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Growing as Researchers: Insider/Outsider Perspectives at Work - The Case of Serbian Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

This paper emerged from a partnership between the two authors over the last seven years, which resulted in a presentation at the recent IATEFL Conference (2013) as part of the Research SIG track. The aim of the paper is to explore how research partnerships can work in practice and to use our specific and on-going relationship as an exemplar. To put this in context, Sara Hannam carried out her doctoral work from 2005-2011 and Radmila Popovic acted as a critical friend throughout the process. The thesis examined English teaching and learning in Serbia using critical educational ethnography as an approach and all the fieldwork was carried out in the country. Following the

completion of the doctorate, we have continued to collaborate and have spent time reflecting on the nature of our research partnership. Our inquiry takes the form of co-constructed reflective answers to questions we have jointly arrived at, answered individually and subsequently analysed in tandem. The exploration of the partnership is carried out in the spirit of an *egalitarian dialogue* and a shared theoretical commitment to a dialogic approach or the search for different perspectives in the creation of shared meaning (Freire, 1970).

The Context

We have also been using the notion of an insider/outsider to explore this relationship. Sara Hannam is from the UK and was living in Greece at the time of the field work in Serbia (and is now back in the UK), and Radmila Popovic is from Serbia and was based in Belgrade at the time of the research but is now living in the USA. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009) the 'insider' possesses the benefit of acceptance from the community as well as a familiarity with the everyday details of the environment. The outsider may be seen as someone who cannot appreciate the lived experience of the location. On the other hand, an outsider may also be viewed as an ideal researcher who has distance and can observe and analyse objectively. Along the same line, being part of a community disadvantages insiders because their inherently subjective perspectives are likely to impact research results (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Sara chose critical ethnography as an approach in part to avoid repeating the essentialist assumptions seen in many of the readings of the Balkans as a region as this framework demanded a more complex understanding of the history and the people. Both authors are aware, however, that "biases and preconceived ideas, even among those who attempt to shed them, are almost unavoidable and this applies to outsiders as well as insiders" (Todorova, 1997). We will argue that a commitment to fully understanding a historically situated locality might therefore come from a partnership of insider-outsider. In terms of our research partnership, it has grown and developed into one that has enhanced both the student (Sara) and the critical friend (Radmila) as opposed to being one where the critical friend offers support and expertise with no expectation of a return. As a result of a shared understanding and belief in equitable education, the relationship has in fact served to "promote...the personal and professional development of both stakeholders" (Norton, 2011).

The overarching aim of the doctoral research was to investigate the changing status of the English language at the beginning of the 21st century in Serbia (as a post-war, post-conflict country with a government desire to ascend to the EU). The choice of Serbia resulted from a combination of factors. Sara was living in Greece at the time of the most recent intervention by

NATO in the Balkans (and the bombing of Serbia) and was therefore acutely aware of the distortion of truth from both the Greek media (obscuring details of Serbian army activities in Bosnia and Croatia and crimes against humanity) and the media in the UK which was overwhelmingly condemning of Serbia (and Serbs) and failed to acknowledge the number of displaced Serbs living in various areas of the Balkans as well as the action of the UK/US military forces in choosing to intervene. Sara wished to explore what role the educational community played in the above and to document evidence of resistance to the Milosevic regime as well as to better understand the environment in relation to language, identity, conflict, power, politics and education. The growing influence of English as a language used and taught was also of great interest given the multi-lingual past of former Yugoslavia, which has also changed fundamentally since the dissolution. Sara was committed to approaching the research using a critical framework, which started from an opposition to all violence and nationalism and a fundamental belief in the importance of educational communities in challenging prevailing beliefs on all sides of any conflict. One of the most significant doctoral findings was evidence of resistance and collectivity in those communities and the ways in which they sought to maintain the cross-border relationships that existed before the conflict began and to show their opposition to the regime which threatened their previously collaborative projects. Additionally attitudes towards the assumed suitability of English as the new 'lingua franca' were extensively documented.

Sara's first contact with Radmila was after seeing her present at IATEFL and hearing her talk about Serbian ELT. This was in a Global Issues SIG track presentation and the content of the talk demonstrated Radmila's commitment to a critical agenda but also an awareness of the representational 'baggage', which often accompanies readings of the Balkans (and Serbs). Radmila and Sara went for a coffee and got talking. When Sara first communicated her project plans, Radmila received them with a mixture of enthusiasm, apprehension and doubt. The selected research focus resonated with her both on the professional and personal level: she lived through the turbulent times of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and NATO intervention, teaching English at the University and actively resisting the regime. On the one hand, Radmila was excited that someone with critical theoretical leanings would venture into exploring ELT in Serbia. On the other hand, she was not completely convinced that this was a potentially fruitful area for a doctoral dissertation. The general historical framework - the-end-of-the-millennium conflict in the Balkans - was undoubtedly unusual. However, by that time it had been analysed from a myriad of perspectives in literally thousands of publications (e.g. "Death of Yugoslavia", "The Destruction of Yugoslavia", "Breakup of

Yugoslavia", "The Demise of Yugoslavia", "Yugoslavian Inferno", "Europe's Backyard War").

Sara's position, which represented a combination of a socio-historic understanding and insights into language teaching and learning, was certainly non-mainstream and of value, as well as offering the chance for multi-disciplinarity in action. Yet, at that time Radmila feared that the story of English language teaching in Serbia was not 'big' or 'important' enough to counterbalance the dominant public discourse. Most importantly, Radmila felt apprehensive about her own role in Sara's research. Having just completed her doctoral dissertation, she was willing to be Sara's source; at the same time, she was also aware of potential pitfalls that would be difficult to overcome. The role of the insider includes not only providing information to the outsider, it also involves filtering it.

From that point on Radmila helped Sara to gain access to the Serbian context and environment by introducing her to people who would be helpful in the research. She also became an advisor in the formation of key research questions.

In Sara's view, as a result of this relationship and the 'critical friend' role, her doctoral research was certainly more refined. A key example of how this worked in practice relates to the representation of local languages and their connection to one another. After having written the chapter which reflected on language learning and use in the former Yugoslavia, she sent the work to Radmila. In her comments Radmila highlighted that the understanding Sara had of the local context, and particularly the relationship between Serbian and Croatian and the language that was formally called Serbo-Croat were over simplified. Sara then revisited this section and realised that to do it justice she would need to read much more widely from a socio- and ethno-linguistic point of view. Due to time pressure Sara made a decision to leave this section out and to revisit it as an individual project post-doc. On more than one occasion she also checked the wording of a focus group question with Radmila to ascertain how 'easy' it would be to answer. One such example was a question she had formulated which asked participants for their awareness of the stereotypes of the Balkans that exist in European literature and imagination. Radmila helped Sara to reword this question in a way that made it more accessible and easy to answer as it is a complex concept that requires several stages of unravelling. At other times when interviewees expressed particular views Sara was able to ask for more background on what may have shaped those views, which was extremely useful and enabled a gradual refining of the questions to get more and more nuanced responses.

The critical dialoguing and engagement was empowering for Radmila in several ways. Overall, this experience significantly altered her perspective of the

insider's role in research: she was a supplier of information but at the same time an active instrument in the data collection. In order to minimize the impact of her own bias, Radmila focused on clarifying her perspectives on all issues before communicating them to Sara. Sara's questions and subsequent clarifications (e.g. "what I want to ask is...") made clear to Radmila when such efforts had failed. Also, they helped her realize that it is crucial not only to provide background information to 'outsiders' (in the digital age this is usually easy to obtain), but to situate it in a broader context. This included defining the boundaries of local cultural and social conventions in all spheres of life, particularly in the realm of education, as well as challenging one's own categories of understanding.

While Sara was assembling her data and finding more pieces of the Serbian ELT jigsaw puzzle, Radmila began to discern a different, more complex picture in this familiar landscape. By focusing her exploration on language users and their circumstances, Sara helped Radmila see more clearly "...[the] dichotomy between the acceptance of the system and the attempt to operate within its structures, and the development of an approach which questions those very structures and tries to change them" (Hannam, 2011: 310) which marked the professional lives of many English language teachers in Serbia. Radmila also realized how an 'outsider's' perspective can sharpen the insider's own vision, lead them to notice things they tend to overlook, learn to appreciate what they have achieved and explain better why they have failed. The outsider and insider working in tandem enables both partners to adjust their 'lenses' and capture micro stories that can contribute to the construction of meta narratives.

The final doctorate would have been written one way or another, but without a doubt the final work is much richer and multi-layered because of the partnership. The process of discussion and negotiation of 'truth' and meaning led to further questions and analysis, which would not have been there without this process. Also, engagement in active meaning making through dialogue, or narrative knowledging (Barkhuizen, 2011) potentially opens up a new direction for research practice which is grounded in a combination of local and global features. We hope that this reflection on our critical dialoguing and partnership makes visible the complex way in which critical educational ethnography is "a mutual relation of interaction and adaptation between ethnographers and the people they work with, a relationship that will change both" (Hymes 1980: 89, in Blommaert & Jie 2010: 12).

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