Bringing Theory into the Classroom: Widdowson's Framework for Pedagogic Mediation in Individual Practice

Larry John Xethakis

Kumamoto University

lxethakis@gmail.com

Widdowson's (1990) teacher mediation framework presents a means for practitioners to incorporate professional knowledge into their classroom practices. While outlining a model for putting the framework into practice, Widdowson does not, however, suggest the specific means or procedures by which this might be done by individual teachers in their own classrooms, nor have such been described in the literature. This paper presents a narrative description of a teacher-researcher's efforts to develop a practical process for implementing this framework in the classroom by describing the process as well as raising several issues overcome in the course of doing this. It also discusses some of the consequences of implementing the model and its limitations.

ウィドウソンの提唱する教師が介在するフレームワークには、実践者がその教室での実践に、専門知識をどう組み込むかという手法が含まれる。ウィドウソンはこのフレームワークを実践に用いるモデルについて触れはしているものの、教室で教師がどう具体的な方法や手順を取るべきかについては提言しておらず、先行研究もなされていない。本研究は、このフレームワークを教室での実践に結びつける事を目的に、教師が実用的プロセスを築くために行った取り組みをナラティブに描写したものであり、この実践中に起きた問題点の解決例を挙げつつ、そのプロセスを明らかにしたものである。またモデルの実践によって導かれた変化と、研究の限界についても検討する。

The gap between educational theory derived from research and classroom practice is a long-standing concern in language teaching (Lantolf & Pohner, 2014), as is the need to provide teachers with a tool to bridge this gap and assist them in bringing professional knowledge into their classrooms (Kessels & Korthagen, 1996).

One means for bridging the theory-practice gap is suggested in Kumaradivelu's suggestion to teachers to "theorize from practice and practice what they theorize" (Kumaradivelu, 1999, p. 458). To do this, teachers need to ground their classroom practice in theory by operating within a framework of "principled pragmatism" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 30). Widdowson (1990) defines this as "a continual process of self-education through an evaluation of practice in reference to theory" (p. x), and his framework for pedagogic mediation is presented as the means to do this.

The need for such a tool in this study was the result of this teacher-researcher's experiences in employing collaborative learning techniques in a third-year university level ESP class. The purpose of the class

was for small groups of students to plan and present an original architectural design. One of the difficulties found in the class was the degree of interaction and cooperation among group members. A number of collaborative learning techniques were incorporated into the lessons in an attempt to improve these. While employing these techniques led to better interaction and cooperation among the students overall, some of the techniques worked well and some did not; some were effective in one class and not in another, and this raised the question of why. It was felt that a better grasp of the underlying principles of collaborative learning might provide a better understanding of how and why these techniques worked, as well as insights into why they did not work in some instances.

Block (2000) characterizes Widdowson's framework for pedagogic meditation as a model for "what teachers do with research which is already done independent of their contextualized needs" (Block, 2000, p. 139) and as a framework for explicitly tying professional knowledge to aspects of practice by grounding it in principles derived from this knowledge.

While presenting a model for implementing the framework in practice, Widdowson (1990) does not, however, describe the means or a process by which practitioners might implement the framework in their own practice to bring theory into their classrooms. The teacher-researcher in this study attempted to put the framework into practice and to ascertain whether or not a practical process for implementing the framework could be developed.

This paper presents a narrative description of the author's efforts to accomplish this. It describes the process (See Appendix A for an outline of this process) and examines a number of issues faced in doing this.

Putting the Framework into Individual Practice

Pedagogical mediation is a process through which teachers work to understand how the concepts and ideas taken from professional knowledge can be made applicable to their individual contexts and how they can be brought into the classroom. Teachers must

appraise theoretical ideas and concepts in light of their own teaching situation in order to determine the relevance of any theoretical proposition to their own particular practice. They make connections between the techniques they employ in their practice and the professional knowledge that informs them. They work to draw out principles which can serve as guides for practical action in the classroom, and using these principles as their foundation, they then develop activities or techniques which embody these principles.

In this framework, theories and other forms of professional knowledge do not provide ready-made answers to problems or puzzles teachers face in the classroom but serve as a means to help teachers "identify factors that call for further enquiry in the classroom" (Widdowson, 1984, p. 30). Widdowson (1990) sees this process as analogous to a process of scientific research. After coming to an understanding of the theory in question, the teacher then develops hypotheses (principles for practice). These hypotheses are then tested out in the classroom through techniques and activities based on them. The impact of these activities on learning and classroom practice is observed and these observations serve as evidence to judge the validity of the hypotheses and the activities.

The model Widdowson provides to give structure to this process consists of two stages (Figure 1). The first of stage of the model, appraisal, is concerned with theory. The two steps that make up this stage, interpretation and conceptual evaluation, are concerned with coming to an understanding of the theoretical knowledge in question and drawing out
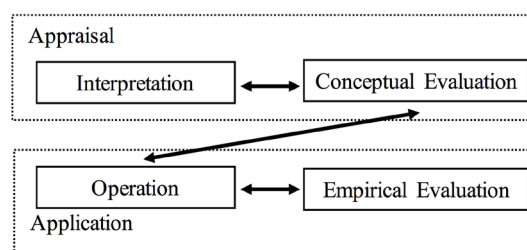

Figure 1. Widdowson's model of pedagogic mediation..

principles and concepts to be examined for relevance to one's own practice.

As my own first step in this process, I began by reading a range of sources on collaborative learning, including its philosophical bases and theories of learning which underlie it (Moll, 1992; Smith & MacGregor 1992; Doolittle, 1995; Oxford 1997; Swain & Kinnear, 2010), principles for its implementation (McGroarty, 1992, 1993; Cohen, 1994) and techniques for its operationalization in the classroom (Kagan & McGroarty, 1993; Barkley, Cross, & Howe, 2004). Potential principles from each reading were drawn out and recorded for each reading.

Through this process, I drew out almost one hundred principles on a wide variety of topics related to collaborative learning and collaborative language learning. I did not feel as though I had really expressed my understandings of the theories with this process, however. I felt that I had merely collected a long list of maxims, lacking a sense of connection to my practice:

Just drawing out the pedagogical principles may lead to a mastery of techniques, but it lacks the contextual knowledge to truly internalize it and be able to put it into action. Simple maxims, like principles, are good for reminding us or as guides in planning but might not give enough information to truly adapt them to any situation. (Entry 24)

Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman and Conrad (1990) recommend that journals be used in helping to make sense of theory, as a place for "exploring, reacting" and "making connections" (p. 229). To better express my understanding of the readings, I chose to write journal entries after re-reading each of the sources. These entries were organized around a set of questions to help make clear the arguments the author was making, the information they were trying to present and the possible principles that could be drawn out of the article, its concepts and its theories. The aim was to present a synthesis of the ideas, concepts and techniques found in the readings.

Verity (2000) notes that journals are often used as a place to give "one thoughts a more objective reality" (p. 183), and my own journals began to take on this role – allowing me to see how the principles were tied to the theories they were based on and giving me a forum to explore my own understandings of the theories and how they might relate to my own practice, as I noted in one of my journal entries:

Some means of expressing understanding provides context for the pedagogical principles. The bare principles only provide the 'how' and the 'what'; the context provides the necessary 'why'. The 'why' is needed to be able to alter the principles to meet new contexts; the 'why' provides flexibility...making it easier to adapt the principles to better fit your context. (Entry 23)

The second stage of Widdowson's model, application, is focused on putting principles to work in the classroom. The two steps in this stage, operation and empirical evaluation, are concerned with developing classroom techniques and evaluating their effects on the learning process.

To carry this out, I wrote out lesson plans for each of the lessons, detailing the activities I was to carry out in the class. Each class was focused around a specific goal or topic and collaborative learning activities were used to scaffold the students' interactions from more to less structured. It was hoped that this would provide guidance, set up problems and suggest procedures to help create more productive interaction (Cohen, 1994, p. 21-22) in their group discussion on their designs in the latter part of each class.

An example of this, the first class encouraged team building among the members (Barkley, et al, 2004; Kagan & McGroarty, 1993) using a think-pair-share activity to provide them with a low-pressure opportunity to discuss their choices for the group project and a three-step interview activity to create a comfort zone and come up with a team name. The group as a whole then discussed their ideas and decided on their project as well as the location, the target customers and the overall concept of the design.

After writing up each lesson plan, I conducted a retrospective written report to bring to light the thought processes behind the planning of each lesson. (See Appendix B for an excerpt from one of these reports.) This report served as the means for making

clear my reasons for choosing specific activities and their hoped-for outcomes, as well as the connections between the materials and activities in the lesson and the pedagogical principles that informed my choices. It provided a frame of reference for reflecting on the roles the principles played in the lesson, with principles from some sources (e.g., Smith & MacGregor, 1992; Donato, 1994; Doolittle, 1995) informing everything I was doing in the cycle of lessons as a whole, principles from other sources (e.g., Barkley, et al, 2004; Cohen, 1994, Foster, P., & Ohta, A. S. 2005) focused on each particular lesson, and yet others (e.g., Kagan & McGroarty 1993, McGroarty 1992) focused on a particular activity or set of activities. These principles provided me with a powerful means of conceiving of the purpose of the activities and a strong rationale for using them in my class. This was my first attempt at the mediation of theory.

However, the sheer number of principles and the lack of some overarching principles to guide my decisions presented difficulties in planning the second lesson. This led me to go back and re-examine Widdowson's description of the conceptual evaluation step. I realized that simply using the principles as I had was not truly what mediating theory meant. For Widdowson (2003), "the findings of research, and the theories they sustain, cannot be directly transferred to the contexts of particular classrooms" (p. 27). This is what I had mistakenly tried to do. The principles drawn from the literature provided rationales for using the activities and materials, but they did not express my own reasoning nor provide a justification for implementing them in my own practice. I had failed to develop a set of my own "valid principles of general relevance," as Widdowson (1990, p. 32) terms them.

The purpose of the framework and the model is not for teachers to apply theory, but to appraise it, to "use it as a catalyst for reflection on your own teaching circumstances, or...as a point of reference from which to take bearings on your own practice" (Widdowson, 2003, p. 27).

Following this realization, I worked to develop several more general principles which were to serve as my own "bearings". These self-created principles guided my choices in planning and implementation

(the operation step of the model) throughout the cycle of classes, and so they were termed "operational principles" to distinguish them from the pedagogical principles drawn out of the readings, which served to inform my own principles. These principles brought together the many principles from the literature and expressed my own understandings of them, serving as a bridge between the evaluation of professional knowledge and putting it into operation. They provided self-articulated reasons for my classroom practices and a rationale for using collaborative learning in my classroom. They came to form an important part of the classroom evaluation process as well.

To gather empirical evidence to evaluate the effects of the activities on the learning process, I employed a number of data collection methods. A teaching journal recorded my impressions of the class and the students' learning. The classes were videotaped and observation notes detailing classroom events were taken. In addition, the students were given short (5 to 7 questions) surveys at the end of each class, with a longer (11 questions) survey given at the end of the final class. The data were given a sense of reliability and validity through the triangulation found in the three different views of the same events – my viewpoint, an objective reference and the students' viewpoint – present in the data.

The question that arose in this step of the process was how to tie my observations and the students' surveys to the operational principles guiding my planning. One possible solution to this was suggested in a journal entry:

Should or could these principles be restated as questions? If I can develop a question or questions based on the principles this might allow me to see them as something whose answers I can find in the observations I make in the class. (Entry 34)

Following up on this idea, I used my operational principles and the activities carried out in the class as the basis for questions that would give me something to look for when observing the student's interactions as well as guide the entries in my teaching journals.

Additionally, I revised the surveys, which had focused on the students' interest in the class as a whole and the projects which they were carrying out, and their use of English in the class, by adding questions which restated my principles in language the students could understand and yet still maintained their central ideas. Using these questions helped to reveal student attitudes towards the activities and materials based on these principles. The surveys now more fully examined the student's view on their learning and the effects of collaborative learning on this.

The process as portrayed above (and outlined in Appendix A) provided me with a preliminary working procedure for the implementation of Widdowson's framework in the classroom. My attempts to resolve the above issues led me to several realizations concerning the role the framework was playing in my practice, two of which are discussed below.

Realizations

First and foremost was the centrality of developing one's own theory-grounded principles. Simply using principles drawn from theory as maxims to guide the choice of classroom activities (Long, 2009) is insufficient to truly engage with the ideas in question, as I found out in my initial attempts. Practitioners must develop their own interpretations of the theory and work out their own principles to put into practice for the model to be effective.

In my case, the operational principles I developed guided my lesson plans and activities, the way I conducted my classes, and the way I hoped the students would react to the materials and their classmates. The principles were grounded in theory, focused my observations and were reflected in the student surveys. They tied together what I did and saw and what the students did and saw, allowing me to see much more clearly how my actions in the classroom led to learning by the students. My principles brought all aspects of my practice together, allowing me to see the class as a unified whole from top to bottom.

Secondly, implementing Widdowson's model provided me with an organized framework to carefully consider the issues involved in putting professional knowledge into my practice. By working through its four steps I gained a deeper understanding of the professional knowledge and how it related to my own practice. By putting these ideas into operation and then observing and evaluating their effects, I was able to begin to perceive the ways in which these 'abstractions' could be made concrete, and how to more explicitly link theory and my practice together. It provided the means for going from theory to practice and back, as I noted in a journal entry:

The model is making the ways in which professional knowledge is put to use in my classroom more apparent -- bringing it out into the light day in a sense. And at the same time giving me the chance to think more clearly and purposefully about why I'm doing what I'm doing. This model provides a means of focused reflection – targeted at how a teacher sees their classroom practices in relation to professional knowledge. (Entry 44)

Conclusion

Smith (2000, p. 8) remarks that developing an "appropriate methodology in and for their own classrooms" is "the heart of what it means to teach appropriately, in any context". Widdowson's framework can provide practitioners with a tool for doing this. Its recursive nature provides the practitioner with multiple opportunities to reflect on and learn from their experience, allowing them to see how professional knowledge can be applied in specific teaching contexts. Tools such as these are needed for teachers to be able to take charge of their own teaching situations and aid them in their own development of their pedagogical skills.

The process outlined in this paper can provide individual practitioners with the means to critically engage with theory in a reflective manner and so consider the relevance of particular theories to their own context. It also encourages practitioners to explicitly bring theory into the decision-making process and link it to specific aspects of their practice through the development of self-derived principles which guide their classroom actions. Finally, it allows them to gather evidence from the classroom on the impact of these principles. First, by using these principles as guides for classroom observation and

journal entries, and second, by using them as the basis of surveys to gain the students' perspective on the impact of these principles in the classroom.

While the time and effort needed to implement the process outlined above, may not be available to all practitioners, it is hoped that this paper will provide both an impetus and a basis for other teachers to explore their own means of employing Widdowson's framework in their classroom in order to help better ground their practice in professional knowledge.

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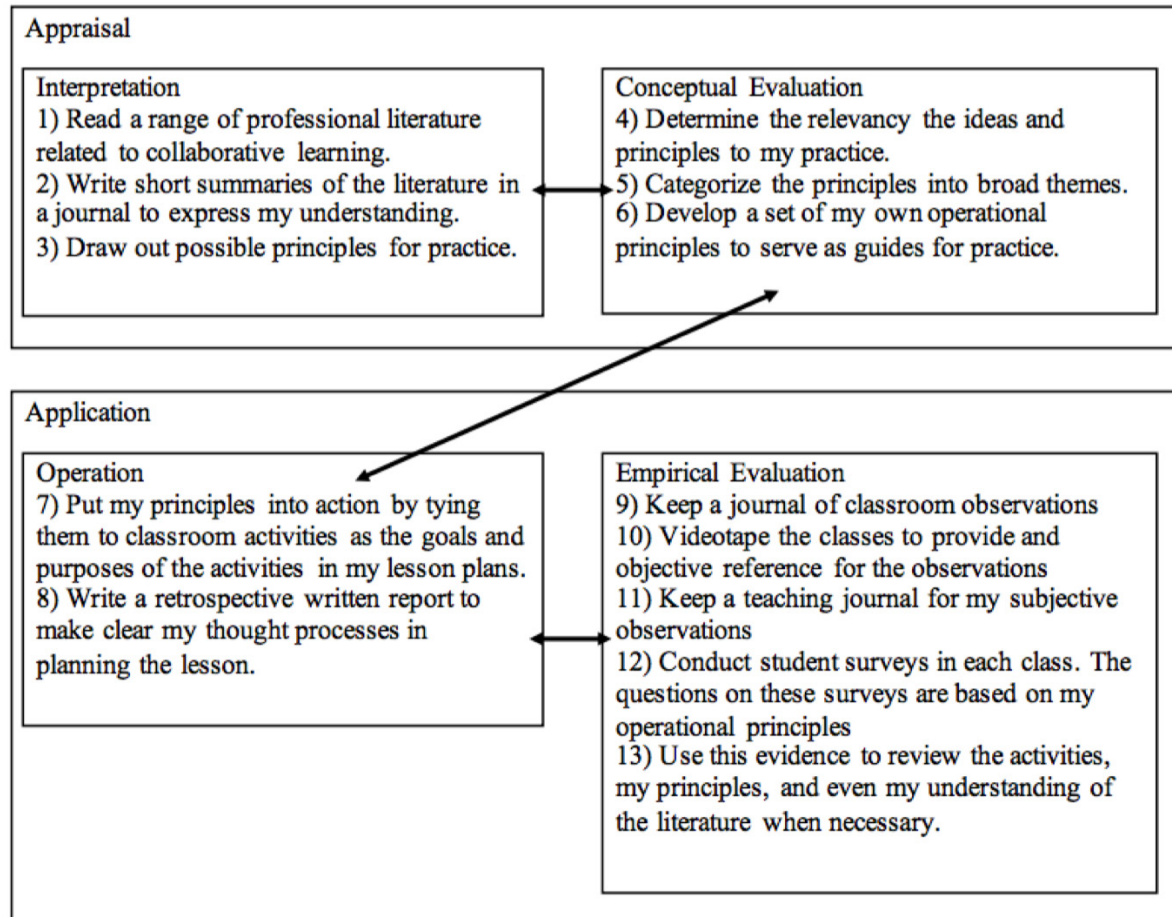
Author's Biography:

Larry Xethakis graduated from Kumamoto University in 2105 with an MA in Applied Linguistics and now lectures at Kumamoto University. His research interests include teacher development, teacher autonomy, conceptions of practice and the role of philosophy in education.

Appendix A

Steps Followed in Implementing Widdowson's Framework for Pedagogic Mediation in Individual Practice

The figure below shows the steps that were followed in putting Widdowson's framework to use in individual practice.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Appraisal                                                                 │
│  ┌──────────────────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────────────┐  │
│  │ Interpretation                   │  │ Conceptual Evaluation        │  │
│  │ 1) Read a range of professional  │  │ 4) Determine the relevancy   │  │
│  │ literature related to            │  │ the ideas and principles to  │  │
│  │ collaborative learning.          │  │ my practice.                 │  │
│  │ 2) Write short summaries of the  │  │ 5) Categorize the principles │  │
│  │ literature in a journal to       │  │ into broad themes.           │  │
│  │ express my understanding.        │  │ 6) Develop a set of my own   │  │
│  │ 3) Draw out possible principles  │  │ operational principles to    │  │
│  │ for practice.                    │  │ serve as guides for practice.│  │
│  └──────────────────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────────────┘  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Application                                                               │
│  ┌──────────────────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────────────┐  │
│  │ Operation                        │  │ Empirical Evaluation         │  │
│  │ 7) Put my principles into action │  │ 9) Keep a journal of         │  │
│  │ by tying them to classroom       │  │ classroom observations       │  │
│  │ activities as the goals and      │  │ 10) Videotape the classes to │  │
│  │ purposes of the activities in my │  │ provide and objective        │  │
│  │ lesson plans.                    │  │ reference for the observations│ │
│  │ 8) Write a retrospective written │  │ 11) Keep a teaching journal  │  │
│  │ report to make clear my thought  │  │ for my subjective observations│ │
│  │ processes in planning the lesson.│  │ 12) Conduct student surveys  │  │
│  │                                  │  │ in each class. The questions │  │
│  │                                  │  │ on these surveys are based on│  │
│  │                                  │  │ my operational principles    │  │
│  │                                  │  │ 13) Use this evidence to     │  │
│  │                                  │  │ review the activities, my    │  │
│  │                                  │  │ principles, and even my      │  │
│  │                                  │  │ understanding of the         │  │
│  │                                  │  │ literature when necessary.   │  │
│  └──────────────────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────────────┘  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Steps followed in implementing Widdowson's framework for pedagogic mediation in individual practice..

Appendix B
Excerpt from Retrospective Written Report on Planning Lesson 1

Activity: Pick projects – Write-Pair-Share activity

The pedagogical principles I'm following here are:

1. Simultaneity Principle – having Ss speak in pairs or small groups increases overall speaking time and number of students engaged. (Kagan and McGroarty, 1993, p 55)

2. One-way tasks (listen to a speaker and then switch) may provide lower level learners with more practice in extended speaking and listening. It may provide them with the opportunity for extended discourse in L2 and give them confidence in their ability to express themselves and understand others. (McGroarty, 1992, p 49)

3. Create a productive non-threatening environment that encourages effort. (McGroarty, 1993, p 40-41)

This is the first true collaborative activity. After I quickly go over the project options on the sheet, the individual students will choose their top three choices and give a reason why for each one, they will then tell their partner their choices, the partner will ask 1 follow-up question and the students will switch roles. (2)

This format will give the students time think on their own and allowing them to write out their answers and read out their answers will help alleviate the tension of speaking and expressing their opinion (1). Asking 1 follow-up question ensures that the listener pays attention.

This also acts as a rehearsal for students to express their preferences later in their group when deciding on the group project. (3)

Activity: Icebreaker/Three-step interview

The pedagogical principles I'm following here are:

4. Include one-way (giving and justifying opinions) and two-way (sharing of information) tasks. (McGroarty, 1993, p 34-35)

5. Students must have a responsibility to make their own contributions to the interaction, i.e. each student has to exchange information or resources (to interact) to achieve group success (positive interdependence and individual accountability). (Kagan and McGroarty, 1993, p. 50)

6. Team Building can help create a supportive environment within the team. (Kagan and McGroarty, 1993, p 59)

7. Icebreakers ease tension creating a more comfortable environment and they create an expectation of interaction and so are useful as introductions to meaningful and ongoing collaboration. (Barkely, et al, 2004, p. 30)

8. Setting aside sufficient time for students to get to know each other to build trust to develop a sense of community...can ensure the course gets off to a positive start by helping to orient students towards CL. (Barkely, et al, 2004, p. 41)

The goal of this activity is for the team to find out what they all have in common by discussing six prompts in pairs, then switching partners and repeating the activity. All four members will then use the prompts to find what they all have in common and to use this to come up with a team name (2, 4, 5). This will help build a sense of team spirit as well as serving as a low-stress means of getting the group members to interact with each other in English allowing the group members to feel comfortable with each other (3, 6, 7, 8)