

# Reflections on Learning from a Study Leave: One Year Later

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## Abstract

Surviving, thriving, and evolving followed by further noticing, reflecting, and acting are some of the stages a teacher-researcher goes through before, during, and after the study leave experience. Having the opportunity to literally remove oneself from the daily concerns, routines, and habits entrenched in one's local institutional context for an extended period of time (e.g., six months) is an experience like no other. Blood donation campaigns call giving blood 'a gift that keeps on giving'. While the majority of people in our profession do carry on with their work quite well without ever going on a study leave (or donating blood), an important revelation that I have had is: a study leave is also 'a gift that keeps on giving'.

**Key words:** study leave, professional development, reflective learning.

## 1. Introduction

For general background information and context, I start with a quiz on the north of England, the region, cities, and culture that provided my home for professional exploration for six months from April until September 2011. The first part of the quiz is a task to place the list of cities (below) on the map of England (that does not include Scotland or Wales). Once that is done, the second part is to answer some questions about local history and culture. The quiz, answers, and the initial outline of this paper come from the public lecture that I gave soon after I came back to work (Nakamura, 2011). Recent thoughts were added July-September, 2012, marking one year after the experience.



## 1.1 Geography

Place the following cities on the map of England (listed by the amount of time I spent there with the first one the most time):

1. York
2. Newcastle
3. Lancaster
4. Whitby
5. Manchester
6. Durham
7. Liverpool

## 1.2 Local History and Culture

8. What is each place listed above famous for?
9. What are the Wars of Roses? When did they occur?
10. What is in the center of the University of York campus?
11. Who live there (besides students)?
12. What is the difference: Church, Minster, Cathedral, and Abbey?
13. What is a *Geordie*? What is *Scouse*?
14. What is a *plate glass* university? What is a *red brick* university?
15. What is Whitby jet?
16. What is a 'baby' goose called?

## 2. Background Information

*What are some of the things each city is famous for?*

According to *Rough Guide* (a popular guide book):

York is the north's most compelling city, a place that stood at the heart of the country's religious and political life for centuries, and until the Industrial Revolution was second only to London in population and importance. The capital of the Roman empire's northern European territories and the base for Hadrian's northern campaigns, by the seventh century York had become the fulcrum of Christianity in northern England. In 867 the city fell to the Danes, who renamed it Jorvik, and later made it the capital of eastern England (Danelaw). These days a more provincial air hangs over the city, but relics from its glory days abound.

*York:* The Minster, The Shambles, Betty's Tea Room, City Walls, Ghosts.

*Newcastle:* Bridges over the Tyne River, Quayside, Grey Street, Ales, Language.

*Lancaster:* Smoked Fish, Sticky Toffee Pudding, Potted Shrimps, Witches.

*Manchester:* Industrial Revolution, Town Hall, Rock Music, Football.

*Whitby:* Abbey, Captain Cook, Bram Stoker's Dracula, Whitby Jet, Fish and Chips.

*Durham:* The Cathedral, A Film Location for Harry Potter, Billy Elliot.

*Liverpool:* The Beatles, Albert Dock (World Heritage), Football, Language.

*What are the Wars of the Roses? When did they occur?*

There was a series of battles between Lancaster (red roses) and York (white roses) that occurred between 1455 and 1485. People still talk about this rivalry.

*What is in the center of the University of York campus?*

A long and winding lake is the centerpiece of the landscaped garden that replaced the marshy land when the campus was built in the 1960s.

*Who live there (besides students)?*

A variety of wildlife (and semi-wildlife) that includes rabbits, squirrels, hedgehogs, birds, ducks, swans, and geese live here.

*Some more answers*

A *minster* is the main cathedral in a diocese and is a missionary teaching church. An *abbey* is a monastery for monks or a convent for nuns. A *Geordie* is a local person of Newcastle. *Scouse* is a dialect spoken in the Merseyside area of Liverpool. *Plate glass* universities were built in the 1960s in a modern style of plate glass framed in steel or iron. *Red brick* universities were built in major industrial areas before WW I. *Whitby Jet* is a minor gemstone. A baby goose is called a *gosling*.

### **3. Outline of the public lecture: Expectations, surprises, and discoveries**

The following ideas represent what I learned immediately after the study leave finished and during the first month back at work.

#### **3.1 If you could have six months to study outside Japan where would you go?**

For me, York and the surrounding area was the perfect place with a balance and mixture of opportunities to study my research field Conversation Analysis (CA) with famous researchers, attend a wide range of public academic lectures and conferences, be immersed in history and culture, work with people (fellow visiting researchers, staff researchers and teachers, administrative staff, undergrads and postgrads, etc.) from all over the world, regularly talk to the local people (shop keepers, restaurant staff, librarians, etc.), and enjoy nature and wildlife (on and off campus) each and every day.

#### **3.2 Goals**

Four goals established in advance:

1. Network with students and teachers of the University of York.
2. Participate in data sessions, lectures, workshops, and conferences.
3. Read and write with a research journal paper in mind.
4. Collect new data.

### 3.3 Achievements

1. I got to know MA and Doctoral students and teachers in various departments (sociology, linguistics, and education) in the university and also at other universities (Newcastle, York St. John).

2. During the term, I attended data sessions and lectures five times a week. I also presented my own research nine times at different departments and universities. I attended five international conferences at Manchester, York, Birmingham, Newcastle, and Bristol and presented at two of them.

3. I collected many research papers related to the topic that I wanted to develop into my own research paper-in-progress. Often other researchers once they knew my interest sent me their papers to read. By following a routine of reading, talking to experts, and writing, I managed to write a first complete draft of a paper before leaving York.

4. I collected 30 hours of recordings of talks with students and teachers.

### 3.4 Suggestions To Those Who Are Planning Their Own Extended Trips/Stays

-Plan well in advance by setting target dates and contacting people.

-Specify goals that you want to accomplish while over there.

-Never hesitate to ask questions and to ask for help.

-The more you learn in advance the less trouble you will have later.

### 3.5 Concluding Thoughts

-Everyone needs 'a gap' away from his or her usual routine. Learning how other people live gives us new ideas on how to live our own life in pursuit of our passion and dream.

-All we need to do is take the first and most important step: leap into the unknown with the belief that things will work out.

-Continuity of one's hopes and dreams is nurtured in unexpected places and ways.

## 4. A Reflective Framework for Interactional Understanding

The key themes that emerged from that talk for me were 'connection' and 'continuation'. In pursuit of deeper understanding of these themes, the rest of this paper will expand on the ideas and accounts expressed in the public lecture last year. Surely since that time new connections have been made and ways to continue in the spirit of the study leave have been adopted.

### 4.1 Sources of Learning: Role Models and Identity

I interacted regularly with four major groups of people: students, teachers, researchers, and administrators. When I tried to recall, describe, and interpret the conversations and discussions that we had, I noticed making an account is a complex endeavor. According to Zimmerman (1998), there are three basic aspects of identity available to us during talk-in-interaction: discourse, situated, and transportable. All three (and probably more) become relevant for any kind of analysis of interaction. Richards (2006) used this framework to look at teacher-student talk in the classroom while Nakamura (2008) explored his own talk with a student outside the

classroom in a similar way.

I propose for the following second half of this paper to use this three facet analytical framework to guide and organize the following reflective account of the various professional relationships and social interactions that I encountered. My hope is by framing my narrative according to one of three types of displayed identities with some sense of order and organization (rather than writing freely and endlessly in a journal style) that new and fresh insights will emerge.

#### 4.2 Discourse Identity/ Situation Identity/ Transportable Identity

Briefly, *discourse identity* is the moment-by-moment talk where there is a current speaker and a listener that can change roles at any time along with the usual pragmatic consideration for things like repairs, requests, refusals, etc. The institutional context is displayed by *situated identity* with the most common one for us being teacher and student. While predictable, at any particular moment in the talk, such roles may not be the sole or even main concern.

According to Zimmerman, possibly the least predictable of these categories is *transportable identity*. While such characteristics are readily noticeable or assignable (e.g., I am more than middle-aged, male, speak with a hybrid West Coast American accent), they might not be the most relevant features or factors at any given point of the talk. My point being that awareness of these distinctions can serve to both widen and deepen understanding of how participants relate to each other and interact on a moment-by-moment basis.

#### 4.3 Students

The students were not my students in terms of officially teaching them in a class though I did meet some of them from time to time in classes that I visited. I will limit my account to the postgraduate (MA and PhD) students who took part in a collaborative interview project. I sometimes interviewed them about their thesis and sometimes they interviewed me about what I thought of their thesis. Referring back to multiple identities available, depending on the focus of the talk, I would be the questioner and even a critic when I took on the situated identity of interviewer. Further reinforcing this role would be my transportable identity as a much older person who was male, a professor, and a native speaker of English. I was not a teacher at York, but I was recognized as visiting staff.

The students' identities had a rich mixture as they came from different countries (China, Taiwan, and Japan), but they shared a common need to use English to survive and successfully complete their thesis. Possibly surprising, regardless of their home country and language, conversation flowed quite freely without much hesitation or awkward grasping for next topics and questions. An academic community can cut across national boundaries through shared practices that are readily recognizable and globally valued.

The ease of talk could be attributed to an array of factors. I was given much respect from the beginning due to my status of invited visiting academic, as well as being much older (all students were in their twenties), a professor (who is familiar with the British academic system/experience having completed his own doctoral degree at Lancaster), and American

(with the allure of being a native speaker of English). Possibly there is an extra degree of comfort for them with my being Japanese-American and having lived in East Asia for many years. Similarly for me such features of their transportable identity as Asian, female (as the majority of postgrads in education and linguistics are as well as my own students), good at English, and working on a postgrad thesis made our encounters familiar and thus comfortable.

As for situated identity, our roles of teacher and student were adjusted to the situation where I was not officially their teacher, but I was a person who could serve as an additional (yet unofficial) teacher or advisor. I provided chances for additional discussion on language and research while they gave me revealing glimpses into the British university culture and their reaction to it. Thus the most lively and changeable movements of identities took place at the discourse identity level. We both had many questions for the other person about things like the content of a thesis, references, arguments (and counter arguments), research design, data collection, and analysis. Richards (2006) cites Schegloff's (1987) word of caution that such aspects of identities are not binding by any means, but are rather meant to help us see analytical relevance within a range of those available. Schegloff in addition provides one more aspect of identity which is helpful for understanding the situation where these students and I talked. Like in his hospital study of doctor-patient talk, the prevailing situation could create 'default' identities where the expectations dictate a general playing out of professional roles: the patient in need of the doctor's consultation. Possibly, the students were interested in or in need of getting a second opinion on their study. (Note: in some MA programs, increased intakes of students meant very limited access to supervisors).

#### 4.4 Teachers

While there is natural overlap between being a teacher and a researcher, I refer to 'teacher' as the person who was teaching the classes that I attended as both observer and participant. One course was an undergraduate elective class on CA and phonology and the 12 students were British and the teacher was American in the Department of Linguistics. The other course was a required one on presentation skills for preparing for their final thesis presentation in TESOL, SLA, or applied linguistics. The 20-30 students were all L2 users of English with the clear majority of them coming from China. Their teacher was British. In the elective course, I learned content, analysis, and data collection methods as the focus was clearly on research knowledge and skills. I would talk to the teacher briefly before class or at data sessions, but our talk was limited and focused on research. Even though we were both Americans, clearly we were talking as researchers.

With the other teacher we would talk before or after class often in the cafeteria as fellow teachers. We would exchange our observations and comments on how students did in their presentations as well as class participation. Coincidentally, not only she had taught in Japan, but also at an institution that I also taught at. This shared experience helped make topics of mutual interest flow easily. Her being British made no difference in fluency or affiliation. Identity-in-interaction was shaped by the people, the type of class, and type of discourse we engaged in. Our transportable identities of nationality seemed to make little difference.

Our situated identities as lecturers and fellow teachers (we both teach presentation skills to MA students) did shape the talk. Interestingly, in the elective class, the discourse identities dynamically shifted throughout class discussion especially when there was ample time, so some potential for more informal talk with the American teacher might have been possible with more time. My main point is the situated identities that we establish and play out in local contexts may shape and impact the talk and relationship more than transportable identity similarities such as same nationality.

#### 4.5 Researchers

Researchers were both ones that I was familiar with through personal contact and those that I met for the first time though I was familiar with their publications. Depending on where and how we met such as a one off encounter after a presentation or joining their seminar/workshop, the identities during these talk-in-interactions were mainly situated with them as the expert and me as the learner or hopefully a future developing expert. Due to other identities such as transportable where we could be of a similar age and nationality or discourse identities when they would also be interested in getting to know who I am and what I do, the talks were never entirely top-down hierarchically speaking.

For those readers familiar with CA, the list of researchers that I had the honor and pleasure of meeting for the first time and even work with is noteworthy: (1) Geoff Raymond whose seminal work (2003) on yes/no questions is closely related to my interest in how questions set up expectations not only for the next turn, but also for the trajectory of the further talk. Geoff was also on study leave and had a desk right next to mine. (2) Tanya Stivers wrote a memorable paper (2006) on how multiple repetition of yes or no answers unpack a pragmatic contrast of saying, 'no, no, no' compared with 'no'. I attended Tanya's two day workshop on clinical encounters and analysis of data for early career medical researchers. (3) Jeff Robinson gave a couple of papers on doctor-patient talk. One presentation was based on his important paper (2006) on how doctor-patient talk commonly revolves around patients wanting to tell their doctor about what worries them (e.g., new, follow-up, or chronic-routine concerns). The question formats such as 'What can I do for you?', 'How are you?', and 'What's new?' are typical openings used by doctors depending on familiarity with patient. What is interesting is how each format 'performs a different social action'. (4) John Heritage who needs no introduction in the CA community completes the UCLA connection with the three researchers above who either studied there or work there. UCLA is the home of CA both as its birthplace and the cutting edge center of knowledge and innovation. In a recent important paper (2012), Heritage shows how epistemic stance and action are negotiated interactionally between questioner and respondent based on what is known or should be known. One important advantage of having a study leave from April until September in the UK besides being able to join classes, lectures, and seminars during the 'summer' term (April-June) was I could take advantage of being there for the conference season in July.

The above account explains how my research on teacher-student talk which came out of my doctoral study in applied linguistics was strengthened and given new light and insight. In



addition, my MA study in TESOL, on teachers' reflective practice to promote continuous professional development, was also reinforced by the opportunities to meet with leaders in language education research. While I was based in the Department of Sociology, I often visited the Department of Education which has a strong English education section. Teachers there invited me to their public lectures series at noon a weekly event which was attended mainly by MA students and teachers. The list of presenters would be impressive for those familiar with research into SLA and TESOL: (1) Alison Mackey (2) Rosemary Erlam (3) Ema Ushioda (4) Rebecca Hughes.

#### 4.6 Administrators

Under this category, I include a wide array of office and support staff at the University of York which made my stay possible and more productive, not to mention more enjoyable. Subgroups are the secretaries in the Department of Sociology, the Secretary of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Language and Communication, IT support staff, and Audio/Visual support staff. As an invited academic visitor I was entitled to certain privileges, but the challenge was to self-initiate access to them and to maintain them once established over the six months. By paying a modest 'bench fee' or facility charge for office space, computer/printer/photocopy use, a library card which also served as an identity card, and recognition of belonging to both the Centre and the Department of Sociology, I was able to move freely around the campus and even related departments such as Linguistics and Education.

The discourse identities displayed in regular professional interactions with these administrators were not limited to a single type. For example, when talking face-to-face or corresponding by e-mail, the secretaries and I always started with greetings and some small talk (inevitably about the weather) with conversational discourse identities of asking questions, responding, making comments, and bringing up current topics. Then when discussing my requests and questions on what I needed (e.g., print card, how to set the connection between printer and computer) we were largely in situated identities where I was the newcomer and they were helping. Awareness of how much or if any of the talk was shaped by transportable identities was difficult to tell, but they most likely made the talk flow easier especially being American, male, older (similar age to the senior positioned staff), and a visiting professor.

Talk with the IT staff and the related Audio/Visual staff was slightly different in regularity of meeting as I called them, I went to their office, or they came to the room whenever I had a technical problem or if one of my colleagues did. Help was always only a phone call away. Situated identities with them as the experts and me as the novice user established the basis of function and purpose for our interactions. However, even in these situations, possibly due to the nature of British institutional discourse practices, there was some amount of ordinary banter of conversation discourse identities where questions, answers, comments, and additional topics flowed freely before and after addressing the technical problems which ranged from setting my laptop to the university network to them talking me through on the phone how to re-set my office computer to an upgraded security system. Again, transportable identities were always present in the background as a resource. Being fluent in the same language made a tremendous



difference in presentation of the problem and then comprehension of the solution as well as any follow-up discussions.

## 5. Concluding Thoughts (For now): September 2012

What I am learning through writing this paper is how continuous professional development takes place inside and outside our immediate surroundings and ourselves. Individual work prepares me for ensuing meaningful collegiality and collaboration. The social networking in turn deepens and expands possibilities for subsequent inner and collective thinking and future individual and collaborative actions. The process is ongoing, cyclical, and dynamic where experiences feed off each other. The core stimulus that I experienced and then made sense of while abroad continues to evolve through setting new targets.

*(1) Make my work that was inspired by and developed during and after the study leave accessible in various forms for a range of audiences.*

This summer besides trying to get a paper accepted and published in an international journal, I wrote this article for our center's in-house journal, presented a paper (Nakamura, 2012b) at the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) Conference, gave demonstration oral communicative lessons to high school students to promote learning through social interactions and authentic materials (Nakamura, 2012a), and interviewed a famous CA researcher, Alan Firth (2012), for the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Pragmatics-Special Interest Group (SIG) newsletter. This fall I will present my ideas in two different formats at the JALT International Conference: a short paper (Nakamura, 2012c) and a collaborative presentation with other CA researchers in Western Japan using the *Pechakucha* style (quick slide show popularized by architects) to show teachers how to do CA (Greer, T. et al, 2012).

*(2) Make an ongoing effort to digitalize my data, analysis, and increase my knowledge of and skills in using relevant software.*

The study leave forced me to 'level up' the technology I use especially for data collection and to a lesser extent data analysis. I had a crash course in using a digital camera's video function and an MP3 recorder particularly in how to save the data in my computer. After the study leave I have been studying how to use transcribing software such as *CLAN* to interface audio recording, video recording, and transcribing on the computer screen at the same time. I have also used *Dropbox* as a site to share data, handouts, and papers with fellow presenters at conferences.

*(3) Make deeper connections between English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and my own teaching and study of teacher-student talk in and out of the classroom.*

In Europe, seeing English language study and use beyond the classroom as being the true purpose and goal for learners is a major movement that EFL countries such as Japan can learn from. Firth and Wagner (1997, 2007) and Firth (2009) are two very influential papers which

have brought language use in social interactions to the forefront of SLA research and teaching for 'interactional' competence.

(4) *Make more East Asian connections and establish neighboring regional communities of teacher-researchers.*

Looking in our own backyard draws attention to talented people and resources available closer to home (Japan). More and more Asian researchers are educated in North America, the UK, and northern Europe where the cutting edge of CA study remains. I have made contact with a brilliant researcher-teacher in Seoul, South Korea and thus a whole new world of possibilities is opening up there with new meetings, seminars, and conferences in planning stages. Even in Japan and the Kansai area in particular there is a growing network of CA researchers and I am a member of a group (CAN-Kansai) that meets monthly for data sessions and planning future projects such as presenting/writing together and inviting famous scholars from abroad.

Going away has opened my eyes to what is available closer to home. The study leave is not only 'a gift that keeps on giving', but it is also what Hemmingway called 'a movable feast'. The ideas both realized and yet to be realized were born in a special place and moment in time with a certain group of people who shared the space and time. Even though I am far away from the north of England, the essence of that experience not only remains, but continues to grow. Perhaps the most surprising and important revelation one year later is still the final comment that I made at the end of my public lecture (October 2011). It remains as fresh and alive as then: *Continuity of one's hopes and dreams is nurtured in unexpected places and ways.*

May we all have the luxury, honor, and privilege to go on a study leave and explore the unknown. We have nothing to lose, but so much to gain.

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### **About the author**

Ian Nakamura is a professor in the Department of English in the Language Education Center. He believes that research should inform one's teaching and vice versa. His ongoing professional project is to apply concepts from CA to guide the development of 'interactional' competence in students especially in extended conversations and discussions. He believes how students and teachers *use* language in 'naturally occurring' talk-in-interaction should be given greater attention, practice, and study.

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