

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Encouraging teaching-practice learning-communities

Sakae Onoda

Yosuke Chiba

Kanda University of International Studies

Mayumi Shibata

Tokyo Metropolitan Fukagawa SHS

Tim Murphey

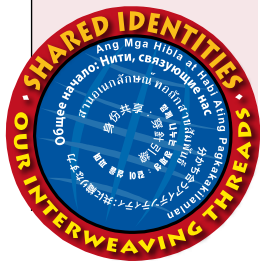
Kanda University of International Studies

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This exploratory study looks at a small group of university students who did their teaching practice with the intent to become high school (HS) or junior high school (JHS) teachers. The students were invited to collaborate as co-researchers on improving the system and to reflect before, during, and after their teaching practice. We asked them to conduct surveys with the supervising teachers and their students at their schools and invited input on ways to improve the training. Research shows that it is helpful to form learning communities around activities in need of improvement (Wenger 1998), like the activity of teaching practice. In learning communities with others, we reflect, evaluate, and learn much more. We understand the problems better and differently, with more complexity. Furthermore, we turn into more productive communities that improve practice.

この研究は、高校および中学教師を目指して教育実習に取り組んだ大学生の集団について行った調査研究である。学生には教育実習制度を改善する共同研究者として協力を依頼し、教育実習の前、その期間中、そして終了後に自らの体験について考えてもらった。また、彼らには実習校の指導教官と生徒にアンケートに記入してもらうように依頼し、教員養成を向上するための意見を求めた。これまでの研究によれば、教育実習のような改善の必要性のある活動に関してlearning communitiesを形成することは役立つ(Wenger, 1998)とのことである。他者と形成するlearning communitiesにおいて、我々はそのような活動を振り返り、評価し、そしてさらに多くのことを学ぶのである。そして我々は問題をより深く異なった観点から、細部に至るまで理解できるのである。その結果、practice(実践)を改善できるより生産的なcommunitiesに生まれ変わることができるのである。我々は、教育実習生と高校の指導教官に我々の調査研究に協力してくれるよう求めたのである。



Introduction, by Tim Murphey

Each of the four researchers involved in this study will in turn give our perspectives and ideas about the present conditions of the English Teaching Practice for university students wishing to become JHS and HS teachers in Japan. I will start out with our intentions and hopes when we started this study and some of the things we did. After this short introduction, Yosuke Chiba, a fourth-year student teacher will describe his experience doing teaching practice and give some suggestions to those in charge of directing the system. Then Mayumi Shibata, a high school teacher, will provide a view from the high school teachers' side of things. Teacher-educator Sakae Onoda, who was a high school teacher for more than 10 years, will follow with some student teacher and host-teacher feedback and what he sees as some of the constraints and problems from his perspective.

Teacher communities that continue to learn and collaborate are models for students who learn to collaborate and learn more. It is a fractal that actually impacts student learning. Wheelan and Tilin (1999) report that the more collaborative the teacher group is the higher the level of learning of the students. In Japan, it seems that many teachers at all levels feel very isolated and constrained by the system with little agency to change things. However, in certain circumstances we can improve the system and benefit at least some participants. Thus, we wish to study how conditions might change to make more learning communities among JHS and HS teachers and university-students in training and university teachers who are training student teachers.

More and more students are wanting to become more active and agentive as prosumers (Toffler, 1980; Tapscott & Williams, 2006) in the world, and they need models of teachers who are also active and agentive as near peer role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Murphey & Sato, 2005). Teacher cognition studies (Borg, 2006) along with the social turn in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Block, 2003) are allowing us to understand just how valuable the social capital (Bourdieu, 1980), i.e., the networks of our colleagues' wisdom, is to our own growth and development. However, when key members are not consulted and included in the proposed plans, the plans lack validity and participants are hesitant to invest themselves in the proposals. In an attempt to improve teacher learning (our own, our students', and supervising teachers') we began this exploratory research and invited all parties to participate with us. Recent research is also showing that educational change is more productive if it is site-based (Martin-Kniep, 2008).

We began in April 2008 and our students were doing teaching practice in May, June, and September. We hoped to form a model of collaborative university-school improvement procedures. One crucial missing entity is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) and we hope to include them eventually. We initially gave questionnaires to our students for their supervising teachers (see Appendix 1); however, none were actually filled out by the supervising teachers of our students. Yes, they are busy, but also new teacher training seems to be very low on their list of priorities. The desire and willingness to cross borders (Murphey, Okada, Iijima, & Asaoka, 2008) and open themselves up to other

influences also seems greatly lacking among most of the practicing teachers. We also gave questionnaires to students (see Appendix 2) who are in our classes doing teacher training and asked their opinions. Onoda will be reporting on their feedback. But before he does, we will look at a student teacher view by Chiba and a high school teacher's view by Shibata.

A student teacher's point of view, by Yosuke Chiba

I would like to present my personal experience of my teaching practice and some suggestions for improvement. Last year, when I was a third year student, I started to prepare for my teaching practice. I took the English Teacher Training Course (the English Teaching Methodology course). In that course, I learned various kinds of teaching methods such as Oral Introduction, and I learned some unique oral activities in my seminar class.

Last May and June, I went to teach English to second-year students at my high school for three weeks. I learned a lot there in spite of the short term. However, I have two things I regret. First, I was not able to teach, as I wanted to teach. Just before starting my teaching practice, I had the first meeting with my supervising teacher and he told me to use only Japanese to teach English. He said his students could not understand spoken English and they would be confused by my English in class. I understood I should teach English at the students' level, but as a result, I was not able to use techniques and activities I learned at the university, and I ended up teaching English like my supervising teacher instructed.

The second is I wanted to experience team teaching with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). Unfortunately, I had no opportunity to work with an ALT in an oral communication class even though I had a chance to talk with one in our office. Not only I, but also some of the other student teachers who did teaching practice this year wanted to team teach with an ALT.

On the basis of the two regrets, I have two suggestions for improvement. First, I wish we could teach as we want to teach, and supervising teachers would give suggestions and instructions about our specific teaching methods. I believe high school students should experience learning English in a variety of ways such as learning English only in English, because students must be curious about our teaching approaches, and also it is a good opportunity for students to learn English in a different way during such a short term. Therefore, we should have them experience and try new things. Even if students might hesitate to try new learning methods at first, perhaps they will be able to benefit from them.

The other is student teachers should experience team teaching with an ALT during teaching practice. Recently, the number of ALTs has been decreasing in Japan. It implies there will be fewer opportunities for English teachers to work with them in the future. Thus, we student teachers should experience this while we can, and learn from them. These suggestions are just my own opinions, but I really hope to make the system of teaching practice better from student teachers' point of view.

A high school teacher's point of view, by Mayumi Shibata

I teach at Tokyo Metropolitan Fukagawa SHS and I am happy to discuss issues about training student teachers. Many student teachers come to our school in order to have three weeks of practice teaching. Some of them achieve great success but some do not. Those who cannot make it successful sometimes confuse the students and the teachers. Now let me talk about some improvements we could make with regard to student teachers.

Let us think about the reason why some of them cannot succeed at practice teaching. I think that one of the factors is motivation. It is true that not all the student teachers want to be teachers. Some take the teachers training course only in order to get a teaching license that looks good on their resume. Practice teaching is an unpleasant obligation for them. We teachers offer precious time with students to student teachers for several weeks and student teachers should be taught to appreciate it and try to behave as if they were teachers in active service. I am sure that they can broaden their experiences by interacting with the students and teachers.

Student teachers should also be made fully aware of the responsibility of teaching. It is taken for granted that teachers should teach correctly because students learn many things from their lessons. Therefore, they should study not only how to teach but also how to organize lessons and interact with students. If they have enough time between periods, they should observe as many lessons as they can. I am sure that they can improve their teaching techniques by doing so. This is more effective than just reading textbooks, which are

written about teaching methods. This is also good training because this makes them realize that they need to collaborate with students if they want to give a good lesson.

Moreover, they should communicate with students in extracurricular activities. This would make student teachers understand what students are by observing them in different ways, not from their attitude in a classroom but from their participation in club activities. I believe that understanding students' features is a foundation of good teachers. I know that student teachers spend a lot of time and energy going through practice teaching, but doing it more thoroughly and effectively will give them wonderful and unforgettable moments. I hope that they will find it worthwhile to work as a teacher.

A teacher trainer's point of view, by Sakae Onoda

In order to obtain a junior and senior teaching license, student teachers are required to engage in the teaching practice or the teaching practicum at a particular host school, usually at the junior or senior high school they graduated from, for three to four weeks in Japan. The teaching practice includes not only teaching English but also many other responsibilities including those as a homeroom teacher (e.g., supervision of cleaning, disciplining of students, explaining and preparing for upcoming school events, and counseling students) and supervision of club activities as a coach. In fact, student teachers' performance is evaluated with the following criteria taken from the evaluation sheet that Kanda University of International Studies sends to the host schools for the evaluation of student teachers' performance.

1. Contact/communication with students inside and outside the class
2. Interest in the teaching profession
3. Preparation of and research on teaching materials
4. Teaching skills
5. Classroom management skills
6. Student disciplining skills
7. Clerical skills
8. General work performance

As a former high school teacher, I agree that it is legitimate to expect these skills and abilities of prospective teachers, but over the years there have been numerous studies and reports that the teaching practice system does not serve its purpose or function adequately from a variety of viewpoints (e.g. Jimbo, et al., 2006). Any system needs monitoring and improving, if it is to remain useful. It is my strong belief that if the three parties involved, i.e., teacher trainers, supervising teachers and student teachers, make the most of the teaching practice experiences, it will enrich everyone's knowledge and experiences because these parties, along with high school students, will be interacting with each other in communities of learners. If there is little monitoring, reflection, and improvement encouraged in the system, then it will pragmatically and bureaucratically remain dysfunctional. Much of these four parties' investments, such as time and energy, will be wasted. Moreover, to the point, it is high school students who eventually will suffer the shortcomings of the teaching practice system. The goal of

improving everyone's learning (students, student teachers, JHS/HS teachers and university trainers) legitimizes our attempts to refine the teaching practice system. Let me begin with what we know from host teachers and student teachers and then move on to my perspective of the teacher trainer.

Host teacher feedback

We regularly get feedback from host teachers at junior and senior high schools on the performance of student teachers coming from Kanda University of International Studies. In 2008, most of the comments from supervising high school teachers returned to KUIS were highly positive with marginal negative comments given to a small number of student teachers. I believe that this has been partly due to the fact that these student teachers were the first students to satisfy the prerequisite of TOEIC 650 to register for the English Teaching Methodology course in the beginning of the 3rd year. We are not sure how many other schools have this requirement, but it is one way to assure that students are serious about becoming a teacher. However, negative comments and suggestions from host teachers are also valuable for teacher trainers and student teachers. These comments, whether positive or negative, help teacher trainers deepen their understanding of what supervising teachers expect their student teachers to have or demonstrate. For economy of space and for the purpose of explicating skills and abilities they should have or demonstrate, I believe that a brief description given below will serve the purpose. When reading the description, please note that 49 out of the 60 student teachers at Kanda were female in 2008.

1. The most highly evaluated skills, abilities and behaviors that the student teachers demonstrated were:
 - a. enthusiasm about teaching,
 - b. sincerity, honesty, and kindness to students and teachers,
 - c. cheerfulness and smiling especially when greeting,
 - d. willingness to communicate with students in English and in Japanese,
 - e. interest in trying to use new teaching techniques and improving their teaching, being reflective on their teaching and incorporating suggestions from their host teachers,
 - f. being fluent in speaking English and creating an English-speaking atmosphere, an ability to make well-thought-out lesson plans and teaching materials,
 - g. creating tasks and activities to accommodate students' interests and stimulating their curiosity,
 - h. effectively using Oral Introduction and motivating students to speak English, and
 - i. being a role model of a good English speaker.
2. Skills, abilities and behaviors that should be improved: Supervising teachers said that a few student teachers needed better:
 - a. grammar skills,
 - b. communication abilities with groups and individual students,
 - c. time management skills,
 - d. ways to balance the amount of English and Japanese in class,
 - e. disciplinary skills with problematic students,
 - f. lesson planning skills.

Student teacher feedback after teaching practice

Only eight 4th-year students at KUIS gave us suggestions for improving the teaching practice system (see Appendix 2 for the questionnaire). Therefore, these results are not conclusive but rather suggestive.

1. It would be:
 - a. useful for a professor who teaches the English teaching methodology course, i.e., a teacher trainer, to visit us while engaged in teaching practice, to observe our teaching and to give suggestions for improvement. Some host teachers are not willing to discuss our teaching with us,
 - b. useful for the principal to check how the host teachers supervise their student teachers because some teachers do not observe, evaluate, or give suggestions to our teaching.

2. It would be useful for the methodology course to teach:
 - a. how to team teach with an ALT,
 - b. how to teach grammar/writing,
 - c. how to teach English in English at junior high schools.
 3. Supervising teachers in JHSs and HSs should:
 - a. meet us two or three weeks in advance, and tell us about the textbook, how they usually teach including activities they use, how students respond to the teachers, leeway in teaching English (i.e. what we are allowed to do in class),
 - b. meet us after school everyday to discuss our teaching and ideas for improving our teaching in the teaching practice period,
 - c. at least listen to how we want to teach and allow us to try different approaches with students.
 4. University student teachers preparing to do teaching practice should:
 - a. improve English skills, not only oral skills, but also grammar skills before engaging in teaching practice. High English proficiency will help you teach effectively and attract students' attention,
 - b. meet your host teachers two or three weeks before the teaching practice period and to find out how teachers usually teach and which units you will teach so that you can be well-prepared when you begin to teach,
- c. exchange teaching ideas with your friends,
 - d. teach at juku schools if possible because you can get used to teaching secondary school students and the experience will give confidence in interacting with students.

Teacher trainer view

With the view to making the teaching practice system work effectively, I would like to present the following suggestions as the principal teacher trainer coordinator at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). These ideas derive from my teaching experience as a high school teacher and a university teacher trainer, feedback from host teachers of student teachers from KUIS and results of a survey conducted with KUIS student teachers. In the teacher training course, the teacher trainer does well to:

1. guide prospective student teachers to critique the ways they were taught in high school,
2. demonstrate a model lesson to students and have them compare it with the teaching they experienced in high school,
3. offer opportunities to observe and analyze good teaching practice demonstrated by experienced high school teachers, in a group of students,
4. set English proficiency criteria as a prerequisite for students who want to register for the English teacher training course,

5. lead them to look back on their own learning by having them write their own language learning history and discuss effective learning/teaching among a group of students,
6. raise their consciousness of the concept that teachers are learning from students by teaching them as well as that they should not underestimate students' potentials,
7. encourage prospective student teachers to form groups, and exchange teaching ideas, demonstrate them, critique each other's teaching, and look for alternative teaching ideas,
8. direct/instruct student teachers to develop scaffolding techniques (i.e., teaching techniques to help students understand and speak English), emphasizing an essential mediator role of a teacher,
9. make student teachers aware of the importance of their English language skills because with high proficiency they can teach with confidence and expand their teaching potential,
10. raise their awareness of the fact that they are responsible for students' learning and so they could help them understand the subject matter clearly if they teach well but also they could confuse students. Teaching influences students' ways of organizing information, i.e., students' cognition.

In addition, it would be a good idea to:

1. offer the English teacher training course for two years, i.e., in the 2nd year and 3rd year (so that students can think about what teaching entails and their teaching career and they can learn more about effective English teaching),
2. facilitate a system so that the teacher trainer at university and the host teacher of the student teacher have opportunities to discuss his/her teaching in the teaching practice period,
3. encourage high school teachers to be open-minded to the possibility of alternative teaching methods and learning from student teachers. In fact, this claim can be validated by the fact that some host teachers said in their comments that they learned a lot, especially teaching ideas, from their student teacher,
4. encourage high schools to allocate supervising teachers with good teaching skills to student teachers if possible.

Proleptic conclusions, by Tim Murphey

Reflection creates awareness of what we are doing well and what can be improved. It behooves the participants in any serious endeavor to attempt reflecting on successes, so they can be repeated, and contemplating how things can be improved. It is also recommended that all the stakeholders communicate with each other and let each other know what they see as the main problems facing them. This was our first

attempt at forming a community around the topic of teaching practice and we think it is a good start but far from sufficient.

Talk does not always solve problems, but not talking usually creates barriers and dysfunction in a system. Creating social capital (i.e., networks of supportive friends and colleagues) through understanding the various participants' views in a system seems to be a prerequisite to cultivating an effective organization. We think we have taken a first step in this regard with our exploratory research and hope to continue doing so. We have formed an online Yahoo Group to discuss these ideas further. If you are interested, please send a message to <mits@kanda.kuis.ac.jp> asking to join the "Teaching Practice Learning Community" whether you are doing research, training student teachers, a JHS/HS teacher, or if you are a student teacher in training (or even a MEXT colleague). We welcome all who would like to learn more about this topic, collaborate with us, and discuss how the teaching practice system can be improved.

Sakae Onoda received his MA in TESOL from Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo. Since then, he has been an active presenter at academic conferences and hosted TV and radio English education programs. Currently he teaches English Teacher Education and Journalistic English at Kanda University of International Studies.

Yosuke Chiba graduated from KUIS in March 2009. He plans to go on to graduate school after a short adventure in business. He has been interested in Japanese English Education since he was a freshman and he wants to get a MA in TESOL in the future. He researches student motivation.

Mayumi Shibata graduated from the English Department at Kanda University of International Studies in 2005. Since then, she has been teaching at Tokyo Metropolitan Fukagawa Senior High School and is contemplating graduate school.

Tim Murphey joined Kanda University of International Studies in April 2008 and is thrilled at the many opportunities for professional development offered there. He is the series editor of TESOL's Professional Development in Language Education series in which he co-edited *Communities of Supportive Professionals*, with Kazuyoshi Sato.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire for supervising teachers

Please Help us Improve the Teaching Practice System

Dear Teaching Practice (TP) Supervising Teachers:

Hello, we are Sakae Onoda and Tim Murphey, teachers at Kanda University of International Studies. We want to thank you sincerely for helping our students through their teaching practice. We would like to improve their preparation for teaching practice in the future and hope that you will help us. We would like to invite you to collaborate with us by filling out the questionnaire below. *Sincerely, Sakae Onoda and Tim Murphey, Ph.D.*

Name _____ School _____ JHS/HS
(Your name and school will not be used and your privacy protected. This is just so we might ask you further questions later if we need to.)

1. How many years have you been teaching English? _____
2. How many different schools have you taught at? _____
3. How many times have you supervised trainee teachers? _____

Below, please write your degree of agreement with the following statements

1= strongly disagree 2= disagree 3= agree 4 strongly agree

4. I generally enjoy working with teachers in training. _____
5. I think the teaching practice system is inefficient. _____
6. I think the time spent is too long _____

7. My students get behind our schedule when they have practice teachers. _____
8. Students learn as much with Practice Teachers as they do with me. _____
9. I would rather not have practice teachers in my classes _____
10. Another time during the year would be more appropriate _____ WHEN _____

If you have supervised a few student teachers from Kanda, what do you think are the good features of our students?

What do you think they should learn or do before coming to teaching practice?

The main problems with the practice teaching program are:

My suggestions for improving the system of practice teaching are

Thank you for agreeing to help us ! (Use the back if you need more space)

Appendix 2

Student teacher survey, September 2008 (Tim Murphey & Sakae Onoda)

July 30, 2008 version

We are researching how we might better prepare students for their teaching practice in JHSs and HSs and make the experience better for student teachers, supervising teachers, and the students involved. Your honest feedback is very much appreciated and your name will not be mentioned without your permission. We do wish to have your name on this survey so that we might ask you in more detail if we have questions. Thank you very much for your participation. Note that you do not have to participate if you do not want to. Your information is valuable to us and could help many other student teachers.

Name: _____ Student Number: _____

Major: _____ Year in school: _____

Gender: Male / Female Age _____ Date today _____

I did teaching practice from _____ to _____ /I will do teaching practice from _____ to _____

Please answer the following general questions about your English learning. Circle the level of your agreement with the statements.

1 = Disagree Strongly, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Slightly agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly agree

<p>(a) I am confident in learning English now. 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(b) I like studying English now. 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(c) Even if English was not a compulsory subject, I would choose to study it. 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(d) Generally, I think that I enjoy learning English in class. 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(e) Generally, I think that I enjoy learning English out of class. 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(f) I am sure I want to be a teacher. 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(g) I think the teacher training program so far has helped prepare me for teaching 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>For those who have done teaching practice</p> <p>(h) I learned a lot ...</p> <p>from my supervising teacher 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>from the other student teachers at the school 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>from doing teaching 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>from the students I taught 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>from other English teachers at the school 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>from Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>(i) I was able to teach ...</p> <p>as I wanted to teach 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>using techniques and activities I learned at the university 1 2 3 4 5 6</p> <p>only as the supervising teacher instructed 1 2 3 4 5 6</p>	<p>TO BE ANSWERED BY ALL STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY CERTIFICATE COURSES</p> <p>(j) Changes I would recommend to MEXT's organization of teaching practice (required courses, length of time, etc.) and please state why.</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>(k) Changes I would recommend in the university course preparation for teaching practice and why:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>(l) Changes I would recommend to supervising teachers in JHSs and HSs and why:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>(m) Recommendations to university student teachers preparing to do teaching practice (and why?)</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>(n)</p> <hr/> <hr/>
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