‘Lift-offs’: Teachers and Learners together in the Sense of Discovery

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Abstract:
This paper explores ‘lift-off’ moments in learning involving several teachers and their students in China. The data come from teaching and research situations centring on teaching and learning English (EFL). ‘Spoken English’ classes with middle school students, highlight playful approaches, including role play, scenario-setting and drawings, designed to challenge and subvert examination–centred expectations of English as a school subject. Documented interchanges between two postgraduate EFL teachers and their research coursework teacher and supervisor were handled largely through interview conversations or distance learning means and emails. These selections come from a wide data bank of exemplars collected over many years, and from linguistically diverse contexts.

An analysis of the language features of the data and their effects explores movement from initial impasses to breakthrough moments, as participants interact, shift ground and discover new learning. Definition of these ‘lift-offs’ centres in a sense of discovery that pushes learning forward and simultaneously pulls together life experiences for specific pedagogical insights, new directions in self-assessment and identity conclusions, and recognition of the power of inquiry. In particular, the paper explores the potential contribution of narrative forms of collaborative inquiry, co-constructed in face-to-face conversational settings and in the distance learning one-to-one format of emailing.

Introduction

All learners can recall ‘lift-off’ moments in their learning: times when suddenly what was going on around them made sense by linking with their own past experience, current need, or plan for a next step. Teachers in formal educational settings yearn for classrooms where ‘sparks’ of recognition along with the aura of an impending sense of discovery prevail. Yet what brings these occasions of connection from what is commonly going on between teacher and students to the forward movement of conjoined learning of students and teachers together?

Experienced teachers moving into unfamiliar fields of practice such as teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) for the first time, or undertaking postgraduate research often bring with them years of experience as family and community members as well as workers in a range of occupations and assorted jobs. On-the-job professional learning, while teaching, researching or supervising in substantially new contexts, does not wipe away prior years of informal learning, rather such experience provides a storehouse of illustrative anecdotes, valuable technical skills, and lessons instilling confidence. From this storehouse, as well as the self-estimation built from general lifelong learning, adults aware of moving into the role of novice in new teaching contexts test, draw comparative frames, supplement, and sometimes challenge or resist the ‘expert knowledges’ endorsed in professional training programs. Previous contexts of learning also mean that adult learners may find break-through moments difficult to achieve in the new situations of practice. Definition of these ‘lift-offs’ centres in a sense of discovery that pushes learning forward and simultaneously pulls together life experiences for specific pedagogical insights, new directions in self-assessment and professional identity, and recognition of the power of inquiry.
This article explores three exemplars, by analysing segments of data from different teaching situations in China, and centring on teachers teaching English as a foreign language, as viewed through the teachers’ own reflective practices and their emerging sense of professional identity. The selections for analysis here come from a wider data bank of exemplars collected over several decades of research in secondary school, adult, and postgraduate classes, involving teachers and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and a researcher with learning experiences in a broad range of linguistically diverse situations (Papua New Guinea, Egypt, Africa, China, Vietnam and Australia). The large data bank comprises transcripts of classroom lessons, interview-based conversations, teacher and student writing, together with drawings (mainly by postgraduate Chinese teachers and national literacy workers in Pacific countries) and ‘maps’ of individual timelines in relation to major national events, and teachers’ educational biographies of reading and of teaching English, as well as visual representations of intergenerational relationships and storylines.

In the teaching and learning situations from which the data selections examined in this article come, four teacher-learners, myself included, found ourselves in the role of novice, and to varying degrees outside familiar comfort zones despite our considerable years of formal teaching experience. Jenny Little’s concluding reflection would resonate for each of us - “I was in a completely new space as a teacher” (Appendix A, paragraph 15). Recently retired after a highly respected career as an English teacher in Australian secondary schools, Jenny commenced EFL teaching in a Shanghai Middle school, as the only ‘foreign teacher’ teaching ‘spoken English’ classes. I first met Constance and Ron as postgraduate students, when teaching Qualitative Research Methods three years apart to two very different Masters and EdD classes, at the same university in a provincial capital city in China. Constance, an experienced EFL teacher at the same university, spoke of her EFL classroom “as a stage” - the platform for passionate teaching as performance - “I suddenly become different ... put myself completely into the role”. Ron, a published writer and EFL teacher in tourism from another of China’s popular tourist destinations, encountered ‘novice’ learning in his foray into thesis research, as did I in my first experience of supervising Ron and other thesis students by email. Our entire supervision interchanges took place at a distance, after I’d returned to Australia and from wherever else I travelled (in Africa and Asia) during that year. At the time I regarded the ‘new space’ afforded by email as a very poor substitute for face-to-face supervision, however Ron’s and my own experience of breakthroughs in learning suggest grounds for reappraising the potential contribution of the space afforded by email interchanges and the internet.

**Informing theories and concepts**

Scholars have often focused on ways to bring about and to recognize occasions of breakthrough in learning. Familiar approaches within adult education centre on experiential, reflective and transformational learning. Those I find most useful in research and data analysis attend to the personal, social and cultural dimensions of learning and teaching interactions, as well as to the potential for movement and transformation.

**Personal stance and transformative change:**
Taking a Kellyan approach (Kelly,1955), Salmon (1980, 1990) and other cognitive psychologists have understood breakthroughs, sudden advances and discoveries in learning in the context of the personal roots of knowing, hence focusing on ‘people as knowers’ and learning as ‘knowing and coming to know’ (1980). We build our meaning-making in the form of personal construct systems, and use these constructs, accordingly, to make, predict, anticipate and refine expectations in life. Like Kelly, Salmon also emphasised the integration
of affective and cognitive dimensions in how we form and hold to our personal constructs, evident for instance in the resistance to new learning often apparent whenever our deepest assumptions and constructs become threatened, incongruous, or disconfirmed in the face of new demands, more complex challenges, painful contradictions and so on. Such resistance may indeed herald transformative change in our ways of ‘knowing and coming to knowing’, bringing changes to our construct system. Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) concept of perspective transformation took the discussion of ‘transformative learning’ in a linear direction of cognitive change (Baumgartner, 2001), accordingly viewing ‘lift-off’ moments as cognitive breakthroughs in viewpoint and understanding – taking place in the mind. Developing the sporting metaphor of stance, both personal and social stance, to denote the characteristic position(ing) a person takes up in life, Salmon (1990) offers a more holistic understanding of transformative change that engages both teachers and students together. The personal stances we take up as learners and teachers, and throughout our lives, reveal both the personal roots of our knowing and also their social and cultural origins and practices. Understood as inherently personal and social, transformative teaching and transformative learning thus entail significant interactions between stances and the over-layering of one stance with another.

Meek (1983, p. 14) encapsulates a micro version of such change, by identifying four potentially interactive views that may develop within the context of a reading classroom. ‘In every undertaking that involves teaching and learning there is a crosshatching of intentions and expectations, like the shading that gives depth to a drawing’. The teacher’s initial view of the task and the student’s initial view of the task (both based on their previous experience) develop inclusively into the teacher’s view of the student’s view, and the student’s view of the teacher’s view. ‘Where accommodation of one viewpoint to the other is possible, success follows’ (p. 14). Moreover ‘If ... some of these interactions could be examined, then what actually happened would be a different kind of evidence’. We might trace ‘lift-off’ possibilities through the dynamic interactions or the trafficking between the changing views of teacher and learners. Moreover as Meek emphasises successful learning involves a change of role – ‘The role of the reading teacher changes as the learner becomes expert’ (pp. 14-15). And we might add, the stances of the teacher and of the learner change too.

*Locating cultural experience in ’potential space’ (Winnicott, 1971):*
I find myself constantly returning for rich understandings of human interactions, learning and teaching, to Winnicott’s (1971) concept of ‘potential space’ and Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘zone of proximal development’. Both concepts focus on young learners engaged in ‘third-space’ intermediate zones of imaginative play and guided participation, in which the outer / inner realities of self and other interact, as the interpersonal both enables and becomes the intrapersonal. Winnicott’s metaphor of potential space locates cultural experience and the discovery of the self in ‘a third area, that of play, which expands into creative living and into the whole cultural life of man’ (1971, p. 121). Winnicott sums up the origin and location of play and cultural experience thus:

This third area has been contrasted with inner or personal psychic reality and with the actual world in which the individual lives, which can be objectively perceived. I have located this important area of experience in the *potential space between the individual and the environment* ... The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living. (emphasis in original, p. 121)

Following Winnicott (1971) then, we would locate breakthrough learning and associated meanings neither in an other (such as the task, text, or environment) nor in the learner or teacher (the self), but in a potential third space – an intermediate zone and transitional space in-between self and other, that is ’the place ... where we most of the time are experiencing
life’ (p. 122). ‘This intermediate area of experience … constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work’ (p. 16).

The related concepts of personal stance and potential space provide us with ways of attending to both personal and social change, both changes relate to what happens, actions and events, in the world and to the sense / meanings attributed through cultural life and consciousness. Building on Winnicott’s concept of potential space as an intermediate zone of creative, imaginative living between self and other, this paper explores successive ‘third-space’ metaphors – of the interpersonal, dialogic, pedagogical and relational spaces (Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1981; and Bird, 2000).

Interpersonal, dialogic space: (Vygotsky, 1978) and beyond

I find significant congruence between Winnicott and Vygotsky’s broad perspectives on the role of play, creative living and everyday experience. Vygotsky specified the social and cultural origins and processes of individual mental functioning (see Wertsch, 1991, p. 26).

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interspsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition … [I]t goes without saying that internalisation transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions. Social relations or relations between people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163)

Vygotsky’s account of play and his sociocultural, historical metaphor of the ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) or the ‘intermental development zone’ (IDZ) help us attend more directly to how (when and where) this interpenetration of the interpersonal and intrapersonal planes takes place. Vygotsky (1978: 90) proposed ‘that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development, that is learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers’.

Two current applications of Vygotsky’s research relevant to understanding and implementing ‘breakthrough pedagogies’ for learning during school and adult years alike, involve the scaffolding of tasks (Bruner, 1986), and provision for progressive phases of learning competence – assisted, independent and interdependent, competence being understood as culturally situated. Both these applications may highlight conjoined and collaborative learning, attend to the sociocultural contexts and practices of learning, and appear congruent with a cultural psychology or a developmental psychology (such as those proposed by Bruner, 1995, and Kegan, 1994, respectively), thereby replacing an individual psychology that presupposes internal, essentialist states and abilities. A third application of Vygotskian concepts identifies narrative as a cultural-cum-cognitive tool (Egan, 2002), and structures storytelling and conversational inquiry through forms of scaffolding and narrative practices (White, 2005). A more detailed theoretical case for and practical application of these concepts developed by the respective theorists and researchers mentioned above falls outside the scope of this paper. However, narrative notions such as ‘relational space’, ‘relational externalising conversations’ (Bird, 2000) and ‘re-authoring conversations’ (White, 1995, 2005) apply specifically to exemplars selected for this paper.
Narrative inquiry and metaphors - multi-storied lives and landscapes

Across the learning theories noted above runs the idea that adult learners certainly compose multiple stories in their heads while they are taking in the professional information, skills and strategies needed to become teachers. These stories come from their own lives or those of other individuals or groups they have known or perhaps heard about and been shaped by. Sometimes teachers of classrooms of adult learners find that these stories, if shared, resonate with others in the class, while occasionally, they jar or rub in wrong ways against professional knowledge about teaching and learning currently under review by class members.

Narratives of past learning may come into play for adult learners most often in their pursuit of ‘assignments’ given by the teacher. On these occasions through processes of telling and retelling, remembering and reflecting learners often discover new meanings, weave storylines through past and present experiences into future possibilities and come to see themselves differently as learners and teachers, especially if encouraged to hunt previously taken-for-granted assumptions and to expose the social and power relations, through further analysis and critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995).

Yet in spite of the difficulties inherent in bringing resolution or confluence from conflicting narratives in any classroom of learners (students and teachers alike included here as adult learners), narratives figure centrally. These narratives of learners and teachers lives are not limited to personal expression, reflection and description, but incorporate (having been shaped by) broader social, sociocultural / global narratives and practices, brought into sharper focus by acts of analysis and critique. In so far as such multi-storied narratives engage people’s hopes, intentions, commitments and longings for alternative possibilities they offer rich resources, beyond those of description, analysis and critique, for ‘restor(y)ing’ narratives and greater possibilities for agency and transformation, or as White (1995) proposes for ‘re-authoring’ lives. By developing a multi-storied approach, we can juxtapose these four interrelated dimensions or spheres of ‘life as narrative’, viewing the potentially transformative as breathing life into the whole (Grant, 1997, Grant & Dale, 2005).

Narrative metaphors: of life and landscape
Geertz (1983) attributes the most far-reaching breakthrough in social science research to the ‘sea change … in our notion of what we want to know’, brought about by the shift to a narrative metaphor of life, and thus to an interpretive, narrative inquiry that ‘connects actions with what they mean’. At the same time this ‘sea change’ constituted a radical shift away from prevalent mechanistic metaphors concerned with ‘connecting behaviour to its determinants’ (p. 34).

Bruner (1988, 1990, 2002) has researched and written extensively about the role of narrative as a way of knowing and a major form of language that profoundly structures experience. Indeed, the metaphor of ‘life as narrative’ sums up Bruner’s (1988) claims that stories become inseparable in our lives, intertwined in our living, telling and interpreting. Developing the argument that ‘stories … provide models of the world … principally as metaphor’ (2002, p. 25), and do so metaphorically, Bruner addresses the further question – ‘But what do stories model metaphorically?’ He proposes that ‘stories are … operating in two realms, one a landscape of action in the world, the other a landscape of consciousness where the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings and secrets play themselves out. … It is part of the magic of well-wrought stories that they keep these two landscapes intertwined, making the knower and the known inseparable’ (2002, pp. 25-26). Following Bruner, White (2005, p. 10) suggests that these two landscapes - of ‘people’s stories of life and of personal identity combine to compose ‘landscapes of the mind’.”
It follows that researchers working with shared conversational inquiry can invite and attend to the stories teachers and learners compose and co-construct about their experiences of unique ‘lift-off’ moments and breakthroughs in learning, together with the sense they make of such events and experiences. Narrative inquiry applies to both data generation and data analysis, as both stages centre on the criss-crossing between landscapes of action (past, present and future) and landscapes of identity (intentional understandings, values, learning), and the stances and stands teachers and students are encouraged to take up.

**Narrative maps:** Narrative inquiry, as applied in the three exemplars examined in this paper, uses questions (in the context of conversations, life story interviewing and written reflections about teaching and learning) to provide a scaffold that invites and supports rich, ‘thick’ descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of people’s lives and identities and opens up alternative storylines and possibilities. Leading narrative therapists such as White (1995, 2004, 2005), Freeman et al (1997), and Bird (2000, 2005) have developed narrative maps for scaffolding ‘relational conversations’ or ‘re-authoring conversations’ with those who consult them. ‘Lift-off’ moments are implied in White’s (2005, p. 10) account:

> **Re-authoring conversations** invite people to do what they routinely do – that is, to link events in their lives in sequences that unfold according to a theme / plot. However, in this activity people are assisted to identify the more neglected events of their lives – the unique outcomes or exceptions ... and these provide a point of entry into the alternative story lines.¹

**Spatial metaphors: of movement and relational stance**

In conducting narrative research inquiry, I’ve come to rely on allied metaphors of space, location, movement and multiplicity. Taken together these specific metaphors can support a more practice-based grounding of the overarching metaphors of narrative and potential space already discussed, with their implicit dimensions of ‘psychic geography’, dialogic movement and agency across time, space and location.

**Metaphors of movement and ‘transport’** have been preferred by White (2001) and others over ‘transformation’, perhaps because speaking of *transportive experiences* foregrounds the effects of movement and of standing on different ground, rather than presuming an inner and perhaps invisible transformation. Employing metaphors of space and movement we can attend to what people accord meaning and value to; the commitments, stances or stands people take up in life; and the possibilities for moving into and standing in different or preferred territories of life. The scaffolding of such movement into new learning spaces and territories of life is constructed through interpersonal engagement in conversational and socio-cultural inquiry; specifically through playful use of tools such as drama and role play approaches, narrative questions and structures; that together challenge old taken-for-granted thinking, and support exploration and discovery. Bird’s (2000) work around exploring and creating a ‘relational space’ focuses on possibilities for discovery, thinking and responding differently.

**Relational space: ‘Third-space’ metaphors** such as relational space, dialogic and pedagogical space, can be placed within two key concepts already discussed - Winnicott’s (1971) notion of ‘potential space’ as a third area, an intermediate zone between self and other, the individual and the environment, and Vygotsky’s (1978, 1981) concept of an interpersonal / intermental development zone. The metaphor of ‘relational space’ following Bird (2000, 2002) has proved significant in generating rich data on teaching and learning in two of the situations discussed in this paper. It provided a way of realising my hopes to engaging Ron intentionally in alternative ways of thinking about researching ‘creativity’ for his thesis (Appendix D), and also of theorising about the mutual learning ‘lift-offs’ that broke through various impasses that initially beset us. More recently, through talking with Jenny Little and
encouraging her to write reflectively about her experience of teaching ‘spoken English’ with Middle school classes in Shanghai (Appendix A), we have both come to see our work ‘relationally’ - as engaging our students differently, in inquiry and discovery, using our conversations and interactions with them to open up “room to move” into alternative, learning spaces and places ‘to think and respond differently’ (Bird, 2000).

**Dialogic, pedagogical space:** A number of research studies following Bakhtin (1981) explore the notion of a dialogic or ‘pedagogical space’ as applicable to understanding conditions for and contexts of breakthroughs in teaching and learning. For instance, Barrs (2003), researching with primary school teachers, studied the interdependence of reader / writer voices dialogically in children’s learning through drama, reading and writing in role. Indications of movement, ‘lift-offs’ in writing particularly, came with children’s dramatic engagement-in-role, imagining themselves in the ‘stances’ of others - people and animals – into whose alternative, fictional worlds they gained entry.

**Multi-storied lives:** The metaphor of multi-storied lives and contexts (Grant 1997, Grant & Dale, 2005) denotes the multiple realities and encompasses micro-to-macro viewpoints that are shaping of people’s lives. Four interrelated contexts, dimensions or narratives can be viewed successively as personal / interpersonal; social / community; sociocultural / global; and, fourth - transformative or transportive. The latter foregrounds imagined possibilities, restor(y)ed alternatives and movement into new territories of life. Through narrative conversational inquiry people can reach new understandings of learning and identity, relationally, within and across a wide variety of contexts of life. A person’s meaning-making may thus be viewed as simultaneously personal (micro) and political (macro); and as situated in and shaped by specific socio-cultural, socio-historical domains (of other) - family, group, community and generation; as well as through institutions of school, adult education, church, workplace and so on; and beyond, in the rapidly changing trans-national and global contexts that impact directly upon the local - the ‘glocal’ effects. Indeed, whether our research focus is on micro or macro dimensions, taking a multi-storied approach appears necessary to the processes of critical reflection and the purposes of doing narrative inquiry, to breaking through into imagined possibilities, alternative storylines, preferred territories of life, whether or not we sum these up as ‘re-authoring conversations’ or ‘narratives of agency’.

**Discourse and language analysis:**

Finally, a note about language analysis before the three exemplars illustrate its application. Perhaps seemingly peripheral to the idea of lift-off moments, Fairclough (1992, 1995) has demonstrated powerful ways of using critical discourse analysis of texts to examine macro, sociocultural practices and ideology, in an era of globalisation. Fairclough’s (1995, p. 7) definitions are worth noting: ‘discourse is use of language seen as a form of social practice and discourse analysis is an analysis of how texts work within sociocultural practice’.

Documentary and ethnographic research studies in literacy and identity have established how ‘versions of the literate subject’ (Green et al, 1994) and ‘literacy practices are constitutive of identity and of personhood’ (Street, 1992). Street continues ‘whichever forms of reading and writing we learn and use, have associated with them certain social identities, expectations about behaviour and role models. Different literacy practices are associated with different notions of the self’ (pp. 1, 44). Luke et al (2004) update and broaden research in literacy and identity in ‘new times’, specifically in relation to ‘new basics, pedagogy and futures’.

Taken together Fairclough’s use of critical discourse analysis, the new literacy studies and critical literacy studies deconstruct ideological and sociocultural practices, and offer ways of contextualising and documenting literacy practices as social practices, constitutive of versions of identity, personhood and lifeworlds. These forms and applications of discourse analysis are pertinent to the narrative research inquiry and analysis developed in this paper.
Data Generation and Analysis

Exemplar 1. Learning and teaching ‘Spoken English’ in a Shanghai Model Middle School (Jenny)

Contexts of data generation:
The written account of ‘Spoken English’ classes with Chinese middle school students [Appendix A] followed several conversations I enjoyed with Jenny Little soon after her return from teaching in China for a year and one semester. Jenny agreed to my suggestion that she write reflectively about her Shanghai experience for inclusion in a joint conference paper.

The opening paragraph places Jenny’s very recent experience of EFL teaching in a personal context:

‘A retired English teacher’s dream job’ was how I described my Shanghai position to friends at home in Melbourne. I told them that I did most of my class preparation while I walked, taking in street life and Chinese ways, then fine-tuning the plans for particular classes under the shower of a morning. I didn’t have to sit in meetings or do marking. All I had to do, I reported, was speak English and draw the students into speaking English. ... (1)

Jenny recalls that a month into her appointment the school principal indicated why she’d been “head-hunted” for the job: “it was my long-term experience of classroom English teaching he had wanted which had also made my non-existent EFL teaching credentials not an issue” (2).

Overall, in fifteen paragraphs Jenny covers her initial impressions, observations of student expectations and “the habits of ‘Spoken English’”; teaching starting points, and cross-cultural impasses gradually overcome by playful approaches (including role play, scenario-setting, drawings, classroom games, interviews with ‘celebrity heads’, animated debates and so on) designed to challenge and subvert examination–centred expectations of English as a school subject. I’d introduced Jenny to Johnella Bird’s (2000) term ‘relational space’, and Jenny applies this notion in her concluding reflections (13-15), as a lens for reviewing “the pedagogy that evolved” in these Middle school ‘Spoken English’ classrooms.

Four main developments or phases can be traced in Jenny’s written reflections, beginning with observing Chinese student (and teacher) expectations. Paragraphs 4 and 5 begin with questions that subsequent paragraphs (4-8) provide evidence to answer. First, “What did the Middle school students in this Shanghai school expect when they were timetabled for ‘Spoken English’ classes?” “They arrived in the specialist classroom carrying nothing, no textbook, paper or pens’. They expected to be called by their chosen English names. Jenny surmised “that they came to my classes believing English to be a block of knowledge they could learn if they studied hard and on which they would often be tested”. They had been learning English by textbook study, but “having a teacher from Australia, ‘a native speaker’, might mean that ... (doing less) English homework because they would absorb English now and then get higher marks in English tests and their parents would be very happy ... and at the end of their time of being students and achieving high marks in English they would ‘get a good job’.” (4). Jenny’s visits to English classes taught by her Chinese EFL colleagues revealed additional practices in these “schooled habits of spoken English”. Students were asked to read off ‘set’, ‘right’ answers to English questions, did not listen when English was being spoken by other students but talked in Chinese until their turn, were called upon individually to speak English at the direction of the teacher and only to the teacher, and looked to students who were better at English whenever speaking in English was required in class. Second, “What was my starting point?” Jenny recalls how her intentions for ‘Spoken English’ lessons took shape in this context, spurred on by “the failure” (5) of attempted group work on Shanghai scenes to coax students into speaking English.
Analysis:

1. **Observing expectations**: From the outset for the teacher, first person singular *pronouns* ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’ and *mental state verbs* predominate. In the early paragraphs the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘they’ evoke the cultural differences and distance of a ‘foreign expert’ from the Chinese EFL teachers and classes at the local school. Subsequently, three major developments in Jenny’s written reflections can be traced linguistically (9-11).

   2. **Starting points**: From (9), see Appendix A (9-15), *the purposeful planning by the ‘I’ now acting within the classroom creates forward movement*. The predominance of first person pronouns and mental state verbs carries forward the teacher’s actions and agency into a scenario where having “seen” the Chinese ways brings new understanding. There’s a sense of what “I had seen” changing into “come to understand”. (“Around the school and walking through the crowded streets ... I had seen that performances were a favourite ‘non-work’ activity ...”). Moreover, the object of this teacher’s preoccupation with her own mental activity and agency is clearly the Chinese, especially “the students as people” within their own cultural contexts - of ‘schooled habits’, crowded Chinese streets, the Shanghainese love of performance, everyday scenarios at the bus stop or answering tourist-on-the-street questions, and a “rather fearsome love of getting people up on stage”. Over twenty *prepositions* are relied upon to generate and locate the largely outward direction of attention and activity (9).

   3. **Conjoined learning**: Another development (by the end of 9) emerges as *interactive* and *mental state verbs combine in conjoined learning*, denoted also in the shift to *plural pronouns* of students with students, and students with teacher. Here the students come to the fore as players - what they do, enjoy, and love to perform. As “the students of the class *listened* to these short *performances*”, the teacher was “able to add questions by *coming in as another player*” (9); and “*Working with*” (“what they enjoyed”) their “love of getting people up on stage I played word games ... and organised ... quizzes”. “In another class we *made* a list of celebrities whom *they would like to interview* ... *They prepared* a list of questions they *would ask* and some acted being the celebrities ... and *responded imaginatively* to the questions *asked from the floor*” (10).

   Here then Teacher <--------> Students are together (on the same plane) interacting as fellow players and learners. Now the observing ‘I’ – previously teacher as single, initiating player comes in as another player, supporting their conjoined learning - eliciting student listening and question posing, and “working with” their love of performance – listing ‘celebrity’ interviewees, preparing questions “they would ask”, and then interviewing “some (who) acted being the celebrities in a press conference and responded imaginatively to the questions asked from the floor” (10). Clearly now the fellow players using English are students with students, not primarily teacher with students. Increasingly then, students take on the role of coming in as fellow players, and assume the roles already scaffolded for them by teacher modelling.

   4. **“Us all” attending differently** (11): A further development becomes apparent as Jenny reflects upon the significance of this conjoined activity. Here the *mental state verbs and second person plural pronouns* (such as ‘we’, ‘us all’, ‘each other’) take over from the prior separation of teacher as ‘I’ and the class as ‘they’, thereby registering the emergent, cumulative effects of collaborative activity, and thence the consequential rewards of conjoined learning. The teacher “began” to discover “that the trick to” teaching and learning ‘spoken English’, the strategy to “getting them [the students] speaking English and listening to each other while speaking English was *having us all forget* that this was a foreign language they were studying, we *just wanted to know what others* in the room *thought*”. Notice the realisation that it takes a shared process of common unlearning or forgetting by “us all”, the
teacher as much as students, that English “was a foreign language they were studying”. Reminiscent of the teacher’s opening statement of intention “to plan activities for my classroom that broke into these schooled habits” (9), the break through involves two key aspects - first a mutual forgetting about language as an abstract and foreign body of knowledge that “they” (the students, apart from the teacher) must study, and second, participation in a shared communicative purpose – “we just wanted to know what others in the room thought” (11).

The consequent new learning rewards for the teacher, “very rewarding for me too ... I was gaining new understanding”, appear not only to offset her own “failing to learn Chinese”, but more importantly identify her jointly as a co-learner with her students. Pronouns (“each other ... us all ... we ... others), intention and activity carried by the mental state verbs and consequent arousal of curiosity, interest and purposeful discussion (thinking, listening, speaking together) enact the flow of events that yields rewarding, new understandings (see 11).

The rest (11-12) elaborates how setting up performance style debates, with topics “bringing up clashing opinion”, “worked superbly” - “even Preparatory groups who did not have many English words had opinions about what a ‘good’ teacher was like”. “To help lock the students in to listening to the speeches ... all the non-team class members were designated ‘judges’ ...” (12) to score the debates.

5. Changes in relational space (13-15): Finally, Jenny reflects upon the nature of the “new understanding” gained in conjoined learning with her Chinese students. Viewing from a new vantage point, Jenny can note the current value of further learning gained retrospectively, through the processes of writing down her own classroom observations and reflections, and of our re-searching them together, through the metaphorical lens of ‘relational space’. These concluding reflections can be summed up by reference to ‘notions of talk’ proposed by Bird (2000):

The language of ‘relational space’ in Johnella Bird’s The Heart’s Narrative offers notions of talk which ‘shifts focus’ ‘orients ... toward discovery’, ‘situates (both parties of the relationship) on the boundary of knowing and not knowing’ and which ‘exposes the ideas and practices of the power relations which inevitably act to include and exclude’ (13).

For this retired English teacher finding herself at a Shanghai Model Middle School with a brief to teach ‘Spoken English’, the pedagogy that evolved was very much of this kind. With this new job, I had to shift focus. Well established in me was the idea that students’ ‘working’ was much more about reading and writing than it was about speaking and listening. To teach only ‘speaking and listening’ required a major shift. ... (14)

I was in a completely new space as a teacher too without much awareness day-to-day of what other teachers were thinking or saying about my work. ... (15)

So Jenny’s learning as a teacher “required a major shift”. “With this new job, I had to shift focus” - from the idea “well established in me”, “that students’ ‘working’ was much more about reading and writing” English, “to teach only ‘speaking and listening’”. In retrospect Jenny notes discordant voices in two kinds of constraints that detract from any unequivocal sense of the learning achieved. “Testing of ‘heard English’ ... very much a part of the examination-oriented curriculum” was problematic, not least because of its low status. Moreover the students’ responsiveness seemed called into question by the unspoken judgements of her teaching colleagues, whom she suspected were “very doubtful about what I was doing”. Awareness that “I was in a completely new space as a teacher too” leaves Jenny “still asking myself, ‘What were we learning together there in those classes?’ I too enjoyed them very much” (15).
A few concluding points from the analysis follow. Jenny’s closing question asks about the ‘what’ of this learning, but leaves no doubt about the ‘how’ – that ‘we’ were “learning together” – conjoined learning enjoyed by students and teacher alike. A reshaping of this teacher’s professional identity has taken place during the account – Jenny new to Middle school EFL teaching of ‘Spoken English’ “had to shift focus” – first, as an ‘outsider’ by deliberately observing the social and cultural practices of Shanghaiese as she walked the crowded urban streets beyond the school, and then by exploring the “completely new space” afforded within the classroom for “working with” students and their knowledges as participants in ‘everyday’ English – fellow performers, players, observers, speakers and listeners, thinkers. Forms of the word ‘work’ occur five times as follows: seeing street performances as “a favourite non-work activity”; setting up debating lessons that “worked superbly”; and three uses of the verb form ‘working’ – two to begin paragraphs - “Working with” (10); “Working further with” (12) and the other in Jenny’s entrenched “idea of ... students’ ‘working’ was much more about reading and writing” (14). Each use registers a change-in-process in the subject ‘English’ and in the stances and identities of teacher and learners (students and teacher as learners together). Yet the lingering question – Jenny imagines raised by her colleagues’ unspoken judgements is about whether or not the obvious enjoyment by class participants has been at the expense of real ‘work’ in ‘Spoken English’.

**Overall:** Finally, we can trace the development of learning changes and ‘lift-offs’ through two main phases: the first phase involves breaking “into these schooled habits of ‘spoken English’” (including designations of teacher as ‘foreign expert’ and ‘Spoken English’ as a ‘foreign language’ in a textbook, to be learnt for doing tests set by the teacher). A subsequent phase develops with “us all” attending differently: “we just wanted to know what others in the room thought” and how they debated – spoke, heard and weighed up “clashing opinion”. Consequently their conjoined learning emerges in relation to change underway in several forms: the changing stances teacher and students take up - in relation both to each other and to what they ‘know and are coming to know’ as they relate differently as language users and attend to English as a classroom medium of communication, playful performance, everyday scenario setting and story making.

**In conclusion:** This data confirms the understanding that learning breakthroughs and movement toward shared discoveries involve the interconnection of student and teacher stances, and that as learners participate together they begin to shift focus, alter what counts as ‘knowledge’ and arrive at alternative views of what it is possible for “us all” to know and come to know. Thus the impasses initially associated with the cross-culturally discordant positions of teacher and students are gradually broken down, the sense of discovery through performance and play gathers momentum and is enthusiastically embraced by the students. Professionally and personally, the teacher establishes the sense of discovery of one’s own meaningfulness within a professional identity – that includes the realisation that we learn new understandings by seeing others learn.

The implicit links back to Winnicott (1971) and Salmon’s (1990) accounts of breakthrough learning mentioned earlier may be borne out in particular by reference to Lusted (cited Lather, 1991: 85). Lusted gives a pedagogical account of the notion of intermediate potential space suggesting that pedagogy addresses ‘the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies – the teacher, the learner, and the knowledge they together produce’. Such learning is socially transactive and transformational – the conjoined individual / group knowing and coming to know made possible by the interaction of the three agencies. Potential ‘lift-offs’, learning breakthroughs can be located within this interactive space. The three agencies might be represented as a triangle: teacher and students together in conjoined learning, reshaping the knowing and the learning they together can produce. (See diagrams after Exemplar 3, below).
‘Lift-offs’ in Jenny’s learning take shape through her use of ‘literate means’ (our conversations leading into written inquiry to describe, analyse, question and ponder her own reflections, accessing the internet to read further writing by Bird) to ponder new understandings. Using such processes of inquiry Jenny reaches identity conclusions about herself as an English teacher that emerge from professionally working and learning with her Chinese students. For Constance, evident from the next set of data selections, realisations about a new kind of professional identity and personal identity take shape and gather substance through the means of narrative, conversational inquiry, recorded in interview transcripts data mentioned here. I suggest that this second study shows that such interview conversations provide a scaffold for breakthroughs to happen.

Exemplar 2. “What I am teaching them ... maybe spiritually it’s a kind of passion toward life” (Constance)

*Contexts for generating data:*
‘Constance’, in her late thirties and highly articulate, was one of the oldest in the first Qualitative Research Methods class I taught in China. Using a narrative approach, I interviewed all the 15 university EFL teachers in this class about their learning of English, educational biographies and intergenerational storylines. Two further conversations recorded with Constance three years later began, in effect, with the first step for re-authoring conversations - ‘the discovery of what it is that a person gives value to’.

1. *Opening moves: ‘storying’ value in the classroom - a “passion toward life”*

Attending to what Constance values ‘opens the door to further development of other stories or to further explorations of the other territories’ (White, 2004, p. 61). Asked how she feels about being a teacher, Constance spoke of feeling ‘special’, ‘proud’, and being ‘passionate about’ English teaching - ‘not just teaching language, but teaching students to think … purpose? To think … expand thinking … at more depth’ (Conversation 2). I asked about examples, ‘sparkling moments’, and then about their effects on her relationships with her students, and her sense of herself. These effects can be mapped through the rich description of how she ‘becomes a completely different person’ inside the classroom, in front of a class and how her students respond to this ‘special’ identity:

That’s what made me special. When I am outside of the classroom, maybe other people would regard me as a very common women … common because I always show, I feel very tired and not energetic. Maybe I give other people this kind of feeling. But as soon as I go into the classroom, I suddenly become a different one, because all my students told me ‘You are such an energetic teacher – enthusiastic, yeah. And we wonder … maybe you can play all kinds of sports, can you?’ And I said (laughs) ‘Oh yes, almost all of them’ (laughs). So I give people a different impression in and outside of the classroom. And then why I am so different when I am in the classroom is because I think I have that kind of talent in I am teaching, because I regard that as a stage and I’m putting on a play, and I put myself completely into the role which I am going to teach my students. So
whenever I stand on the platform and teach my students, I think inspirations come to me continuously without any stop ... anything I touch upon, or read through, or ... during my explanation ... I have so many inspirations from them. And I can enlarge my scale of explanation ... into a very rich class ... my students just enjoy that, because I’m not only confined to ... the text, the language. What I’m teaching them is a kind of - maybe spiritually it’s a kind of passion toward life. ... [F]rom the point of view of knowledge I think I am teaching them how to get all different kinds of information not only one thing, but you have to open up your view and try to know everything (I Mm), as much as possible. So I think ... I’m special ... maybe quite different from other people. I don’t know what others think about their teaching. But I just prefer teaching. And so, my mind, I think my brain works very fast at that time when I am in the classroom. (C. 3)

Note the dominance of the ‘I’ pronoun throughout this extract: the I as the basis of comparison – “when I am outside the classroom” and “when I am in the classroom”, the ‘I’ <----- ‘you’, and the I <----- the professional ‘me’ now and in the future. The ‘I’ reflected back by her students suggests a learner seeing herself as a new kind of learner in professional identity (see diagrams for all exemplars, below).

History – “a childhood dream”: Asking about the history of this preferred professional identity can enhance a sense of valuing. Constance traces the story of wanting to be a teacher right back to having “a childhood dream - from the first day of school”. In kindergarten the “teacher so inspired” her (C. 1). “As soon as I entered primary school … She taught me so well that I admired her so much”. This teacher would invite Constance and the other girls to her home; and a “very good relationship kept between us for five years” (C. 3).

Dominant intergenerational stories: ‘Shouldering the family burden’

From the first set of individual interviews I also hoped to learn about the different Chinas encountered by the different generations my postgraduate students knew, about ways individual and family histories and understandings are shaped by the broader social, cultural, political changes, as well as by new global, technological transformations – by the changing macro contexts associated with wave after wave of political movements, upheavals, and traumatic events in China during the 20th Century – (times my parents had also experienced and spoken about). For many Chinese families with adult children born before or during the 1960’s, life was hard and painful, suffering and sadness were pervasive for generations. Three generations of my students’ families could be linked by the dominant storyline of hardship, the shared stories of ‘shouldering the family burden’ ‘binding’ generation to generation. The older students were of primary school age when the real effects of the Cultural Revolution (1966-) impacted family life. Unspoken or untold stories sometimes form a recurrent theme. For instance, children do not “burden” their grandmother by speaking of the fights and nastiness initiated by other children; or other painful experiences. Such stories of childhood are rarely told to others “you are the few among them” (C. 2).

The only grandparent Constance knew was her maternal grandmother, who kept the family home for five years when the older children were usually boarding at middle school. For Constance an alternative storyline emerges from this time, which she associates with her grandmother’s love, and later with her parents staying at home after their release. Relationships change as fear, even hatred, are gradually replaced by love and understanding. This alternative story carries forward the next movement from earlier ‘storying’ into a restor(y)ing or re-authoring conversation.

Movement 2: Restor(y)ing / re-authoring: “Knowing how to show your love” – “learned from the inside”

My question about tracing the intergenerational lines of the courageous, ‘strong’ stand a young Constance so admired in her parents and her brother, opens up a second movement of
restor(y)ing. What Constance selects to mention about how she sees that alternative story in her family is significant - the mutual respect and love expressed between her parents and grandmother, and between the grandmother, “us children” and playmates.

I think the family tie – in my family, is so, so, so tied together – yes. And then we cling to each other so much. ... But I think this is a kind of respect, mutual respect between my parents and my grandma. And after my parents were ... taken away from us, the five children of the family were all taken care of by my grandma, and she tried her best, to do all kinds of family chores and to help us to be healthy and sound-minded. And at that time I remember all the brothers and sisters of my family, yeah cling to each other, the older ones help the younger ones with their study, and to read a story, to them, to make slide shows by ourselves, and then to put all kinds of reading, the magazines or journals or some pictorials - on the wall, and invite all the other children to come to my home, and then to read books. Like a library at the time. ... And my grandma encouraged us to do that. ... even if ... it was quite noisy. A lot of children were gathered, in my home. And she never said anything hard on us. And I think this is a kind of understanding ... I think we children tried our best to help her, until. So that’s why, I remember the day that she was leaving, my younger sister and I cried, and we run after the bus ... the other the children were also very sad ... So even if we are a quite different generation I think we still cling to each other, and try to understand each other. (C. 3)

Significantly, in the re-membering of family relationships across the generations Constance is re-authoring alternative storyline of her childhood - of children filling the house, of the mutual nourishment of reading and play activities, and of generously shared grandmother love reciprocated by the children, expressed in their sadness and tearful ‘running after the bus’ the day she returns to her own province.

Such life-sustaining learning is an intergenerational heritage through the maternal line – from mother to mother to child. Constance locates this as “learning from the inside” expressed in “knowing how to show your love”. As if being on the inside of a loving family is the place where values, knowledges and life skills are learnt and acted out through the medium of “knowing how to show your love”. Constance’s preferred stories and ways of being become more richly described through the re-authoring conversation -

I: And how about that, that storyline with the next generation, with your son?
C: Yes, so when I have my own family, I think I learned a lot from my mother - how she treated the older generation and how she treated us children ... My son also learnt something from me - to be considerate and to care for the adults. ... for instance when I was ill, my husband was not at home, my son took up the burden, the responsibility to do everything for me. So, I think this is something learned (I. Mm) yeah from inside – It's not something you have to teach him to do so, because I think he can just follow you, because you have done that ... then he will do that in return. ... Sometimes my son and I, we make jokes to each other, and then laugh together ... I think that is a kind of very good relationship, between mother and the child. (C. 3)

The alternative, preferred story ‘knowing how to show your love’ neither removes the hardship of ‘shouldering the family burden’ nor replaces painful intergenerational stories that surface as counterplots. Rather it mingles with them, for it is forged and refined in the midst of them, out of such crucibles. Constance towards the end of the third conversation moves between the one and the other storylines, but is standing in different territories. The alternative / re-authoring story emerges first as an intergenerational maternal storyline, and by means of questioning, is traced in her immediate family, expressed most readily in her relationship with her son, but also in their relationship with her husband. As her favourite Shakespearean character, Cordelia, exemplifies, Constance’s role is ‘special’, ‘different’, ‘knowing how to show your love’ to act, even when words fail, out of an assured identity (values of honesty, goodness and loving integrity) expressed in the midst of tragedy.

Constance’s admiration for Cordelia, expressed early in our first conversation, reveals their shared relational identity and ways of being in the world.

... I read King Lear. I liked the younger daughter because she was honest. ... [and] to be loyal to one’s own family, that is most important. ... It’s always the case that you don’t have to say, to
Moreover, it seems to be through conversational acts of intergenerational re-membering that Constance is able to acknowledge the robust expressions of her preferred identities and memberships of life, as in the re-membering reflections towards the end of the last conversation. We acknowledged the sense that, in these enactments of love, her grandmother and parents are standing with her. ‘And sometimes I only do things and immediately I remember my mother. (I. mm) Yeah. (I. That she did that). That she did it in that way. And I try to follow my mother’ (C. 3).

Movement 3: Multistorying - InterViewings

The third movement, of multistorying, brings us to thinking poststructurally about lives and contexts, in moving from foregrounding ‘storying’ through re-stor(y)ing to ‘multi-storying’; from metaphors of ‘viewing’ and ‘reviewing’ life as narrative to ‘interViewings’ of lives and lifeworlds as multi-storied. These are multiple strands to draw together, briefly and somewhat speculatively by thinking multiply in terms of medium, tellings, viewings, and storied constructions of contexts.

*From verbal to visual:* Constance’s colourful self portrait drawings display an emotional, experiential history of learning English, becoming a teacher of English and undertaking postgraduate study, Her brief written annotations and later spoken commentaries offer further layers, expressive of significant stands taken in relation to her own experiences. *From untold to told:* Conversations with my students raise questions about the connections between the told, the untold, the effects of the tellings and non-tellings. “Tellings” can bring to the fore alternative, preferred storylines, thus supporting thicker, richer descriptions in re-authoring and re-membering conversations. *From storied to multistoried lives:* movement from single frames and personal voice to dialogic, multiple narratives including alternative, intergenerational, sociocultural and historical narratives and contexts proceeds in tandem with the next movement. *From ‘viewing’ to interViewings:* Narrative interviewing, as a conversational process of inquiry, invites two apt metaphors - of embarking on ‘a joint voyage of discovery’ (Little, 1989), and of an interactive, visual metaphor of ‘InterViewing’ (Kvale, 1996). ‘Lift-off’ moments, learning breakthroughs, realisations of alternative, life-sustaining identity conclusions may emerge through such interview conversations.

As glimpsed through successive movements in Constance’s storying, re-stor(y)ing and multi-storying the process of interViewing – of seeing alternative stances and perspectives plays an essential part. Constance shows this again and again: professionally as the English teacher ‘inside’ the classroom, on stage performing for her students a ‘spiritual ... passion for life’ and viewing herself through their eyes; and personally, as granddaughter, daughter, wife and mother “inside” the family, witnessing the ‘interViewings’ of mutual respect within and between the generations, specifically with her grandmother, parents, siblings, husband and son. For Constance, engaging with such histories through life story conversations brings new ‘inspirations” for engaging in life.

Exemplar 3. Moving ground / relational space – proposed thesis research and supervision by email (‘Ron’ and supervisor)

This section reports the first few months of my email supervision of Ron’s thesis, what I hoped for and encountered, and the shifts in stance we both made to achieve learning breakthroughs. Language analysis of the data notes evidence of the associated movement from impasse to relational ways of knowing and learning.
1. Initial challenges and impasse:
Ron proposed to use a qualitative approach to study the creativity of two groups of tourism students – English (EFL) majors and non-English majors, given the perception that EFL majors lacked creativity. I argued that the starting point for such research is to question the taken-for-granted assumptions about what counted as ‘creativity’. So I attached to my report a summary by Csikszentmihalyi (1994: 135) [Appendix B] of his conclusions after 25 years of researching ‘creativity’, and describing the direction of his own research journey (a journey in which I hoped Ron, as a new researcher, might glimpse a new starting point – a potential shift from an essentialist to a relational, contextual stance).

However, Ron dismissed such questioning of the obvious as ‘Nonsense’. Our emails went to and fro for a while with little sign of a breakthrough. When Ron thanked me for my “frank comments” and sent another outline of his proposal, I again felt disheartened. Noting now the language features establishes an acute sense of impasse.

**Analysis notes 1:** Ron’s proposed Master’s thesis title ‘Locating creativity in TEFL in China: An investigation of English majors’ creativity in comparison with that of Chinese majors’ and research questions (second version) [see Appendix C] Nouns predominate in the proposed title and research questions. Apart from ‘locating’ in title, the only verb used is the verb to be (‘is’, ‘is’, and ‘are’).

The effect is to convey the given, static nature of ‘Creativity’. – ‘Creativity as a noun, exists as a given, already there, a ‘taken-for-granted’ attribute, to be uncovered by a research investigation. The language contains no clues of how the sole, envisaged action of ‘locating’ creativity might be done, no hints of a future research scenario or plan. At the time, this static characteristic of the first and second versions of the proposal contributed to my sense of impasse as supervisor - that Ron was going nowhere with his research questions, and foresaw no clear role to play as researcher.

2. Potential space / signs of movement
“Where to from here?” I asked myself. To prompt his and my own reflections about taking an alternative, relational stance, I wrote ‘Guidelines for interviewing: preparing the questions’, and drafted a new set of interview questions, applying what I was learning in a workshop with Johnella Bird §. I addressed these questions to Ron and emailed them to him. My immediate aim in writing the ‘guidelines’ [see Appendix D] was to encourage Ron to be intentional about taking a relational stance towards studying ‘creativity’. I hoped to achieve this through providing a sociocultural scaffold, by:
1) prompting a rethinking of his research purposes and stance;
2) posing conversational questions that ‘enacted’ the taking up of a ‘personal, relational stance’; and
3) drawing attention to the sociocultural and dialogic, to broaden the relational dimension and expose the power relations.

**Analysis notes 2.** Supervisor’s guidelines [Appendix D]


Effect: These actions anticipate movement, create a sense of research as an exploratory project or of a researcher ‘researching’, constantly in process. In fact Ron can engage with this process only if he is willing to move.

3. Locating movement / what kind of ‘movement’?

I hoped that Ron would take up this alternative (relational) positioning in the process of answering the questions. Ron didn’t email answers to my questions, but this interchange
marked a significant turning point in his approach. His response within two weeks conveyed excitement and a sense of discovering what “qualitative inquiry” could offer. He framed his email with acknowledgement and appreciation of my “detailed reply” and “wonderful suggestions”. He was “now … convinced that quantitative and qualitative research methodologies” are “controversial”, often contradictory. Therefore, “after careful thinking, I have made up my mind to give up the … test and indulge myself completely into qualitative inquiry about creativity”. He’d “worked very hard” to complete the attached, updated proposal “in accordance with your very thoughtful suggestions”, included new interview schedules, and in brackets gave his rationale for the questions, so “that you don’t have to second-hand guess”.

Ron’s “newly designed research” allows for a new ‘relational space’ from which he could problematise ‘creativity’, inquire into and expose the previously ‘taken-for-granted’. His revised topic, “Locating expression of creativity for Chinese EFL majors”, and new research questions also indicate ‘discovery’ and movement. (“What is the concept of creativity as viewed by different people involved in the education of Chinese EFL majors?” “What are factors that foster or hinder the expression of creativity, especially in Chinese EFL major teaching and learning situations?”)

There is potential now for his interview questions to invite prospective interviewees to make relational connections with their own experience of creativity, as everyday practices and valuing, and, thereby, to call into question dominant cultural ideas of creativity as an essentialist attribute or individual property that English and non-English majors have varying measures of, in comparison with official EFL curriculum goals. The questioning process could now become akin to what Bird calls ‘relational externalising conversation’, exposing the lived experience, taking an idea and contextualising it, bringing forward the idea by inquiring into what links this with that. When no longer taken for granted, the whole idea or concept of creativity becomes more powerful, in that Ron at least can relate to it differently.

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<th>Analysis 3. Ron’s email response to my guidelines and questioning enacts substantial shifts [Appendix E].</th>
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<td>Now verbs predominate in his letter, and most of these place Ron in a narrative as the actor, research designer and agent: ‘appreciate’, ‘convinced’, ‘cannot find’, ‘to merge’, ‘clashing’, ‘made up (my mind) to give up’, ‘indulge (myself)’, ‘worked’, ‘completed’, ‘included’, ‘to make’, ‘have included’, ‘hope’, ‘obtained’, ‘thank’. There seems to be a trade off too, in his activities – between the hard and the soft; between Ron taking up mental rigour and hard work (‘convinced … careful thinking … worked very hard and have completed … included the rationales) on the one hand, and, on the other, deciding to embrace something else, that seems indulgent or ‘soft’ – “I have made up my mind to give up the Torrence test and indulge myself completely into qualitative inquiry about creativity” and “my newly designed research”.</td>
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The attached “updated proposal” carries forward similar changes, pronouncing them less dramatically in the research question format, but nonetheless mapping out a research project for inquiry. Both the nouns and the verbs carry forward the shift in research project. From the title onwards – “Locating Expression of Creativity for Chinese EFL Majors” we can note, even through the nominalisation, the replacement of an earlier assumption that ‘creativity’ is a self-evident category, by the new idea of creativity as a phenomenon surrounded by human activity. Such ‘creativity’ can be expressed (an expression of), conceived (the concept of) and ‘viewed by different people’. Moreover, ‘the expression of creativity’ can be fostered or hindered, applied in or absent from teaching / learning situations, and so on. This naming and linking conveys a greater sense of possibility, people and place. Now some kind of dynamic, interrelated movement and probable trajectories are envisaged.
4. Reviewing space created / steps taken:
Ron’s changing language and metaphors register his movement towards a different territory in relation to particular ideas and practices about ‘creativity’. But what facilitated and supported Ron’s movement from a seemingly entrenched psychological position about essentialist / internal states to a different stance – one of active inquiry into multiple participant (teacher / student) perspectives and experiences of creativity situated in teaching / learning contexts? I’d suggest at least two accounts fit with Ron’s move to more richly describe and study ‘creativity’ for himself: first my written guidelines couching the research task in terms of narrative inquiry; and second, the invitation and space for Ron to think through, experientially and relationally, a particular set of questions about the value he and others accord to creativity, and something of the history and effects of that valuing. My desire to apply what I was discovering afresh, in Bird’s workshopping of ‘relational externalising conversations’, forced me to occupy a ‘relational space’ myself (to stand in a different position as supervisor). Only then could I map out a space for an alternative viewing of Ron’s relationship with and valuing of creativity, his research purposes, stance and contexts. I could only model or enact an alternative space from being there myself, within that relational space or position, rather than commenting or writing about it. My conclusion is that such invitations and enactments – coming from within the practice – have enabled Ron, and other research students, to take up alternative positions and stances in order to re-search the phenomenon and experiences they are committed to studying.

I can only speculate about the possible contribution of email in our learning, as perhaps offering a needed sense of space and place. Unlike face-to-face interactions, the ‘virtual space’ of email seemed to allow for separate places to sit with and mull over our own responses, first intrapersonally, before articulating them to the other. Individually, this gave us “room to move”, and perhaps made it easier to be both frank and polite. And I wonder if I would have written the guidelines and addressed the relational set of questions to Ron, but for my desperation to resolve the initial philosophical deadlock reached in our email exchanges.

5. Analysis overall – identifying movement:
A four-way movement, traced through the above data analysis, represents Ron and my own learning breakthroughs. These are also sketched diagrammatically below.

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**Diagram of exemplars:** Teacher / student and learner stances and movement

**Exemplar 1. Triangle**

- Teacher / supervisor reflecting and viewing herself as learner, in process of learning;
- Student / postgraduate researcher coming to see himself as active learner learning;
- And interactions between - between teacher and student,
- And interactions between the two learners’ views of the research task / supervision process and related roles.

**Exemplar 2. Dyad**

**Exemplar 3. Parallelogram**

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Conclusion

This paper began with an inquiry into the phenomenon of breakthroughs in learning and teaching, associated ‘lift-off’ experiences and a shared sense of discovery. We are now in a position to refine understandings of these out-of-the-ordinary learning events, by drawing together evidence from the perspectives of teachers and learners represented in the three exemplars, and asking about the practice of narrative inquiry. To do this, we need also to review potential interconnections between participant versions of identities, conjoined learning, and notions of place and space, stance and movement.

1. Narrative inquiry and ways of knowing:
A case for the central role of narrative inquiry can only be built upon rich understandings of narrative in everyday life, whereas notions of narrative that have little bearing on inquiry frames or ways of knowing will obviously remain peripheral. As illustrated through the three exemplars — much conjoined learning for adults flows into and through simultaneous or collaborative engagement in a single narrative or chain of narratives. However, if working with narrative amounts to no more than just learning the genre conventions, telling stories, or telling ‘something from your own experience’ it will not necessarily and often does not indicate forward movement in learning and most certainly not the uptake of an inquiry frame. Instead what has to happen is that the subtextual features of the narrative indicate shifts in attitudes and stances, cognitive frames, and absorption of certain aspects of local knowledge, information, skills, strategies and so on.

Taking up an inquiry frame involves calling into question what has been taken-for-granted (commonly expressed in received information, thin conclusions, dominant stories or stereotypical assumptions), shifting focus thereby exposing the lived experience, problematising the ideas, and bringing forward other possibilities through sustained, playful attention and exploration of landscapes of action and identity. The accompanying sense of discovery pulls together life experiences differently and simultaneously pushes learning forward in new directions, as imagined through alternative storylines that develop and cohere as counterplots and counter narratives. Taking up an inquiry frame thus ‘orients toward discovery’ about life and learning, as richly and diversely storied and multi-storied.

2. Teachers / learners together in conjoined learning:
From examining the exemplar data selections we can see how key images and metaphors carry reciprocal ideas about teachers and learners. In the first exemplar the metaphor of teacher as coach / learners as apprentices seems implicit; in the second exemplar the dramatic image of theatre - teacher as performer / learners as audience, or of actor as learner / audience as learners, prevails (throughout Constance’s interview transcripts, visual and written documents, spanning three years). In the third exemplar the strongest images work both metaphorically and methodologically - of supervisor / researcher as joint inquirers, and of potential breakthroughs in learning and research conditional upon both inquirers taking up a relational stance that calls into question the taken-for-granted.

These prevailing images from the exemplars also subsume ideas about the potential contexts, settings and conditions for learning ‘lift-offs’, breakthroughs and discoveries to take place.

Teacher – coach / learner apprentice: Reading the first exemplar this way this way, we follow Jenny as the teacher - coach starting off well aware of her own need to learn a new craft through observing everyday cultural practices and schooled ‘habits’, introducing authentic speaking / listening activities, evaluating their reception by students and guiding class participation to the point that she will need to come in only as fellow player or a volunteer apprentice alongside her students. The classroom setting is that of teacher as coach...
and trainer doing her own ‘working out’, then seeing ways of ‘working with’ trainees, coming into games with junior players, gradually releasing responsibility, and finally discovering that the significant breakthroughs come in the conjoined unlearning and new learning of “us all” together, as fellow culture-brokers and language apprentices in ‘Spoken English’.

For Constance the setting is inside, the English teacher as theatre performer / students as audience. She has a sense of discovering her purposes as an English teacher “when I am in the classroom” on stage, “putting on a play”, putting “myself completely into the role which I am going to teach my students”. And in the midst of performing live a “passion toward life” she discovers that “inspirations come continuously ... I have so many inspirations from them” - her engaged student audience. Reciprocal inspiration brings actor and audience together as learners.

Similarly, Constance’s sense of personal breakthroughs in ‘knowing and coming to know’ depends upon performance, enactment “inside relationships”, for instance in clinging to the ties that bind one generation with the next, and in “knowing how to show your love ... to be considerate ... to care for” others. The setting, the conditions, the relational demonstration, the enactment of the reciprocal roles intergenerationally from within the family (of mother and child) and within the classroom (of teacher and student) are all encapsulated in Constance’s imagery of life as performance theatre (“I think this is something learned from the inside ... it is not something you have teach him to do so, because ... he can just follow you, because you have done that then he will do that in return”). Learning takes place reflexively in the doing and the seeing, the mutual learning and sense of discovery made possible only “from the inside” of reciprocated relationships.

In the third exemplar, for the postgraduate researcher, Ron, and his supervisor, learning ‘lift-offs’ happen equally as methodological breakthroughs in inquiry, involving joint inquirers. From my stance as supervisor, the research experience seemed to ‘take off’ in a mutual sense of discovery after I shifted focus, moved from explanation, argument or recommendation about a ‘relational approach’ to commending, scaffolding and enacting narrative inquiry by question posing from a different, relational stance, one that invited forward movement in an intermediate zone, a potential space joining inquirers.

3. Locating cultural life and new learning in potential, relational space:
For each exemplar, an understanding of the conjoined learning that brings together teachers and learners is enriched by the notion of the third-space metaphors of potential space and relational space, representing the intermediate and interactive location of cultural life and learning. The notion of taking up a personal stance in relation to a narrative landscape of action and landscape of identity, also brings into play images of identity, self and consciousness bound up in those actions, events and practices that we accord greater value and significance to, in the process of narrative inquiry.

4. Movement into new territories of learning and teaching:
We have traced through exemplar data analysis significant ‘lift-offs’ and breakthroughs that move learning forward and bring teachers and learners together in a sense of discovery. Often such movement may be experienced as ‘transportive’. While the trajectories differ (as sketched for instance in the diagrams) certain preconditions and features appear to occur in each of the scenarios examined.

Viewed primarily from the three teachers’ stances studied in the exemplars, ‘lift-off’ moments and a shared sense of discovery encompass the following initiatives: taking up the challenge to identify, break into and through impasses and barriers, accompanied by being willing to shift focus - to see things differently, to unlearn, and to inquire into perceptions, ideas (such as ‘creativity’) and their real effects in people’s lives; moving forward by taking
up a personal, relational stance oriented to working with learners’, insider knowledges and local cultural resources; entertaining, demonstrating and scaffolding for alternative inquiry, and exploring interconnections with imagined possibilities; coming in as fellow learners with student/learners in conjoined learning; and taking one’s stand reciprocally and in acknowledgement of teachers and learners together in the sense of discovery.

Endnotes:

1 People’s stories of life and of personal identity can be considered to compose ‘landscapes of the mind’ (following Bruner), which are constituted of ‘landscape of action’ (composing events, linked in sequence, through time, and according to a theme/plot) and ‘landscape of consciousness [identity]’ (composing identity conclusions that are shaped by contemporary identity categories of culture). It is through scaffolding questions that these alternative landscapes of mind are richly described. (White, 2005, p. 11)

2 Double quotation marks are used “for verbatim quotations” from the data selections in each exemplar. For Exemplar 1 paragraph numbers in the data are indicated in brackets. Paragraphs 9-15 are printed in full in Appendix A.

3 Three years later, when I returned to teach at the same university in China, Constance and I were able to have two further interview conversations.

4 Asking postgraduate students to draw their experiences contributed qualitatively to the triangulation of data, and potentially to the types of evidence, trustworthiness and authenticity of the research. Similarly, inviting participants to mind-map by improvising with visual shapes and verbal ‘namings’ (instead of a linear listing) the successive generations of their family, has been generative in discovering how they experience these generations, relationally with each other.

Neuroscientists are providing educators with profound reasons for valuing sustained attention to the visual for instance in the use of colour, line and form (Greenfield 2000, Heath, 2001, 2003). Moreover, memory is enhanced by the use of multiple mediums, and the weaving between them (Luke et al. 2004).

5 Johnella Bird, Narrative workshops, Melbourne, 8-9 May 2002.

6 By way of postscript: Ron didn’t look back after this. He conducted an interview-based study with eighteen undergraduates and teachers in an English major program, eliciting and analysing their ‘stories of creativity’ from their experiences of teaching and learning English. He then identified emerging themes from two ‘key informants’, one student, one teacher, and compared ‘focal issue data’ across the participants. On the first page of the opening chapter Ron acknowledged – “This study takes as its starting point Csikszentmihalyi’s (1994) stance that creativity is a socially held concept and may vary in accordance with different domains and fields”.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Data for Middle School ‘Spoken English’ [Exemplar 1]
Paragraphs 9-15 from Jenny Little’s written reflections. Italics highlights word features for analysis

9. Without being quite aware that this was what I was doing, I started to plan activities for my classroom that broke into these schooled habits of ‘spoken English’. I wanted spontaneity in the English talk so that I found out about the students as people. Around the school and walking through the crowded streets where Shanghaiese were doing what they enjoyed I had seen that performances were a favourite ‘non-work’ activity. After the failure of the group work on Shanghai sights, I tried setting up role plays by handing out slips of paper stating a scenario (e.g. the bus stop on YanAn Road) and characters (e.g. an American man who can speak some Chinese and a junior student from the Model Middle School). The students of the class listened to these short performances and I was able to add in some common tourist-on-the-street questions by coming in as another player in the scene.

10. Working with what to me was a rather fearsome love of getting people up on stage I played word games like ‘Celebrity Heads’ and organized game show style quizzes. In another class we made a list of celebrities whom students in the class would like to interview, next they prepared five questions they would ask and then some acted being the celebrities in a press conference and responded imaginatively to the questions asked from the floor.

11. I began to think that the trick to getting them speaking English and listening to each other while speaking English was having us all forget that this was a foreign language they were studying, we just wanted to know what others in the room thought. Setting up issues that aroused keen discussion was very rewarding for me too because while I was failing to learn Chinese even surrounded by it, in my classroom every day I was gaining new understanding of this fascinating place, its people and its culture. An Australian teacher friend passing through Shanghai took one class for me and demonstrated how to set up the two-sided discussion. He told a story in strong performance style of a one-teacher school and the strict, angry, punishing teacher who the parents of the town replaced with the gentle, caring teacher under whom the children ran riot. He posed the question, which was the better teacher? In the next week this lesson worked superbly for me setting off discussion within the classes of every year level, even the Preparatory groups who did not have many English words had opinions about what a ‘good’ teacher was like.

12. Working further with this genre in the senior classes, I handed out lists of debating topics asking students to check Agree/Disagree beside each topic and underline two of the twenty topics they would like to hear debated in class. Some of the topics which emerged as bringing up clashing opinion and which they also volunteered to debate were ‘Parents have more influence than friends’, ‘Clothes should cover the body’, ‘The lights of Shanghai are too bright’, ‘Computers make people lazy’ and ‘All fighting is bad’. To help lock the students in to listening to the speeches of each debate, all the non-team class members were designated ‘judges’ with a score sheet to be filled in giving points for what was said and for how well the speaker’s opinions were communicated.

13. The language of ‘relational space’ in Johnella Bird’s The Heart’s Narrative offers notions of talk which “shifts focus”, “orients … toward discovery”, “situates (both parties of the relationship) on the boundary of knowing and not knowing” and which “exposes the ideas and practices of the power relations which inevitably act to include and exclude”.

14. For this retired English teacher finding herself at a Shanghai Model Middle School with a brief to teach ‘Spoken English’, the pedagogy which evolved was very much of this kind. With this new job, I had to shift focus. Well established in me was the idea that students’ ‘working’ was much more about reading and writing than it was about speaking and listening. To teach only ‘speaking and listening’ required a major shift. Testing of ‘heard English’ was very much part of the examination-oriented curriculum at the school but as with all oral testing of foreign languages, sheer numbers of students made ‘Orals’ a complex administrative procedure and different in status from the real English examinations. Speaking English was a very minor part of the English study.

15. I was in a completely new space as a teacher too without much awareness day-to-day of what other teachers were thinking or saying about my work. My judgement now is that the English teachers at the school were very doubtful about what I was doing. When I insisted they give me some feedback, I was told with the full grace of Chinese hospitality, “The students enjoy your lessons very much”. I am still asking myself, “What were we learning together there in those classes?” I too enjoyed them very much. [written by Jenny Little, March 2005, emphasis in original]
Appendix B: Data for Ron [Exemplar 3]

Abbreviated extract from Csikszentmihalyi (1994) on Creativity

I will describe how I started with an interest in the personality traits and cognitive processes of creative people, and how as time went on I became convinced that the epistemological grounds of such a quest were largely unsound. … Finally I came to the conclusion that in order to understand creativity one must enlarge the conception of what the process is, moving from an exclusive focus on the individual to a systemic perspective that includes the social and cultural context in which the ‘creative’ person operates. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1994: 135)

Appendix C. Ron’s second version for research proposal


Research questions:
1. How is the creativity of Chinese EFL majors in comparison with that of Chinese majors?
2. Is the creative ability related to the proficiency of the EFL learners (Balanced bilinguals and monolinguals)?
3. What are the factors that may effect the creativity of the EFL majors?
[nouns in italics]

Appendix D. Supervisor’s guidelines for Ron

GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWING: PREPARING THE QUESTIONS

Clarifying key research aims / stance:
to be inquiring about the ’phenomenon’;
to be exposing the taken-for-granted, and moving out of this to the known – problematising
what you are interested in studying / passionate about;
exposing a relational connection eg. power relations;
exploring / discovering rather than asserting / telling.

Taking up of a personal / relational view:

In order to ground your questions, think about your own experience. For example:
‘Ron you’ve mentioned creativity, being creative is something you value about yourself. I’d like to ask you about that:
Thinking back, when was the first moment you noticed this ‘creativity’ was showing itself?
What form did it take / how did it show itself?
Thinking back on your family- do you think there was an appreciation of ‘creativity’ in people?
How do you think this appreciation of creativity supported you to build on your first experiences / and to continue to build up an appreciation of creativity in your life?
Outside of family support what was it that supported you to continue to do this?’

Taking a socio-cultural view: exposing power relations – of ideas (of the self):

Look at how these (dominant) ideas have come about:
Who or what benefits from these ideas? (discourse / discursive advantaging)
Who or what are these ideas disadvantaging? (discursive disadvantageing)
What sense of self is constituted through these ideas?
[present participles / present continuous tense in italics]

Appendix E: Ron’s response – email letter and ‘newly designed research’.

Dear Audrey,
I really appreciate your detailed reply regarding my revised proposal. Now I’m convinced that quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are, in some respects, very controversial. Choice of qualitative would sometimes mean dismissal of the other, especially in my case. I cannot possibly find anyway to merge the two without clashing into contradictions, it seems. Therefore, after careful thinking, I have made up my mind to give up the Torrence test and indulge myself completely into qualitative inquiry about creativity. … I worked very hard in the last few days and have completed an updated proposal, which I included in the attachment of this email, in accordance with your very thoughtful suggestions. In order to make it easier for
you to read my questions and that you don't have to do second-hand guess, I have included the rationales of the questions in brackets after each one. Please check and give me your response as soon as convenient. I hope to begin study in the soonest possible time if you agree with my newly designed research. I have obtained "Approval of using the place" from the administration.

Thank you again for your wonderful suggestions!
‘Ron’

[verbs in italics]

Ron’s “updated proposal”:

Locating Expression of Creativity for Chinese EFL Majors

Research Questions:
1. What is the concept of creativity as viewed by different people involved in the education of Chinese EFL majors?
2. What are factors that foster or hinder the expression of creativity, especially in the Chinese EFL major teaching and learning situations?
3. How can application/absence of creativity affect EFL learning/teaching?
4. What factors keep students/teachers learning/teaching in the ways as they do now?
References
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