

How Not to Be Sabotaged by Your Teaching Identity

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Abstract

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) is today an autonomous theoretical construct, which draws from educational, psychological, and sociological paradigms of teaching (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin 1999). This paper exploits the personal experience of a teacher who loves teaching, a change of heart that took place after years of experience by showing how teaching can be life-changing. It also provides five simple steps to identify whether our teaching identity has been beneficial or harmful to the learning environment, and how to be an effective professional by having the right mindset.

How I Began My English Teaching Journey

It can be a fairly common feeling to have taken wrong steps during our lives. Indeed, life can be full of surprises. We are never certain about the road we should take in life. Oftentimes, we make a move but we soon realize that this was not the best decision, so we make up our minds and change directions. The new direction may lead to an ideal path, bringing about happiness and satisfaction, or an unfortunate direction, resulting in temporary failure. As a matter of fact, several life events can cast doubt on what the future holds for us. Hamlet summarized this best: “To be, or not to be: that is the question”.

The same concern can be applied to our professional lives. I was studying Human Resources Management in college when I began to feel like this direction was not for me at all. Halfway through the course, I decided to try something new and started working as a trainee teacher for a well-known English course in Rio de Janeiro, where I was still studying as an advanced-level learner. I wasn't convinced that I was ready for teaching, but my coordinator felt I had the makings of a teacher, so at her insistence, I decided to try. Soon after that, I was given a chance to teach a group of teenagers (aged 11-13) whose teacher needed replacing. I vividly remember the very first time I walked into that classroom as a teacher, no longer as a student. I was flabbergasted and my heart was racing. Those restless teenagers were staring at me, which caused me alarm. Trembling, I took a deep breath, and started the lesson. At that early point in my career, I felt extremely unprepared because I didn't know the first thing about teaching, but one thing I knew deep inside: my frantic journey as an educator had just begun and no one could ever stop me. I had finally found the ideal path.

How Teaching Changed My Life

In the beginning I was not mature enough to understand what it really means to be a teacher. Honestly speaking, I was hoping I could gain some experience and start earning a lot of money with it (at least I thought I would make it). The fact is that I was too blind to see that teaching is far more than gathering experience for the sake of it, or earning money; teaching is life-changing.

It took me some years to realize that I needed to seek improvement each passing day, as not only do we need to improve as individuals, but also as professionals in this life. As I fundamentally believe that what we say and do exert huge power both on ourselves

and on the people surrounding us, I was truly eager to have a positive impact on people's lives (and I still am). Therefore, I decided that I would be the best I could be as a teacher and provide my students with the best of my practices. This was definitely a turning point in my career, since I finally accepted the fact that we are lifelong students of teaching and that we need to keep learning, no matter what. That is to say, there isn't such a thing as a flawless lesson. Furthermore, it is unwise to think that we know enough. In fact, we don't know enough, we must seek improvements, and widen our horizons throughout life.

After ten years of experience, I have learned that if we want to improve, we should be open-minded about the way we teach and be willing to make necessary adjustments. With this in mind, I made the best decision to go beyond my limited frame of mind, and invest in my CPD, namely, Continuing Professional Development. Taking up courses, entering college for languages, taking a postgrad course, and doing a lot of reading/research have significantly contributed to the success of my career, and I won't stop there. In other words, teaching started to change my life because my motivation was grounded in serving others, not in serving only myself. Since then, I have acknowledged the value of being a knowledgeable and resourceful professional. Our students do deserve our very best. This is how I see teaching: a way of changing other people's lives by caring for them so much that we find a way to give them nothing but our best.

5 Steps to Identify Your Teaching Identity and Assess Whether a Change Is Necessary or Not

Teacher identity has been used in research (Ball & Goodson, 1985) to describe how teachers seem to understand themselves as teachers. Here are five ways to find our identity and avoid being sabotaged throughout our teaching journey.

How you see yourself as a professional

The way we see ourselves plays a key role in the message we're conveying to others. If we see ourselves as valuable professionals, we will positively impact others and they will likely see us that way. However, if we think of ourselves as miserable, low-standard professionals for instance, we will begin to act as such and, as a result, this message will quickly be sent to everyone around us. As Weber and Mitchell (1995, p. 21) say: "images are constructed and interpreted in attempts to make sense of human experience and to communicate that sense to others." Our self-image communicates to others about our true nature. Our personal identity affects our professional one, and vice-versa. The way you see yourself as an individual mirror your professional life. How do I see myself as an educator? How did my experiences shape my teaching style? What message am I conveying to others? These are important questions we should ask ourselves. Additionally, if you are not sure about how you see yourself as a professional, as a good starting point, you could make a list of your positive qualities. Afterwards, ask others to describe your positive qualities and see if they match your list. If they don't, confront thinking distortions. Oftentimes, we mislead and sabotage ourselves by having distorted thinking patterns about us, and people around us.

Identifying your beliefs

Our beliefs tell a lot about who we are and our place in society. Notably, we are also shaped by what we truly believe in. Be it our faith or moral values. Therefore, it is essential that we identify our beliefs and see whether they are interfering in our practices or not. In

other words, identifying and recognizing what we believe to be true when it comes to the educational process, is of paramount importance for everyone. It's a win-win situation. Yet, if you still can't find your core beliefs, you could start by being aware of your thoughts; literally, thinking about our thoughts. Recent studies have revealed that we are also driven by what we think. Our thoughts lead to feelings, which lead to actions. If you want to know what your core beliefs are, the rule of thumb is to ask yourself some thought-provoking questions regarding a wide range of variables in the teaching and learning process. For instance, you could ask yourself "How do I deal with my mistakes"? If you truly believe that under no circumstances should we make basic grammar mistakes, you will likely pass this belief on to your students in the classroom. Before long, they will be afraid to make such mistakes because they know you don't tolerate such a thing in the classroom.

- What are your core values when it refers to diversity, intellectual competence, teaching skills, understanding of learners, among others?
- Do our beliefs help us improve and better students' performance or are they keeping us from improving as professionals? These are other important questions we should ask ourselves in order to identify our teaching identity.

Understanding your real role in the classroom

First and foremost teachers need to fully understand their roles in the classroom. Most of the theories of learning are focused on explaining that 21st century teachers should not be dominant at all. In light of recent studies, learner/learning-centered classrooms are healthier and more effective for the learning process to take place. Teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge as they used to be; they are facilitators, mediators, researchers, and curators, to name a few. To give an illustration, if our teaching identity tells us that the best learning environment is one in which students are being controlled by the teacher at all times, then our TPI is already affecting the way we teach and, consequently, our students. Reflective teaching is key here. It's vital that teachers make a deliberate move to allow themselves to think critically and reflect upon their practices finding the best ways to maximize learners' learning. One good start is to make judicious use of the so-called "reflection-in-action procedure", which is basically being able to step back and change directions when need be in our lessons. Reflective-in-action involves thinking about what we are doing, whilst we are doing it, giving us the chance to redesign what is being done in the classroom. This is to state that reflective teaching may turn teachers into researchers due to the dimension of self-inquiry. Therefore, becoming a reflective teacher has numerous advantages to our professional life.

How you see your students' emotions & learning experiences

The way we establish rapport with our students is essential to make their learning experiences more enjoyable, and appealing. The teacher is now required to be friendly (not a friend, though), and perceptive to the extent of enhancing learners' social & emotional skills. Some students just need the constant warmth from their teachers, because they're either hurt or lacking confidence. Who knows what they've been through, how much sleep they're getting (research has shown that many teenagers aren't getting enough sleep) or even the sacrifices they're making to be in the classroom with you and their classmates?

Do you turn your learners' experiences into something meaningful to them? Do you consider the social-emotional skills of your learners? Taking our students' feelings and emotions into account when teaching is a virtue. Teaching involves people, and people

involve emotions, which are very likely to affect the learning environment. How do you deal with your learners' low self-esteem, levels of anxiety, and inhibition? Another key point to remember is that the affective factor is crucial for an effective learning environment. It's the teacher's place to reduce negative factors and develop more positive ones. One simple way of doing it is by fostering motivation among learners as much as possible.

How important CPD is for you

Continuous learning is an essential part of life. Knowledge is something we acquire and nurture throughout life. We are always learning after all, but when we don't attempt to invest in taking our teaching competence to the next level, we are not giving ourselves the opportunity to grow. Knowledge is power. It is true that our professional life has many challenges on a daily basis and that sometimes we feel dismayed by so much competitiveness and trials in our field, but determining where we want to be is just as important as knowing where we are right now. I have seen many teachers not investing in their CPD because they believe they've hit the glass ceiling. They are either content with their current career path or the money they make is enough to make ends meet, so they are fine with that. Perhaps, they are not sure if they want to teach for the rest of their lives. If they are fired or even decide to step down, that's ok. They can find themselves another job in a different field. Teachers are neither valued nor respected after all.

But the truth is, that would be the easiest way out. No matter how hard it seems to be, if teaching is what you were cut out to do, then you should take action, and move forward. If you love what you do then investing in your CPD is essential for you to reach higher and be the best professional you can be. Thus, it increases chances of being more and more successful in what you do.

All things considered, teachers as any other human being, hold different types of identity. If they get lost somewhere along the way and can no longer recognize who they are, they may neglect their roles, which might cause failure and frustration. I believe I began to change my mindset and comprehend the importance of honing my skills once I understood the importance of my role as a teacher, and how much my students can be positively or negatively affected by me. Therefore, being a teacher goes beyond what we may think it means. Being a teacher is finding an inspiration to carry on despite the hurdles in our way; it is our essence; we must know who we are, and what we are here for. What's more, we must bear in mind that there is always room for improvement and be open to perform any changes if need be. Once we take that in, we start gain the right mindset as we begin to build up our own teaching identity, which will most likely bring substantial benefits to everyone involved. Teaching is not a job without perspectives or future. It's true that teaching takes a lot of elbow grease but it can be a rewarding profession.

Biographical Note

Raquel Marinho Andrade has been teaching English since 2009. In 2013, she worked offshore teaching English & Portuguese. In 2016, she completed a post-graduated course in Language Teaching & New Technologies. She is a passionate CELTA-qualified English teacher and holds a Train the Trainer by the University of Cambridge.

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