

# Weaving Together Teacher Development and Narrative Inquiry: A Conversation with Paula R. Golombek

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## Abstract

Paula R. Golombek, well known for her research using Vygotskian sociocultural theory in language teacher development, as well as her work using narrative inquiry, was interviewed after a visit at the University of Guanajuato. This interview explores three broad areas: teacher development, recommendations for teachers in Mexico concerning teacher development, and the use of narrative inquiry as a tool in teacher development. Another theme which emerged in the interview is teacher identity in relation to how teachers develop.

## Resumen

Paula R. Golombek, reconocida por su investigación sobre la teoría sociocultural de Vygotsky en el desarrollo del maestro de idiomas, así como por su trabajo con la investigación narrativa, fue entrevistada después de una visita a la Universidad de Guanajuato. La entrevista explora tres temas de relevancia: desarrollo de maestros, recomendaciones para los maestros en México sobre su desarrollo docente y el uso de la investigación narrativa como una herramienta en el desarrollo docente. Otro tema que surgió en la entrevista es identidad del maestro en relación a cómo maestros desarrollar.

Paula R. Golombek<sup>3</sup> is well known for her research using Vygotskian sociocultural theory in language teacher development, as well as her work using narrative inquiry. She recently visited the *Universidad de Guanajuato* and gave a talk to our students studying a Master in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching. This article stems from a follow-up interview with her, and looks at three broad areas she discussed during her talk, including her recommendations for teachers in Mexico concerning teacher development.

## What is Teacher Development?

As Paula acknowledges, defining teacher development “seems like an easy question to answer as a definition, but this definition is challenging to implement, in reality.” So how does she view teacher development and her role in teacher development? “For me as a language teacher educator, teacher development is about teachers developing their conceptual understandings of teaching AND developing instructional practices that are congruent with those understandings. It is about teachers moving beyond their everyday, experiential understandings of teaching and re-storying those experiences or understandings through language teaching concepts that they’ve been exposed to.” In contrast to a more traditional “knowledge transmission model” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 1), Paula has positioned her research in teacher development from the perspective of teacher as researcher, recognizing the value of having such research come from the teachers themselves. By placing teachers in the role of active participant in

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research regarding their own development, she makes them “knowing professionals or agents of change” (ibid.), rather than passive objects to be studied by researchers.

More specifically, Paula adopts a Vygotskian perspective concerning teacher development and identity. In her recent book with Karen E. Johnson (2016), teacher development and practice is seen through this Vygotskian lens (see Ban, 2016). Clarifying this perspective, Paula says, “As someone who works with Vygotskian sociocultural theory, this means that teachers understand their everyday, experiential understandings through what Vygotsky called ‘scientific concepts,’ more generalizable and systematic knowledge about language learning and teaching.” The impact individual experience has on teacher development is something Paula has seen in her research into teacher development and identity formation (Golombek & Klager, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). As she explains, “There is great power in understanding your past through a new discourse, through new concepts. It opens up new possibilities for a teacher in terms of his or her teacher identity and practices.”

While a significant part of the sociocultural learning process is internal, Paula’s work has also focused on what can be “seen” in the teacher-learner process (Johnson & Golombek, 2003). As she explains, “Just knowing a new concept, however, is not fully internalizing it or developing. I’ve had a lot of interactions with teachers who can repeat a concept about teaching, for example, genre-based or text-based approaches to teaching, but they cannot enact those concepts in their teaching.” Finally, Paula concludes, “Development is about expanding thinking and understanding but also developing teaching practices that embody those understandings.” Her research therefore has the goal of empowering teachers in their own development by giving them the tools and support needed to allow them to gain those understandings.

### **Advice for Language Teachers in Mexico**

Paula recognizes not only the important role individual experience plays in teacher development, but the impact context has as well. In her research, she has found that sociocultural theory and a Vygotskian perspective provide an understanding of the importance of context, and outside influences on teacher development and identity formation are another focal point of Paula’s research (Golombek & Klager, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2003). Her recommendations for teachers in Mexico concerning teacher development therefore acknowledge some of the unique aspects of that context, and in discussing language teachers working in Mexico, Paula says, “I recognize that time constraints are a major issue for teachers in Mexico. My recommendations need to be realistic in that sense.” She also draws some universal truths about teacher development, however, noting, “I think what I’ve described as ‘teacher development’ in my previous comments has a very practical sense to it. Whether a teacher is a pre-service teacher, beginning teacher, or experienced teacher, she or he needs to be able to articulate how teaching and learning takes place in her or his class.” To do this, Paula recommends that teachers “identify what your theory of language teaching/learning is.”

As Paula explains, however, true development does not end there. She goes on to describe an important next step: “But then, examine your teaching practices. This could be accomplished through some kind of systematic self-inquiry, but if time is an issue, then teachers need to find a way to do a briefer examination of what they’re doing in their classrooms.” The link between teacher development and teacher identity is key to Paula’s

analysis, however. In her research, she has found that cognitive development is a process of internalization, or the “progressive movement from external socially mediated activity to internal mediation controlled by individual learners” (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, p. 731; see also Golombek & Johnson, 2004). She says, “In essence, the goal is to determine if your practices match up with your conceptions of who you want to be as a teacher and what you want your teaching to look like. If it doesn’t, this is a ripe opportunity for teacher development.” The reflective teaching practice Paula describes is designed to permit teachers to gain an understanding of themselves as teachers as part of their professional development.

Speaking on another aspect common to teaching a language in Mexico, Paula further acknowledges that teachers may not have access to resources to help in this mediated process. Paula recognizes that outside support is an important part of teacher development, explaining, “Of course, what the teacher does after this is where development can occur, but it also may get more challenging at this point because the teacher needs the resources, interactions, and feedback to push development.” In her opinion, this next step can be challenging because “engaging with new concepts and developing practices that are congruent takes time. It takes goal-focused interactions in actual teaching practices in which expert others provide guidance and feedback, what I typically call ‘mediation’. And what this suggests is that teacher education can and should be critical in supporting the development of language teachers in their learning to teach experience and as they leave a teacher education program.” This type of mediation in teacher development is the focus of her most recent book with Karen Johnson (2016). So, what can teachers do when they do not have access to this type of mediated support? “If the teacher is in a teacher education program, then I hope the teacher educators can provide that support. If not, continued reading and interaction with colleagues to foster development becomes important.”

### **Narrative Inquiry as a Tool in Teacher Development**

In an earlier book exploring the use of narrative inquiry (NI) in teacher development, this research methodology was used by Paula and Karen Johnson not only for research into teacher development, but as a tool in teacher development (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Discussing NI now, Paula says, “There are a couple of ways to think about narrative inquiry. Of course, many would associate this term with Clandinin and Connelly (2000). For them, NI is a form of qualitative research, typically done with teachers and a researcher. And the products of NI then become public in that they are published in journals.” In describing how NI has developed in the area of teacher education and development, Paula says, “Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in using NI, expanded our understandings of what teachers do by showing what teachers do in their daily professional lives, and why they do it. Of course, this work was shaped by new understandings about the role of narrative put forth by fields like narrative psychology, in which narrative was posited as the way we make sense of our worlds, give structure to it. This kind of research using NI is invaluable, though it can possibly position the teacher below the researcher.” As Paula has explained, her position as a researcher in teacher development acknowledges the important and perhaps unique role teachers have in their own development.

While Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have placed emphasis in their research on the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ stories, Paula has taken a different approach to

using NI. As she explains, "For me, my understanding, one which I have been working on with Karen Johnson for some time, is that it is 'systematic exploration that is conducted *by* teachers and *for* teachers through their own stories and language' (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 6)." Paula's research using NI therefore places the emphasis more on the teacher, their roles and their own professional development, not simply as a participant in research. In her view, "Narrative inquiry is systematic self-inquiry done by teachers in their own contexts for their own purposes and in their own language," she explains. "For me, narrative inquiry is about teacher development and about teachers taking agency in their development. It is about elevating the role of the teacher in his or her own development, giving him or her a voice." In acknowledging some of the limitations of NI's use in teacher development research, Paula explains, "Of course, this use of NI is, as I previously noted, time consuming. And it is also difficult to do alone. Being isolated can be a major barrier in doing NI. And teachers may not receive recognition or financial gain from conducting NI, so the incentive may only be personal/professional development." Paula acknowledges another limitation of using NI, noting, "As a result, it tends to stay local and unpublished. Of course, this kind of inquiry can be shared locally, and even on a larger stage."

With these admitted limitations, why is Paula so committed to using NI as a research tool in this way? She explains, "My own interest in NI lies in what I have seen as its power in supporting teacher development." Paula's experience using NI as a teacher educator is extensive. "I use narrative inquiry regularly with the teachers with whom I work, whether they be undergrads pursuing a TESL certificate or MA students. I have used NI as part of the internship, or practicum experience, so that teachers could identify tensions or contradictions in their teaching, to externalize their feelings and emotions about their teaching." What has she discovered about the use of NI in teacher education? She explains, "Through the process of conducting NI and identifying areas of possible growth, teachers can then find conceptual resources and collaborators to expand their thinking and develop concrete teaching practices to address the tensions they have identified. As I've been arguing for the last almost fifteen years, teachers engaging in NI enables teachers to make worthwhile changes in their teaching but help build insider knowledge in the field of second language teacher education, thereby changing the field of second language teacher education itself." Paula is a strong advocate for recognizing the importance of the teacher's voice in any research regarding teacher development, not only for the teachers themselves as individuals, but for the greater community of teachers where their insights as teaching professionals adds significantly to the conversation about teacher development.

## **Conclusion**

Paula Golombek continues to contribute through her published research in areas of teacher learning and the role of emotions in teacher development in L2 teacher education, sociocultural perspectives on L2 teacher professional development, narrative inquiry as professional development, and language teacher identity. Her work focuses on teachers by making them important partners in her research rather than mere participants. This emphasis has the effect of empowering them. Her encouragement of teachers in their own personal development is also evident in her support of other researchers using narrative inquiry as a way of looking at teacher development and identity formation. That generosity

of spirit was evident throughout this interview, and we would like to thank her for her time and patience in allowing us to carry out this interview for the *MEXTESOL Journal* readers.

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