

Communities, Concepts and the Jungle of Words: The Writing of a Research Course Journal

Timothy Brockley

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"An ecological theory holds that, if you take the context away, there is no language left to be studied. It's like an onion. You can't peel away the layers and hope to get to the 'real' onion underneath: it's layers all the way down. So it is with language: it's context all the way down." (van Lier, 2004, p. 20).

One could argue that the prefixes 'eco' and 'green' have taken over the course of our vocabulary and thus our way of thinking... and rightly so considering the state of affairs. This is no less true in the field of linguistics but, perhaps ironically, the pace of change appears to be crawling at a much slower rate. The experimental design still holds sway in the highest of academic circles. The propensity to churn out quantitative data and to adhere to notions of statistical significance drives the engines of education all around the globe. Still, a great deal of effort and significant bodies of qualitative forms of research (Nunan and Bailey, 1996, Lantolf, 2000, Kramersch, 2002, Nunan and Choi, forthcoming) have appeared and have influenced the field of language learning. Just what an ecological theory might look like in terms of qualitative research will be explored throughout this paper.

But first, an essential question: "Who are we writing for?" The answer may seem simple enough: "We are most likely seeking approval or at least recognition of some kind... acknowledgement for our efforts... we want to be heard and understood." Great efforts are made to deliver a 'good product', otherwise papers and books wouldn't likely make it past the door of a publishing house. Editing out content is the chopping block of convention.

Stripped of all said literary intentions, the question eventually becomes: "Who are we?" We may just as easily peer down into a stream (or even a gutter after a storm) and try to

identify what it is we are gazing at... and so we reach the concept of 'identity', such a solid and consonant word for such a fragmented and fragile reality. In what is now a classic paper on learner identity, Bonnie Norton (1995) juxtaposes the "humanist conceptions of the individual" as having "an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent core" with the poststructuralist viewpoint which "depicts the individual as diverse, contradictory and dynamic; multiple rather than unitary, recentered rather than centered" (p.15).

This last concept, 'recentered rather than centered' is the point of departure from which this paper hopes to explore an ecological perspective. The idea that we are constantly 'recentering' ourselves as the world is changing all around us rings true in a poststructuralist environment. It's a dizzying and complex process of taking on multiple identities in relation to the dynamic progression of life in which we are all in constant relationship. It challenges the boundaries between where 'we' might end and where 'the other' appears to begin. It is the inquiry Claire Kramsch (2002) has proposed in her introductory piece entitled: "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" (p. 1). In this collection on ecological perspectives, she describes the contributors as researchers that "found in the notion of "ecology" a rallying framework to voice the contradictions, the unpredictabilities and paradoxes that underlie even the most respectable forms of research..." (p. 4). She also makes explicit just what the metaphor may come to mean in the area of second language research: "...they place themselves on a level that is of a different logical type from either language acquisition or language socialization: they seek new ways of conceptualizing the relationship of the dancer and the dance" (p. 5).

The keepers of journals constantly confront the uncertain territory between the writer and what is written. We are continually mimicking texts, ideas and other voices and at the same time distancing ourselves from other texts, ideas and from other voices. The following is one such writers' attempt to make meaning of a six week journal writing exercise in the context of a research methods course in an online learning environment.

Overview

There are three inseparable components in the overview presented here: the participants, the methodology and the interpretive analysis. The participants (primarily, my fellow students, my professor and various authors) the methodology (the writing of a journal as a course assignment) and the analysis (interpreting the journal as a process of delayed retrospection) can be seen as interacting "'nested' systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) in which influence can pass in many directions" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008, p. 169). It's as if there is a kind of pinball action and reaction happening between the individual, the community of participants, the reading of various texts, the writing process and various forms of discussion. It is this dynamic interaction that constitutes the reflective process along the trajectory of our day to day experience. Eventually, this is the process that gives voice to the events in our lives in the form of an interpretation of that which has transpired. As van Lier (2004) points out: "The value of Bronfenbrenner's model lies not in the nested set of systems, but in the focus on the relationships among them. These 'linkages' allow the researcher to track the instigative and debilitating forces between one ecosystem and another" (p. 210). I will attempt to sketch out the role that each of these components has played both individually and in relation to one another.

Participants: The 'who'

The participants in this study were all enrolled in an online research methods course. Our assignment was to keep a daily journal of our experiences for the first six weeks of the course and to write up an interpretive analysis of that experience in the following three weeks. We participated in a discussion forum up until about the eighth week of the course and had weekly ninety minute online chat sessions. The scope of this paper will mainly be limited to the journal writing process in relation to the academic community (of fellow students and authors) although some discussion forum posts made their way into the journal and thus occasionally appear in the narrative below. There was no attempt to tie together the three forms of communication (journal entries, discussion forum posts and chat sessions). There are two reasons for this: one, including hundreds of pages of discussion forum and online chat text here would perhaps require a book-length treatment, and two, the complexity of human relationship that emerged throughout the weeks of this course is perhaps outside the ken of my interpretation.

The other less visible, but no less influential, participants include my family, friends and the students I teach. The less obvious participants, but those that might easily be overlooked, are the authors of the texts that have inspired me throughout this study.

Methodology: The writing process

We can only document what comes to us as we sit down to a keyboard, take notes on a bus or even speak into a recording device when there's no debilitating embarrassment. Some

essential things naturally escape our attempts to peg them down. I found myself 'losing thoughts' when the means or the time to place them were not immediately available. Other times, these lost thoughts came back as opportunity and they were duly noted.

Most of the content that found its way into the journal arrived there each morning, as the first activity of the day. There was always coffee and always texts—books, articles, copied diagrams, notes and notebooks, discussion forum posts and e-mails—surrounding me as I put words to document day after day for the six week duration. This is one reason that the journal ended up being a dialogue with texts. I would record a salient portion of text, think about it and respond to it in one form or another. In short, the methodology turned into a process of turning various texts into a six week written dialogue. Authors of books (both living and dead) and my course participants interacted in an awkward dance of ideas. The other supply of journal content came to the page after transferring various thoughts and ideas from my pocket notebook at the end of each day or on the following morning.

Analysis: Ways and means of interpretation

The analytic process was more or less a mixed one. Following Nunan (fifth chat correspondence in the eight-week course):

"...segment your entries into 3 x 2 week groups, find a couple of issues in each two week bunch of data, and then provide an interpretive analysis...You often have to trawl through the data several times...As categories begin to emerge, you have to highlight issues that seem to go together using highlighting pens and different colors for different issues...of the font color function of Word..."

This process corresponds roughly with Lieblich, et. al. (1998) as outlined in Nunan and Bailey (2009, pp. 432, 424) which I have employed and which is paraphrased in the following manner:

- 1) Read the material several times until patterns emerge...
- 2) Put your initial and global impressions... into writing.
- 3) Decide on special foci of content or themes...
- 4) ...mark the various themes in the story...
- 5) Follow each theme throughout the story... Be aware of the transitions between the themes, the context for each one and their relative salience in the text.

As an extension of the fifth process, 'following the themes', I transferred the entire text of the journal into an mp3 format and reviewed the material as audio files. This allowed me another avenue to identify the location of the chosen themes and to explore their transitions and internal relationships.

Further, rather than divide the journal up into segments of equal length, I trawled the data in an attempt to discover potential stages along the trajectory of the forty two entries. I employed the forth technique as outlined in Nunan and Bailey (2009, p.417) which was exemplified in Schmidt and Frota (1986). In this exemplary study, an EFL learner of Portuguese in Brazil found three "natural divisions or stages" (ibid., 417) emerging over a twenty-two week period. In the case of my own journal, the stages pertain to the process of developing relationships (to people and texts) within an ecological metaphor: stage one (entries 1.0 ~ 1.13 ~ 15 pages): surveying the territory, stage two (entries 1.14 ~ 1.35 ~ 27 pages): tending the field and stage three (entries 1.36 ~ 1.41 ~ 24 pages): new horizons.

Themes and Stages: The Trajectory of Experience

Themes and stages emerge throughout our lives whether we choose to pay attention to them or not. Even from a basic biological point of view this is quite obvious: we're born, we grow up, we get older and eventually we pass away. There are events that create salient memories throughout our lives and there are stages of development beyond the biological that we undergo. We could position this six week journal writing process as a pilot study in search of an ecological research paradigm.

In a systems theory model, themes and stages can be seen as part of the trajectory of experience, each in constant interaction along a changing and potentially challenging terrain. "The landscape includes areas where the system hovers on the edge of various, very different possibilities. Ridges between very different valleys reflect sudden changes in the state of the system" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008, pp. 45, 46). One concrete and quite common example of this kind of changing terrain is when we replace one source for another in the construction of a literature review. In fact, most references in this paper may eventually find their way into the as-yet-to-be-created thesis report. On the other hand, they may be destined to some forgotten valley along the way.

Themes are generally incidental. They appear in layers of context, be they online classroom experiences, face-to-face conversations, conferences, books, notes or any other contexts. Themes often defy chronology and tend to pop up unexpectedly. In contrast, stages are generally chronological. We evolve (or devolve) over time and salient changes are named 'stages'.

Although one stage may appear to shift back to an earlier one, as in the notion of recidivism, there can be no stepping in the same stream twice. Stages, in all their overlapping nature, help us to construct meaning from experience.

Themes

I have outlined two central themes that were both salient and recurring throughout the journal writing process. In the section on themes, there will be no references to the journal itself, rather reflections on the themes themselves. In this sense, this section is the outer layer of the journal writing experience. It is a treatment after the fact. The themes here will take on new light. This is testament to the fact that interpretive analysis is perpetual... one could go on and on as long as there was a text and a will to engage with it.

Theme one: Communities of practice and identity

Wenger (1998) suggests that "...we belong to several communities of practice at any given time..." and that "...the communities of practice to which we belong change over the course of our lives... communities of practice are everywhere" (p. 6). These communities can be family, work or school-type organizations or more loosely connected in nature, for example, a community of sky or scuba divers. The key words in community then are 'belonging' and 'participation': "Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). It is in these communities that we "construct[ing] identities in relation to these communities" (ibid., p. 4).

Two such communities will be described here: the online community that is this course and the community of writer/researchers that are found in all the texts I have come into contact with

over the period of this journal writing experience. Perhaps it is with the second of these communities that I have devoted most of my time.

Theme two: An evolving conceptual framework

Defining a conceptual framework usually follows a thorough literature review. Nonetheless, in the process of reading through texts relevant to a proposed research agenda, the structure of the inquiry itself passes through stages: the questions may be reformulated, certain references are foregrounded and others fall by the wayside, even one's position in terms of concepts and ideas may shift in relation to other paradigms. The evolving conceptual framework in this case is general in nature but emerges from van Lier's (2002) "...four basic constructs in ecological linguistics:"

1. Language *emerges* from semiotic activity.
2. Language does not arise from input that is processed, but from *affordances* that are brought forth by active engagement and which enable further action and interaction.
3. Language is not transmitted from person to person by way of monolog or dialog, but arises from indicational processes occurring in *triadic interaction*.
4. Linguistic activity in particular contexts can be analyzed in terms of *quality*.

Nunan and Bailey (2009) quoting Duff (2008, p. 49) relate that successful studies present coherent and informative conceptual frameworks: "It is up to the researcher to articulate the theoretical framework guiding the study..." (p. 181). As Dewey (1938) has pointed out: "Failure to examine the conceptual structures and frames of reference which are unconsciously implicated in even the seemingly most innocent factual inquiries is the greatest single defect that can be found in any field of inquiry" (p. 507).

I take these comments to mean that the enterprise of developing a conceptual framework should not be taken lightly. The narrative below is an exploration of concepts. It is an attempt to peel away the layers of an ecological approach to classroom research and, at the same time, to see these concepts as a working whole.

The narrative in stages: Living in the jungle of words

Meaning condensation, according to Nunan and Bailey (2009), "...involves a reduction of large quantities of text into briefer, more succinct formulations. This process results in condensed statements that are then subjected to further analysis" (p. 418). Due to the length of the journal—which ran sixty six single-spaced pages—much of what follows is in condensed form. But perhaps the more visible technique that emerged, as the process of interpretation unfolded, was that of selection. In order to keep the paper from turning into a book, only the most salient of entries have been selected. These selections and condensed forms have also been 'subjected to further analysis' such that the following narrative is a kind of hybrid of the content of my journal interwoven with a delayed interpretation of that content.

Stage one (entries 1.0 ~ 1.13 ~ 15 pages): Surveying the territory

The journal began as a 'running start'. The image is that of chasing a freight train as it is in motion and hopping into an empty car: "(Entry 1.00) So the beginning of this diary is actually a synopsis of several weeks of reading and thinking regarding the thesis proposal... it's part of what I sent in/uploaded as part of the pre-residential assignment and it describes an abandonment of a previous topic in favor of classroom research... so it's time to get to work (Entry 1.00). The hurried nature of this imagery describes a scramble to come up with

a decent proposal before the residential conference begins. In fact, at the time of this entry, I would have but a week to put something together.

In truth, the environment of the online community had become somewhat stressed at the outset. There was a problem of mistaken identity that involved T. interpreting a problem that S. was undergoing and attributing it to myself. But I did come to terms with the matter in my own way: "(Entry 1.05) Well... it's good that T. realized his gaffe... I really don't like being on the receiving end of mistaken identity. Perhaps I, myself, will make efforts in the future to NOT cause any misunderstandings. This type of thing can get in the way of learning (Entry 1.05)."

As the residential neared, the anticipation of events and the prospect of reunions and new relationships painted the canvas in much brighter hues: "(Entry 1.09) My wife and I went to Insa-dong, a kind of 'folk village' in the middle of the cement jungle of the city of Seoul. We drank coffee and played cards and in the evening we went to a restaurant serving 'Korean Temple Cooking' which included a dance performance (exotic and animistic... especially the 'crane dance'). As the dancers gathered at the end, they 'invited' the foreigners onto the small wooden stage and supplied us with various instruments... the result was very comical... but surprisingly fun... especially for my wife who nearly died of laughter watching the 'waegook' circle around rather stupidly, attempting to keep in time with the complex rhythms of the native performers... All in all, I'm ready for the residential... working with my fellow students and professors in the process of clarifying the content and form of our research... looking forward to tomorrow...(Entry 1.09)."

By the end of the residential, the community of learners and professors had become quite close. Not 'forced' by any means, but naturally so... there was an invisible bond, a real spirit of learning and mutual respect. Listening to the voices of the participants, of friends, as they described their experiences throughout the residential courses and conference was truly a moving experience and saying 'goodbye' was not an easy gesture. "(Entry 1.13) I really enjoyed working with my fellow students and professors... great people... I think we all came out of the residential with some gold in our pockets... memories that will last a lifetime... a profound sense of learning and overall friendship... these are the experiences that enrich this fantastic thing called life (Entry 1.13)."

Conceptually, I had been preparing to move away from an information processing (input-output) model for quite some time. Here, I've quoted from a lecture by Chomsky (2008) and have followed up with commentary. "(Entry 1.3):

'...if somebody can find a better theory that doesn't involve computation, great, let's have a look at that...for insects or humans or anything else... but until then we just work with the best theories we can find...'

Comments: Perhaps the new model is an ecological one. This substantiates the research design in that this study sets out to explore the possibility that van Lier's four constructs can be operationalized and that data can be gathered and evaluated using this model. The fact that potentially valid and reliable (to some acceptable degree) results can be attained further justifies the approach. One may argue that the scope is too wide, that it should be narrowed, that perhaps just one of the four constructs should be operationalized. This is a fair argument, but I would insist that the model is ecological essentially because it is a holistic system. To make discrete studies of each construct would betray the essential nature of the

model. The system works as a whole and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Entry 1.3)."

In fact, I would later choose to operationalize just one of the four constructs (triadic interaction) but in a manner that would foreground the construct as opposed to isolating it. The other three constructs (semiotic activity, affordances and the quality of interactivity) would see the light of day as complementary to triadic interaction, but not in the spotlight. This decision seemed to resolve both the problem of isolating an ecological construct and the blunder of putting too much food on the academic plate.

Stage two (entries 1.14 ~ 1.35 ~ 27 pages): Tending the field

During this 'post-residential' period (entry 1.14 coincides with the closing of the aforementioned conference) the online learning community really began to come together... relationships grew stronger and informative and discursive volleys were regular fare in the weekly chats and on the discussion forum in the course of moving through the very comprehensive textbook: "(Entry 1.18, a discussion post to S. on October 30) As I explore our book (wonderful tool that it is) and observe myself in my environment, as I record events both immediately and in a delayed retrospective fashion... Well, it's a lot like what I've been doing for a good portion of my life... but this project has given the process more focus... (Entry 1.18)."

There are also more references to our professor in the journal during this stage. Perhaps due to the quality of his efforts and unifying skills in the weekly chat sessions: "(Entry 1.18, same) I think the Prof. has brought up, on more than one occasion, the possibility that we cannot apply the rules of one sport to the rules of another... for example the rules of golf (as a

psychometric/psycho-statistical metaphor) to the rules of Rugby (as a naturalistic inquiry metaphor)... Such that the rules of each research tradition are unique in their own way... By the way, are there any rules in Rugby? (Entry 1.18)."

And frank discussions were the order of the day... in fact, we all seemed to be taking our own unique approaches to the journal writing process: "(Entry 1.30, a discussion post to T. on November 10) That's the essential point I think... to what degree are we willing to let others look into 'our' thoughts... and further, to what degree would that be useful to anyone... Look out... going into the philosophical mode... (Entry 1.30)."

In regards to the journal keeping process, we come to realize that we are indeed internalizing the concepts that ring true in the moment of comprehension. We are, in fact, composed of the languages of a complex set of 'others' and of other voices and ideas in texts. It is dialogue on two planes as Holquist, paraphrasing Bakhtin (1981) asserts: "Dialogue may be external (between two different people) or internal (between an earlier and a later self) (p. 427): "(Entry 1.21) This journal is turning dialogical... ideas that came from other sources are now returning in new light... It goes to show, ideas need time to gather and merge, to find their way into the puzzle of our thesis proposal... it can't just be a ramshackle piecemeal outline, rather it must contain the seeds of a fully developed methodology that has the capacity to carry out research and to collect data that in turn addresses the research questions posed... in effect, there must be an organic quality to the paper, all the elements working toward internal validity... (Entry 1.21)"

This conceptual flight of fancy is typical of the contemplative nature of developing a framework for scattered and coalescing ideas. Later, a more focused and pedagogic approach to

the nature of triadic interaction (which had become the focus of the research proposal) manifested: "(Entry 1.34) I'm searching for a good reference to joint attention. The indicational process that is an essential aspect of triadic interaction in a screen-based classroom involves not only pointing and gesturing, but also vision and facial expression... for example, if a student is taking a turn and has a prolonged gaze focusing on a particular image, text or activity, then it's fair to assume there is a process of thought happening... the student then appears to make an expression of discovery and blurts out an answer to a question or a solution to a puzzle (posed as part of an activity on the screen)... in the interim, the teacher may point to a particular aspect of the image or text or provide audio stimulus or word/phrasal elicitations to give hints or clues while the student focuses on the activity... further, fellow students may supply the partial or whole answers to the question, giving the turn-taking student the option of following their own thought process or taking up the fellow student's utterance... and this scaffolding process goes on in a constant and dynamic manner throughout the lesson in various combinations of attention (to the screen, to the teacher, to other students), collaboration, thought, gestures, expressions and further utterances... (Entry 1.34)"

Stage three (entries 1.36 ~ 1.41 ~ 24 pages): New Horizons

The final stage was spurred forth by the professor. He posted the introduction to his yet unpublished book: *Shifting Sands: The Evolving Story of 'Voice' in Qualitative Research*. This was really a breakthrough of sorts as the concepts I had been collecting as elements in my own personal conceptual framework had been confirmed by this finely-crafted introductory piece, a work that I feel will be a transforming influence on language learning research: "(Entry 1.36) I've just read Prof. Nunan and Julie Choi's intro to *Shifting Sands* and realize just how important this work will become... (Entry 1.36)."

It seemed to me that the online community was given a boost of insight into the idea of voice and reflexivity, of the process of reflective journal keeping and its interpretation: "(Entry 1.36, a discussion post to the Prof. on the week of November 16) This is really interesting material Prof. and thank you for sharing it with us. Favorite lines (p. 8 of 19): "Narratives enable people to construct a meaningful story about themselves over time. As Hardy (1968) attests, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (p. 5) (Entry 1.36)."

"(Entry 1.39) I found an article in the Asian EFL Journal by my former professor, when I was studying in Chiang Mai, Thailand. J. introduced me to SCT and was well-read on the subject... In fact, his dissertation was based on our classroom (antics?) activities with a focus on gestures. Brought back excellent memories... (Entry 1.39)."

From here on in, I see the community of researchers/writers stretching beyond my coursework as an MA student. I can see the nature of this community expanding to include those professors, colleagues, teachers and students I've had and will have the privilege to meet. Perhaps we'll share stories and even wile away the hours discussing theories and concepts or collaborate on projects of similar interest. This new horizon is the beginning of an unnamed adventure, a journey that hopefully will push me to the limits of my intellect and imagination.

Well... I'm now on the last leg of the narrative. In this third and final stage of the journal writing process, many of the concepts that had come before were swept up one day (November 22) into a framework inspired by a television documentary, which triggered a consolidation of some of the concepts relating to the general principles of sociocultural theory (as I had

interpreted them). This extraordinary documentary contrasted modern-day super tanker construction with the making of an historic Indonesian trade ship. The craftsmanship of assembling the wooden vessels of old had been (and still are) passed down in the native culture's history of apprenticeship, the beginnings of which have been clouded as lost memories.

In order to build these anachronistic wonders, the artisans employ (to this day) just the simplest of tools—strings to measure, hammers, hand saws and pegs (versus nails or spikes)—and natural materials—wood, bamboo, rope and resins. It is amazing to see the workers create these thirty or forty meter vessels with no blueprint... they are under the direction of a master craftsman.

By contrast, the construction of the modern day oil tanker has very little human-to-ship interface; that is, most of the work is orchestrated by advanced levels of computer programming and the equipment used to carry out these programs' tasks. What must be articulated here is the complexity of the process itself. It would be impossible to build this ship by hand... under any circumstances. We are amazed by the processes we cannot see nor understand. The construction of these tankers is daunting in this respect.

So what could this possibly mean, what significance does boat-building have in the context of this paper? Here is my attempt to give substance to the metaphor:

"(Entry 1.41) Considering the building of an Indonesian trade ship, the question arises: "How could this technology have begun?" Wind is a natural object. A sailboat is a physical

artifact. It is artificial in the sense that physical objects were manipulated in its formation. The process of mediation is what brought the notion of moving across water with the assistance of wind and the motivation for doing so (fishing, travel, migration, adventure) together with the physical objects, artifacts/tools and language that is the means for the realization of this notion.

Within this process of mediation, the ship builder has made use of physical objects (mainly wood) physical artifacts (such tools as sharpened stones, hammers, saws and measuring devices such as a stick) more complex physical artifacts (the tools that manufacture a sail) and symbolic artifacts (in the case of the first boats, linguistic and paralinguistic tools such as speech and gesture) and in more advanced forms, such as the clipper ship, additional symbolic artifacts (tools such as blueprints and calibrated instruments such as squares and complex measuring devices).

Mediation then is the process of combining the intention (to build a boat) with the physical objects and artifacts (the raw materials and the means for their transformation). Symbolic artifacts play the central role such that communication in all its forms (gestures, speech and the various forms of writing, blueprints and codes) are tools for the completion of the task (the building of a boat/ship).

When the task is carried out successfully many times over by the same people, the process of mediation as an external process becomes internalized, the interpersonal communication among workers and the use of tools and blueprints as an external process gradually becomes a process within the individuals participating in the project. Over time, in the case of the more able workers, the blueprints may be discarded, the physical tools may become improved and the

symbolic tools (as processes, organization and language use) may become honed. The more able become the masters of the craft, and they are then at liberty to train and assist the less able. But the craft (boat-making) as a whole, the communication processes and the knowledge to build things remains neither exclusively in the head nor in the world but, as Lantolf (2005) so aptly states, are rather:

"...always distributed between the person and the world and as such never are completely inside-of-the-head processes. Indeed, as previously mentioned, internalization is not about something moving exclusively and completely inside of the head but is about an individual's ability to function independently of specific concrete circumstances" (p. 342).

And further, on occasion, the less able will improve upon an aspect of the tools, their use or even the design, such that there can be no absolute rule according ability and creativity to experience. All participants have the potential to improve any aspect of the endeavor. History is brimming with examples of naive minds discovering novel and useful means for improving tools and processes, even if they are considered 'accidents' of good fortune.

In a sense, the idea of wind as a potential means of power, the conception of boat and sail, the implementation of objects (in nature), tools (physical artifacts) and processes (symbolic artifacts) and the final result (whether success or failure) is a metaphor for the collaborative socio-cultural-historical nature of the development (for both good and ill) of humankind. We change the environment (put boats and ships on the sea) and the environment changes us (we become adept at navigation, develop fears of falling into the abyss and find and transform other cultures). It is a process of mutual transformation (Entry 1.41)."

Sociocultural theory (SCT) is indeed an ecological approach. Focus is directed toward relationships and processes rather than on objects or outcomes. As van Lier (2004) contends: "The boundaries of SCT and ecology are highly permeable..." (p. 15) and "...the ecological metaphor can provide a coherent conceptual and methodological worldview and frame of reference that can move SCT forward" (p. 22).

This constitutes the end of the narrative section of this paper. If you have made it this far... I salute you!

Discussion

The journal itself is an elephant in a dark room: the tail must be a rope, the ear could be a hand fan and the trunk seems a lot like a water hose. This perennial metaphor highlights the challenge of qualitative research: one might ask, "How can we claim internal validity when the data and interpretation are in constant flux, when they are not definitive in nature, when the variables are not controlled as they seem to be in experimental research?" The question remains hypothetical, but its power over us appears to be dwindling. As Nunan and Choi (draft) point out: "In quantitative research, the researcher strives to remain 'invisible', maintaining the stance of the objective outsider." In contrast, they state that from a qualitative viewpoint, "researchers are insiders – very much part of the research process. The objective pronoun 'one' is exchanged for the subjective pronoun 'I'" (p. 4). This is an essential difference, perhaps enough of a difference to justify a whole different set of rules for each research paradigm.

Perhaps from a 'fractured future' (Nunan and Choi, draft) perspective, experimental methods necessitating controlled variables and standards of validity and reliability may be juxtaposed in a complementary fashion with the necessity of maintaining reflexivity and voice in naturalistic inquiry, i.e., in qualitative forms of research. This is to say, the 'objective outsider' and the 'subjective insider' may both have something to offer the processes of research, each in their own way. 'Voice' as a legitimate attempt to understand the nature of various forms of life in qualitative research paradigms may be seen as (Nunan and Choi, draft) "...the positioning of the writer within the text" (p. 12). It is "...*what* the story is and *how* the story is told" (p. 11) and "...can only be done by taking a reflective stance... a concatenation of reflexivity and voice. One enables the other" (p. 12).

Although the metaphor may seem somewhat tired, this process can be seen as a spiral of relationship between the voice as it creates text and as it turns back to interpret what it had said in prior contexts. It is emergent and it is evolving.

Conclusion

As suggested above, the objective pronoun 'one' pertains to research of an experimental nature, while the subjective pronoun 'I' approaches research in a reflective manner. The writer constantly reinterprets experience in new light. Perhaps we could also include a plural 'we' or an ecological 'we.' This would be taking the reflective, qualitative forms of inquiry to the level of global concerns in which all contexts are considered as an evolving whole system.

All three forms ('One', 'I' and 'We') could then be positioned as nested systems in the complex dynamic process of life as it evolves and transforms. Such nested systems are at once and the same time stable and predictable, fractured and multiple and dynamic and

mutual. This is to say that nothing is rejected. The experimental method, the qualitative paradigm and perhaps the as-yet-to-emerge ecological approach, each, in their own way, describes some aspect of reality. We will need all our efforts (both individual and collective) to create a collaborative research environment and even to bring about the conditions that foster peace and prosperity rather than war and poverty. Language, in all its diversity of form, must be the medium upon which this potential state of being is realized. We cannot afford to ignore any single context. As van Lier has pointed out: "You can't peel away the layers and hope to get to the 'real' onion underneath: it's layers all the way down. So it is with language: it's context all the way down." (van Lier, 2002, p. 20).

Timothy Brockley, 12-21-09

Postscript: Reflecting on the process:

I didn't explicitly answer the following questions in the paper, so I'll give some brief answers here:

What did I learn about language / learning / research / myself as a result of the assignment?

I learned that while journal-style qualitative research isn't perfect, it is viable and the results of writing a journal in a disciplined fashion and the consequent interpretive analysis can be a developmental process and an enlightening experience.

What were the problems / difficulties?

The main problems are two-fold: one, the discipline of writing in a journal on a daily basis does not come naturally... there is strenuous effort involved, and two, it's a daunting task to condense themes and stages from a lengthy journal and to craft them into a coherent whole.

How would I do this differently next time?

I'm quite satisfied with the approach I've taken, but I'm sure the process will evolve and new and different techniques will be employed in my next journal writing (ad)venture.

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