their role in shaping pre-service teachers’ experiences in their programs.

#### **5.4 Community teacher**

Inquiry as stance and communities of praxis are learning communities with shared intellectual/educational goals and values but do not necessary represent the cultural /political knowledge and values of communities in which schools

are situated. However, knowledge of local contexts is integral to teacher praxis. The concept of “community teacher” is instructive here as it helps validate and legitimize the role of local knowledge in teaching.

Developed out of the traditions of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and leaders and teachers in and before the Civil Rights movement in the United States, a community teacher spends quality time in the community where he or she is going to teach in order to better serve his/her students. As Murrell (2001) asserts,

the community teacher is aware of and when necessary, actively researches the knowledge of the cultures represented among the children, families, and communities he or she serves... The CT enacts those knowledge traditions as a means of making meaningful connections for and with children and their families... Community teacher knowledge emerges from a complex mix of reflective experience, cultural knowledge and critical inquiry (pp. 51-52).

Teacher education programs that embrace a community teacher philosophy would expand field experiences to include community-based experiences that provided teacher learners with different types of opportunities to learn more about their teaching contexts. Becoming more knowledgeable about local communities is one important way that teacher learners are then able to talk back to theory because they can question imposed policies/curricula in light of immediate realities, constraints and possibilities.

## **5.5 Courses, assignments, practica**

An important way to start nurturing praxis is to include more practica and other field-based assignments early in our programs, of course, always with a critical reflection component. Possibilities for this include helping students get into language teaching classrooms; asking them to interview a bi/multilingual person about their learning experiences; requiring students to be language learners themselves, whether formally or informally; volunteering to be conversation partners or tutors.

Another area to consider is lesson planning and curriculum design. In promoting what they call a community-integrated pedagogy, Sandra Schecter,

Patrick Solomon, and Linda Kittmer (2003) require prospective teachers to design curriculum that reflects knowledge of communities and neighborhoods where they teach. The lessons and activities must be based on interactions with members of the community (e.g., parents, students, and other community members). Examples include collecting oral histories and helping students design and create bi or multilingual histories of their neighborhoods. These assignments encourage teacher learners to see their students' communities as rich curriculum resources, and they foster praxis because students must investigate local contexts and integrate this knowledge with what they are learning about appropriate curriculum design and implementation.

To help students develop the appropriate tools for community investigations we could train them in ethnography and in ethnographic data gathering techniques. Carolyn Frank (1999) taught her practicum students' methods such as ethnographic interviewing and mapping to help them see their classrooms in different ways. Learning to analyze data through an ethnographic lens also provides students with the intellectual tools to name and question the cultural assumptions embedded in practices, programs, and policies. Introducing students to stimulated recall protocols, used with audio/video recordings of students' practice helps them analyze and assess their development. Frank's work took place within a final practicum but many of her activities could be inserted into earlier field experiences.

One creative possibility in facilitating concept development can be found in arts-based approaches to research such as performance ethnography (Denzin, 2000). As its name implies, performed ethnography transforms "ethnographic data into scripts and dramas that are either read aloud by a group of participants or performed before audiences" (Goldstein, 2004, p.1). In her ground-breaking work in teacher education, the critical ethnographer Tara Goldstein argues that performed ethnography makes critical research useful; and helps students "think imaginatively" in service of their own development (Goldstein, 2004, p.2). In "Hong Kong, Canada," Goldstein turned her ethnographic research on the experiences of Chinese-Canadian immigrant students in a dominant English-speaking high school into a script and had her teacher candidates perform and process the experience. The combination of performing and processing

the performance in conjunction with reading and discussing issues related to silencing, discrimination, and language development, helped her prospective teachers gain a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Performed ethnography is distinct from classroom role-plays because it is research based and accompanied by strong theoretical and analytical frameworks. True, there are not many examples of performed ethnographies for us to use in our programs but I share this example so that we might also “think imaginatively” in terms of our own learning as teacher educators.

In addition to infusing core courses with opportunities to praxize, teacher educators can also seek spaces to create new courses. In their often-cited work challenging colonial discourses and practices in TESOL, Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) describe a special topics graduate seminar that they designed and taught. Carmen Chaçon and Luisa Alvarez, two students in the seminar, returned to their home country of Venezuela and designed and taught their own version of this course (2003).

## **5.6 Larger projects and creating forums and spaces to blur institutional/community boundaries**

Many teacher education programs already require students to do some type of culminating project. Typically, these include an action research or teacher research project and/or a portfolio. These are valuable, worthwhile endeavors. However, in light of our conversation there are two issues worth considering. How do we scaffold students’ learning within these projects and how do such projects reflect or contradict our stated philosophies regarding learning and teaching? For example, how might these projects reflect an inquiry as project rather than an inquiry as stance perspective? If we believe that learning is socially mediated and it occurs through participation in social events, how do we ensure that those social events reflect the culture beyond our institutional walls? One way is to create spaces where students present their work to larger audiences. In other words, we blur institutional/community boundaries by inviting participation from our larger communities. Examples include establishing research conferences where educational professionals across the career span present their work at the same venue as our teacher learners who are presenting their culminating projects.

Students early on in our programs also attend and perhaps are able to present preliminary findings on their current projects. Other examples include asking students to submit their final projects for consideration in professional publications. The journal *PROFILE: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, published by la Universidad Nacional de Colombia Sede Bogotá is a wonderful example of an appropriate publishing venue as it typically features articles written by novice and veteran teacher researchers as well as articles related to policy analysis and essays on current pressing issues.

In this section I have tried to outline considerations for praxizing language teacher education and offer some concrete and conceptual examples of that work. A working “to do” list is: articulate a philosophy for our programs that defines our concepts of learning, of teaching, and then design a program that enacts this philosophy; provide students with multiple opportunities to “make sense” of concepts, theories, content in their courses; develop students’ analytical skills necessary for inquiry; find ways to create and nurture collaborative inquiry communities that are open to multiple stakeholders; and broaden the learning spaces to go beyond university walls. However, it is important to stress that there is no official entry point or gateway to this work. A supervisor/tutor of student teachers need not wait until a program revises its mission statement to begin experimenting with ethnographic data gathering techniques. We might all be able to find more ways to integrate different kinds of field experiences into our courses or infuse more inquiry-based assignments into our syllabi. Again, the list above is not exhaustive. I look forward to learning about more possibilities from my colleagues and collaborators.

## **6. CLOSING: THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES AHEAD**

Obviously, there are numerous challenges to this project, and they vary according to the diverse contexts in which we work. There are challenges related to resources, and ideological and cultural constraints, particularly in institutions that value compartmentalized approaches to scholarship and in contexts where high-stakes tests have equated learning with test scores. Faculty turnover affects stability of inquiry communities. Students who have mastered a culture of schooling that rewards mimicry (e.g., perhaps through multiple choice exams



or essays that only require identification or paraphrasing of concepts) and are new to the concept of praxis/praxizing may need additional help in seeing their learning in new ways. Given all these challenges, is it worth it? Consider the thoughts of Juan, another one of our seminar participants in Aguascalientes:

Is praxis a worthwhile pursuit? I would say definitely yes. I consider someone who says no is a person who wants to have everything already stated and telling him what to do. In that way he would not feel responsible for what he is doing. I believe it is worthwhile because it is all about improvement and I want to learn about myself and I want to prove to myself what I am capable of and at the same time what my limits are [Juan, 5/12/0]

I hope I have sparked enough interest in the project and provided enough examples so others will take up the invitation to join this collaborative effort.

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## THE AUTHOR

\*\* Judy Sharkey is associate professor and associate director of Teacher Education at the University of New Hampshire in the United States. She holds a Ph.D. in Language and Literacy Education from the Pennsylvania State University and an MAT in TESOL from the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont (USA). E-mail: judy.sharkey@unh.edu