

Book review: *Common Grounds, Contested Territory. Examining the Roles of English Language Teachers in Troubled Times*

MARK A. CLARKE, (2007): ANN ARBOR: MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY PRESS.

DR. KARIN ZOTZMANN ¹, BENEMÉRITA UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE PUEBLA

Although the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been dominated for decades by a cognitivist perspective, many authors have criticized its underlying computer metaphor where the learner receives *input*, processes it in the form of *intake* and then produces *output* which in turn mirrors exactly – in the ‘ideal’ case—the input (Kramsch 2003, Lantolf 2000). The search for new approaches attempts to account for the fact that our students are not passive recipients of information but human beings who learn in particular institutional and cultural contexts. In order to explain the kinds of socially ratified knowledge, researchers have turned to the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) who emphasized the importance of interaction, communication and scaffolding in the development of any higher cognitive ability. While this socio-cultural perspective provides fruitful insights into the complexity of formal foreign language learning, its underlying metaphor of the human being as an *apprentice* (and concomitantly the teacher as a *Meister*) captures learning only as a form of *socialization*. Again, we cannot account for the complex relationships between individuals who have specific motivations and occupy certain positions in particular societies which allow or limit these aspirations to be realized. Recently, a third strand has been developing that explores the biological metaphor of ecology for the field of Second and Foreign Language Learning.

Clarke adopts the ecology metaphor not only to explore the complexities of teaching- learning but also to help foreign language teachers in pursuit of their professional day-to-day activities and struggles. Through a list of guiding questions, he makes his readers reflect upon institutional policies, practices and constraints and sets these in relation to the educational philosophy and values teachers hold. He thereby opens up a conceptual space for teachers to reflect upon whether these two perspectives are in line or whether they diverge, and if so, to what extent. Clarke’s main aim is to make us aware of the fact that not all institutional ‘givens’ are unchangeable and that teachers’ voices should be taken into account in institutional decisions whenever possible since it is the teachers, not administrators, who are the experts when it comes to actual teaching and learning.

In order to create this awareness the author guides the reader through a multidimensional journey of all contexts (including conceptual ones) that impact upon and that we co-construe in our profession. In the first chapter he introduces the theoretical tenants of an ecological perspective on teaching under the title “Whose questions count?” and gives practical examples of how international

¹ kzotzmann@gmx.net

relations, politics of national education, exam boards, administrators, managers and coordinators influence our daily teaching practices. He emphasizes the importance of not only being well-informed about these different factors but also of positioning oneself critically in relation to their discourses and practices. Since such a stance has to be reflexive and “clearly articulated” (p. 10), chapter two focuses on our own views and beliefs of learning and teaching in light of recent discussions in the field. In this, as in other sections of the book, the author does not only present academic theories and leave it up to the readers to infer the link to their teaching practices, but he also guides them through these complex territories by means of exploratory questions and concrete examples.

Chapters three (“Teaching as Learning, Learning as Life”) and four (“Philosophy as Autobiography”) deepen this self-exploration but link our philosophical and professional stance to ourselves as people with specific values and principles. By introducing action research, its main ideas and benefits, Clarke not only promotes professional development but also a new connection between our professional and personal selves. As he convincingly argues, this relation is increasingly lost in the hectic life of many teachers who work at several institutions at the same time, have only part-time contracts and usually do not receive social benefits.

Chapters five and six both deal with the concept of authenticity which the author regards as a means to harness the curiosity and enthusiasm of learners and hence the meaningfulness of learning. Since he is acutely aware that the creation of authentic lessons might be understood as requiring more preparation time, he presents a variety of examples of subtle adjustments that connect the classroom to relevant issues for both teachers and students.

In chapters seven (“Teachers and Gurus”), eight (“Teaching to Standards: How to and Why Not”) and nine (“Changing Schools: Creating Disturbances and Alarming Your Friends”), the author moves to external factors that influence our teaching practices. While the first of the three might be more relevant for teachers in the U.S. than in Mexico (Clarke states that in the current climate of accountability teachers are pressured to cite ‘authorities’ and advises strongly against following fashions), the latter two discuss the relation between institutions and individual agency. The author moves here from questions about the nature of the standards and educational change, their origins and their impacts upon our teaching practices to a discussion of how we can position ourselves to balance external mandates against our own sense of what is right.

Taking as a starting point the contested nature of our professional territory, as indicated in the title of his monograph, Clarke fills an enormous gap and is of invaluable help to foreign language teachers in current times of educational and social change. Having been a teacher himself for decades, the author mediates in a very accessible style between theoretical discussions and actual practical teaching concerns. Clarke motivates practitioners to reflect upon taken-for-granted assumptions and to develop their own theoretically informed perspectives. He argues forcefully that decision making about what should happen in the classroom has been further and further removed from teachers and presents the implications of this increasing ‘managerialization’ of our profession. His adoption of the ecological perspective allows him to bring into focus the

different contextual and institutional factors that impact upon the mundane decisions we face every day in class. His main contribution is to show that there is space for individual agency and change in these processes.

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