

Cultural Contexts and Situated Possibilities in the Teaching of Second Language Writing

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Abstract:	<p>Premised on the conception of teacher knowledge as situated and the agency of the teacher in perceiving and exploiting "situated possibilities" in the classroom, this paper argues that it is important for teachers to construct local understanding of their work embedded in the local cultural traditions and to explore possibilities for student learning in the context of constraints. It reports on an investigation of the pedagogical strategies developed by two L2 writing teachers in Hong Kong, which showed that these strategies emerged as the teachers perceived and responded to situated possibilities for learning, and that they were rooted in the cultural traditions of the learners as well as the micro-cultures of the classroom. This paper suggests that teacher education programs should provide ample opportunities for teachers to gain a deep understanding of local cultures and to explore opportunities for student learning that build on such cultural traditions.</p>



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Cultural Contexts and Situated Possibilities in the Teaching of Second Language Writing¹

Introduction

Since the 1970s, there has been a paradigm shift from a conception of learning as a set of individual decontextualized cognitive processes to a conception of learning as a socially organized activity that is inseparable from its sociocultural locus in time and space (Lave, 1988; Scribner, 1984). Theorists of situated learning have argued that the objective forms and systems of activity, along with the individual's subjective and intersubjective understandings of them, mutually constitute the world and its social practice (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Rogoff, 1995). This paradigm shift in learning theory has provided powerful insights into the nature of teachers' practice and knowledge. A number of studies on teacher learning have also pointed out that the sociocultural contexts in which teachers operate and their forms of engagement with them mutually constitute their world of practice and the knowledge so constructed (Fenstermacher, 1994, Leinhardt, 1988; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

In explicating the understanding of human action and engagement that underpinned their study of clinical judgement and knowledge development of expert nurses, Benner, Tanner, and Chesla (1996) argued that "human lives are situated within meaningful activities, relationships, commitments, and involvements that set up both possibilities and constraints for living. Being situated means that one is neither totally determined or constrained nor radically free in how one acts. Rather one has *situated possibilities*, certain ways of seeing and responding that present themselves to the individual in certain situations, and certain ways of seeing and responding that are not

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3 available to that individual” (p. 352). They further pointed out that the way humans are
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5 engaged in practice is bound up by what matters to them, and that these concerns also
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7 determine what is seen and unseen.
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10 Similarly, teaching is a situated activity in which possibilities and constraints for
11
12 teaching and learning present themselves to individual teachers in different ways. First
13
14 Author’s (2003) study of expert and non-expert teachers of English as a Second
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16 Language (ESL) showed that while expert teachers were capable of perceiving
17
18 possibilities that opened up opportunities for learning, non-expert teachers were less
19
20 capable of doing so. As Coldron and Smith (1999, p. 712) observed, “teachers find a kind
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22 of agency in positioning themselves” within a given social context in response to needs
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24 that arise from their assessment of the context in which they find themselves (p. 714).
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32 Paradigm Shift in Learning Theory and Second Language Writing Pedagogies 33

34 The paradigm shift in learning theory has been highly influential in research on
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36 second language (L2) writing and its pedagogies. In the last two decades, writing has
37
38 been reconceptualized from an individual cognitive activity to a socially situated activity
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40 (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Leki, 1995; Leki & Carson, 1997). Consequently, more
41
42 attention has been paid to the sociocultural assumptions underpinning writing pedagogies.
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44 In the 1980s, process pedagogy in writing was introduced as a more effective approach to
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46 the teaching of writing than the traditional product oriented approach. The former
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48 simulates the process of writing in everyday contexts, whereby students are given
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50 opportunities to revise their drafts with input from their peers and the teacher before
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52 submitting them for grading. Product writing, by contrast, requires students to work
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54 individually to produce a final draft for grading, and the emphasis is on assessing the
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56 quality of the final product.
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3 A number of researchers have pointed out that process pedagogy may favor
4 certain sociocultural groups over others as learners of different cultural backgrounds may
5 orient to it in different ways (Kalantzis & Cope, 1993). For example, Carson and Nelson
6 (1996) showed that in peer response sessions, that is, sessions during which students are
7 required to provide feedback on each other's writing, Chinese students withheld critical
8 comments for the sake of maintaining group harmony. By contrast, Spanish-speaking
9 students gave priority to the improvement of writing (see also Nelson & Carson, 1998).
10 Thonus (2004) also showed that the non-native learners of English in his study (mostly
11 Asians) had such "unshakable beliefs" about the authority of their native-speaker English
12 tutors that the collaborative frame the tutors tried to set up was rendered dysfunctional (p.
13 236).
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29 The uncritical adoption of process pedagogy by teachers with little regard to
30 learners' cultural traditions has undesirable consequences: It renders irrelevant the local
31 meanings and experiences of learners and leads to pedagogical failures. However,
32 sweeping generalizations regarding local cultural traditions and the constraints they
33 impose on pedagogical possibilities may lead to stereotyping, which is often unhelpful.
34 Such stereotyping hinders a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of factors
35 impinging on student learning and the exploration of opportunities for learning.
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The Study

50 Drawing on the conceptions of teacher knowledge as situated knowledge and
51 teachers' agency in situated possibilities, this paper reports on a study of how two L2
52 writing teachers, Rosemary and Shirley (pseudonyms), responded to process pedagogy,
53 and the pedagogical strategies they developed in response to the problems that they
54 encountered in implementation. The study was undertaken as a follow-up to a large scale
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3 study on good practices in L2 teaching conducted in 2003-4 by First author and her
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5 colleagues in eleven secondary schools in Hong Kong, and in which second author's
6
7 school participated (Rosemary and Shirley were among the case study teachers in this
8
9 school). It involved classroom observations as well as interviews with teachers and
10
11 students on good practices in L2 teaching, and the findings revealed that, amongst other
12
13 good practices, both Rosemary and Shirley had been adopting effective strategies in the
14
15 teaching of writing (First author et al. 2004). The aim of the follow-up study was to
16
17 examine in greater detail the strategies used by these two teachers and how they were
18
19 developed. The findings of the follow-up study showed that the development of these
20
21 strategies was a process in which the teachers sensitively and skillfully exploited the
22
23 possibilities for learning that were rooted in the cultural traditions they shared with their
24
25 students and the micro-cultures in the classroom that they co-constructed with them. It
26
27 should be noted that in this paper the delineation of Chinese culture captures the Chinese
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29 cultural *orientation* and should not be interpreted as cultural *stereotyping*. The former
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31 suggests that although there are commonalities within the same culture, individual
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33 variations can be found in all cultures and are highly situated. By contrast, the latter
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35 suggests that social structures and cultural traditions are a determinant of an individual's
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37 social behavior.
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Context and Methodology

Context of Study

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55 In Hong Kong, the average class size in publicly funded secondary schools is 36
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57 to 40 students. Students are streamed according to academic ability into three bands,
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59 Band 1 being highest ability and Band 3 being lowest. Second author's Secondary School
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3 is a publicly funded school located in a working class housing estate in Hong Kong. The
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5 students are in Bands 1 and 2, ethnic Chinese, and mostly from working class families;
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7
8 most of them have little academic support at home and most of their parents do not speak
9
10 English. Second author is the Head of the English Panel (equivalent to the Head of the
11
12 English Department in schools in U.K. or U.S.A.). Rosemary and Shirley, who are
13
14 colleagues of second author on the English Panel, and are both experienced ESL teachers,
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16 were invited to participate in the follow-up study. Both teachers are ethnic Chinese who
17
18 were brought up and educated to tertiary level in Hong Kong.
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22 In 1995, the process approach to writing was introduced by the Head of the
23
24 English panel at second author's School. It was understood as a better alternative to
25
26 product writing, which had been the approach adopted by teachers until that point.
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28 Students were encouraged to focus on content for the initial drafts and on grammar in the
29
30 penultimate draft. Teachers were advised to design peer response forms for students to
31
32 use when providing comments on their peers' work and to allocate class time for
33
34 discussing the comments. However, they were given the autonomy to organize the
35
36 provision of peer feedback and teacher feedback sessions as they deemed fit. In the first
37
38 few years of implementation, students showed improvement in their writing in terms of
39
40 content and organization (see First Author & Second Author, 2000). However, the
41
42 lengthy period taken to complete a cycle of revisions (often lasting four to six weeks),
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44 and the fact that attention to grammatical accuracy was delayed until the penultimate
45
46 draft, proved problematic, and the students' performance in public examinations declined.
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48 As a result, in 2004, the teachers on the English Panel decided to adopt a mixed approach,
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50 whereby product writing was reinstated and process writing was implemented only twice
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52 per school year for more demanding writing tasks. In addition, to increase students'
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54 writing practice, the school introduced "regular writing", which required students to write
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3 once every two weeks on an extensive range of topics in a variety of genres. To handle
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5 the heavy grading load, teachers were encouraged to draw on their students as a resource
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7 for learning through “peer response”.
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10 In the research literature on writing pedagogy, peer response usually takes the
11 form of peers working in pairs or groups to provide feedback on each other’s writing.
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13 Guidance is usually provided by the teacher, either in the form of a list of questions or a
14
15 peer response form outlining the aspects on which feedback should be provided (Liu &
16
17 Hansen, 2002). Although a number of researchers have pointed out the benefits of peer
18
19 feedback (see for example Arndt, 1993; Mittan, 1989), others have identified problems
20
21 such as students’ tendency to respond to surface errors instead of semantic and textual
22
23 ones, their tendency to give comments that do not facilitate revision, and their lack of
24
25 competence in determining to what extent the peer comments on their work are valid. It
26
27 has also been pointed out that students from cultures in which the teacher is viewed as an
28
29 authoritative figure may not consider their peers knowledgeable enough to make valid
30
31 comments and, therefore, may ignore peer comments when making revisions (Leki, 1990;
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33 Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Nelson & Carson, 1998).
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35 However, findings from the large scale study reported in First Author et al. (2004)
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37 showed that, contrary to the reservations expressed in the literature, peer response was
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39 skillfully organized and sensitively managed by both Rosemary and Shirley, with positive
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41 learning outcomes in both cases.
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50 At the time of the study, Rosemary was the Deputy Head of the English Panel
51 and had thirteen years of teaching experience and Shirley had ten years of teaching
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53 experience. Rosemary had gone through the whole process of moving from product
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55 writing to process writing and subsequently to the mixed approach. By contrast, when
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57 Shirley started teaching at the school, process writing was already in place and she
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3 accepted it as existing practice. When the first study began, both teachers had already
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5 explored process pedagogical strategies for some time, and their teaching was well
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7 received by students (see First Author et al., 2004).
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10 11 12 *Research Methodology* 13

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15 For the follow-up study, further interviews with both teachers were conducted
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17 based on the findings of the initial large-scale study. A total of twelve students, six from
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19 each teacher, were also interviewed. Data were collected over a period of six weeks. The
20
21 interviews with the teachers lasted two hours each and elicited narratives that accessed
22
23 the context and history of their practices (Benner et al., 1996; Benner, 1994). Prior to the
24
25 interviews, questions were emailed to both teachers. The questions pertained to two
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27 major topics: first, their understanding of process writing and second, their
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29 implementation and subsequent modifications of process writing practices. Under the
30
31 first topic, three questions with a number of sub-questions were asked regarding i) their
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33 initial reactions to process writing; ii) the congruence of process writing with the Chinese
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35 cultural beliefs and traditions and the micro-cultures in their own classrooms; and iii)
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37 whether their understanding changed over time. Under the second topic, five questions
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39 with sub-questions were asked relating to i) the aspects of process writing that worked
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41 and those that did not; ii) their reactions when they did not work; iii) the modifications
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43 they made to specific elements of processing writing; iv) their views about peer response;
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45 and v) their understanding of the teacher's role in the teaching of writing. Both authors
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47 were present at the interviews.²
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55 The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and an initial analysis of the data,
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57 conducted through identifying recurring themes, showed that peer response was further
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59 developed by Rosemary and Shirley after the school switched to a mixed approach.
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3 Instead of merely asking students to provide written comments on their peers' writing,
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5 both teachers introduced a number of strategies that fostered collaboration amongst
6
7 students. On the basis of the preliminary analysis, students of both teachers were
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9 interviewed. The interviews were conducted with individuals, in pairs or groups,
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11 depending on the students' availability. A total of four pair/group interviews and two
12
13 individual interviews were conducted, all semi-structured, and with a duration of 45 to 90
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15 minutes each. The common questions directed to all students pertained to their attitudes
16
17 regarding five dimensions: i) peer-editing; ii) writing as a result of participating in peer-
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19 response; iii) preserving face when providing peer feedback; iv) teacher authority; and v)
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21 public praise and criticism from the teacher. In addition, questions were asked on specific
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23 themes that emerged from the interviews with each teacher. For Rosemary's students,
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25 specific questions were posed on relationships between self and group, including the
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27 tension between achieving group harmony and improving performance. For Shirley's
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29 students, specific questions were asked about the teacher's scaffolding methods, self-
30
31 group relationships, and the reader-writer relationship that was fostered through peer
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33 response. The students' writing, their peer-edited work, and peer response forms were
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35 used for stimulated recall.
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43 Six students from Rosemary's class agreed to participate in the interviews. They
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45 belonged to six different peer response groups and three language-ability groups, high,
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47 average, and low, with two in each ability group. Each ability pair included one who
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49 showed obvious improvement in their writing scores between the first and second
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51 semester and another who showed less obvious improvement, with the exception of the
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53 low ability pair in which one showed a slight decline in scores. Six students in Shirley's
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55 class were selected on the same criteria. However, as only one low ability student was
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57 willing to be interviewed, the participating students included two in the high ability group
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3 and three in the average ability group. In our view, the sample provided an adequate
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5 representation of ability levels and improvement in learning outcomes.
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8 9 10 *Data Analysis*

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12 The transcription of interview data was sent to the teachers for verification.
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14 Adopting a grounded approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the interview
15
16 data went through three stages of coding: open, axial and selective coding. The open
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18 coding of Rosemary's interview data yielded 78 codes and that of her students' interview
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20 data yielded 15 additional codes, the latter pertaining to aspects that were not covered by
21
22 Rosemary's interview (e.g., the sense of shame students experienced when they were
23
24 criticized publicly by the teacher and their views about maintaining group harmony). The
25
26 open coding of Shirley's interview data yielded 67 codes and that of her students'
27
28 interview data yielded 7 additional codes. The latter related to their views on teacher
29
30 authority as opposed to the authority of peers, books and themselves, and their views
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32 about public praise and criticism from the teacher. Axial coding of both data sets yielded
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34 19 categories for each teacher, with 15 common categories and 4 specific to each.
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41 In the final selective coding stage, it was apparent that the pedagogical strategies
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43 the teacher developed (particularly those relating to peer response) and the cultural
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45 contexts in which they were developed were themes that recurred in both data sets and on
46
47 which the other categories seemed to hang. Repeated examination of the relationship
48
49 between axial coding categories in both data sets suggested that a core category, one that
50
51 was abstract enough to explain variation as well as the main point made by the data,
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53 would be "Peer response: pedagogical strategies and cultural contexts" (see Strauss,
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55 1987). The relationships between the core category and the axial coding categories were
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57 examined in detail. The findings of the study were interpreted in the light of the cultural
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3 orientation of the students and teachers by drawing on Chinese classics as well as the
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5 research literature on cross-cultural studies.
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8 The presentation of findings below is organized according to the strategies
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10 developed by the teachers over time. Findings from the students' interview data are
11
12 interwoven with those from the teachers' data in order to provide a coherent narrative.
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15 16 17 Findings 18

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20 While both teachers attached a great deal of importance to peer response and
21
22 provided guidance for their students in its implementation, the strategies that they
23
24 developed were different. As detailed below, Rosemary focused on getting students to
25
26 take collective responsibility for learning (i.e., take responsibility for the improvement of
27
28 every member in their group) through organizing peer response groups. Shirley, in the
29
30 course of scaffolding peer response, encouraged her students to benchmark their own
31
32 performance against their peers and to co-construct reader and writer identities. Both
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34 teachers related the strategies to the Chinese cultural beliefs about teaching and learning.
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41 *Reconceptualizing Peer Response and Collectivist Culture* 42

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44 At the beginning of implementing process pedagogy, Rosemary understood peer
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46 response as merely an additional step in the writing cycle, during which students read and
47
48 discussed each other's drafts. Being skeptical about students' ability to edit each other's
49
50 work, she initially identified mistakes herself and provided suggestions for revision
51
52 without requiring peer editing. However, two major events changed her perception and
53
54 practice. The first event was the study she conducted on peer response in grammar
55
56 correction for her master's dissertation, which showed that students were able to help
57
58 each other to identify grammatical errors and make sensible corrections even though they
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3 might not get it right each time. The second event was the addition of regular
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5 composition writing (as mentioned above), which increased the amount of grading she
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7 had to do and made it necessary for her to find innovative ways of coping with her
8
9 workload. Realizing that students could be a resource for learning, Rosemary started to
10
11 explore ways of engaging them in peer response in a meaningful way.
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15 *The organization of peer response groups.* The use of peer response groups was a
16
17 major strategy that Rosemary developed and refined over time. She recounted that the
18
19 first few pieces of regular writing produced by her Secondary Four (grade 10) students
20
21 were extremely poor, and recalled, “There was only one group (out of ten) whose writing
22
23 I could bear to read. I didn’t even want to take the rest home to grade.”
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27 Inspired by the findings of her own study for her master’s dissertation and
28
29 motivated by her heavy workload, she asked students to form groups of four and
30
31 proofread each other’s work and correct the errors identified by their peers before
32
33 handing it in to her. Students stayed with the same group throughout the school year so
34
35 that they could monitor each other’s progress. The editing work was primarily language-
36
37 focused, but organization and content were attended to as well. Peer-editing in groups
38
39 was usually done outside of lessons, and each piece of writing was edited by at least one
40
41 group member. In some cases, a piece of writing could be edited by all group members.
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46 To scaffold the peer response process, Rosemary conducted the first few sessions
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48 in class, starting with simple editing tasks such as correcting verb forms and subject-verb
49
50 agreement. She also provided worksheets for correcting common grammatical errors, and
51
52 required the editor to put down his or her name after editing so that she could monitor the
53
54 effort made by each student. The whole group was held responsible for the quality of
55
56 each member’s work. To ensure that students went over teacher and peer feedback
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58 collaboratively and had the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification, Rosemary
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3 allocated class time for this purpose. For each task, she displayed samples of well-written
4
5 pieces as models, and required students to identify the strengths of these pieces. In
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7
8 Rosemary's view, collaborating in peer-editing, responding to teacher feedback, and
9
10 analyzing models of good writing were crucial elements in learning how to write.

11
12 *Collective responsibility.* Reflecting on her thinking behind the organization of
13
14 peer group response, Rosemary explained that she saw learning as a social activity in
15
16 which the individual was a part of the collective. She often reminded her students that in
17
18 learning (how to write), "We are sitting in the same boat" [同坐一條船] (*tongzuo yi tiao*
19
20 *chuan*). There is some difference between this Chinese saying and the English saying,
21
22 "We're all in the same boat". Although both refer to being in the same difficult situation,
23
24 the Chinese saying, which originates from the Chinese proverb [同舟共濟] (*tongzhou*
25
26 *gongji*), emphasizes the interdependence between self and others in the same predicament
27
28 and the need for a sense of fellowship, or mutual help, which is reflected in the meaning
29
30 of "gongji" [共濟] (see Wu, 2006)³.

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40 In her teaching practices, Rosemary stressed collective effort in learning and the
41
42 importance of improving as a group, and often reminded her students that "We are
43
44 learning *together*". She graded writing assignments in groups so that she could find out
45
46 whether or not the group members had made an effort to help each other. The students
47
48 interviewed reported that Rosemary would ask to see the whole group if the quality of
49
50 their work was below par; in particular, the editors would be questioned for not helping
51
52 their peers.

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57 The collective goal of achieving improvement as a group was a powerful
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59 motivation for the students despite their lack of confidence in their own English
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competence. The students interviewed all said that they were quite apprehensive at first.

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3 To accomplish the task, they worked together to consult grammar books and the
4
5 dictionary to try to figure out how to edit each other's writing. They also looked at the
6
7 teacher's feedback on their editing to find out if they had made mistakes. Once they had
8
9 overcome their initial apprehension, they found the process enriching. As one student
10
11 explained, "The team discussed how we could 'add value' together so that we could
12
13 improve our English. Team members knew each other well and, therefore, they
14
15 understood each other's strengths and weaknesses; they offered a lot of suggestions on
16
17 how you could improve."
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22 Over time, Rosemary was able to establish group solidarity in her class. The
23
24 perception of self as part of the group was shared by all interviewees, as evidenced by the
25
26 following excerpt:
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29 If someone in the group has improved, you feel that you have helped [him/her]
30
31 because you've been proofreading and making suggestions for improvement. You
32
33 can see your peers improving all the time, and that's good.
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36 *Group harmony and collective goals.* Rosemary reported that the students
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38 established strong bonding within their groups and monitored the quality of each other's
39
40 work closely. Work that was full of careless mistakes would be rejected by peers and
41
42 returned for re-writing. Rosemary gave the students the mandate to impose a penalty on
43
44 their peers for repeated mistakes, and they readily used it. For example, one student asked
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46 a group member, who consistently misspelled a particular word, to write the correct
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48 spelling fifty times. Rosemary's account corroborated that of the students. All student
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50 interviewees indicated that they were direct and frank with their comments, and that they
51
52 tried their best to help their peers. For example, one of them said,
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57 I went over each part [of the essay] with her and told her how to reorganize it, ...
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59 then I asked her to rewrite the whole thing. During class, I paid attention to her
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3 and asked if she understood what the teacher was saying; I suggested that she jot
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6 down notes. I also lent her my vocabulary books for photocopying.
7

8 To explore whether there was any tension between maintaining group harmony and
9
10 improving their writing, we asked the students how they would rate the importance of
11
12 maintaining good relationships in the group compared to five other possible objectives of
13
14 peer group response, namely, improving performance as a group, learning from each
15
16 other, outperforming other groups, being praised by the teacher in public, and avoiding
17
18 public criticism by the teacher. Most of them rated “improving performance as a group”
19
20 and “learning from each other” most important, whereas “maintaining good relationship
21
22 in the group” and “avoiding public criticism by the teacher” followed closely. The
23
24 students pointed out that the collective goal of group improvement had overriding
25
26 importance because they needed to start preparing for the final public examinations in the
27
28 following year (S5, grade 11) and had to help each other.
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34 35 36 *Public Praise and Disapproval* 37

38 In line with making students take collective responsibility for their learning,
39
40 Rosemary publicly praised groups and individuals who achieved marked improvement.
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42 The public recognition of effort and competence was a powerful source of motivation for
43
44 students. Even when only one group member was publicly praised, the rest of the group
45
46 felt a sense of achievement. The following excerpt reflects the sentiment shared by all
47
48 interviewees.
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53 In my group ... the weak ones have shown obvious improvement; a lot of the
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55 grammatical mistakes have gone, and the whole group has improved a lot. ... We
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57 are very happy. Even though she [Rosemary] praised only one member in the
58
59 group, we all felt that we had made a contribution.
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3 Interestingly, students who had not been praised also found this a source of motivation:
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5 They all wanted themselves and their groups to be named and praised, and they all
6
7 wanted to emulate the good writers. The perception of self in relation to others was
8
9 widely shared.
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13 In addition to public recognition of good work, Rosemary also showed public
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15 disapproval of poor quality work resulting from lack of effort. Expressions of disapproval
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17 of certain behaviors in front of others are typical of the socialization process of child
18
19 rearing in Chinese culture (Russell & Yik, 1996; Wong & Tsoi, 1999). Rosemary
20
21 developed this strategy when she found that providing opportunities for revision did not
22
23 result in improvement in writing. She felt that in addition to peer support and public
24
25 recognition of competence, she needed to appeal to students' preservation of "face"
26
27 (which is a claimed sense of self-worth that an individual wants others to have of him or
28
29 her (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998)) by avoiding criticism. When we asked Rosemary
30
31 whether she was worried that public disapproval might be psychologically damaging to
32
33 her students, she emphasized that she would not have used this practice if she had not
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35 established a close and caring relationship with the students. Moreover, she ensured that
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37 students who had been publicly criticized were publicly praised when they showed even
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39 the slightest improvement.
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46 The interviews with students corroborated Rosemary's view of how they were
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48 affected by her approach to public disapproval. The students used the metaphors *no*
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50 (Cantonese, meaning "the smell of something burnt") and *yu* (Cantonese, meaning
51
52 "bruised")⁴ to describe the embarrassment they felt when their work was criticized in
53
54 front of the class. When we asked the students whether their self-esteem was undermined
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56 when this happened to them, none of them said that they were made to feel inferior. They
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58 said that they knew the teacher meant well, that they deserved the criticism because they
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3 had not done their work properly, and that it motivated them to do better and avoid
4 making careless mistakes. One of the interviewees cited as their motto a well-known
5 Chinese saying: “When you feel ashamed, you are brave enough to face the problem” [知
6 耻近乎勇] (*zhichijinhuyong*)⁵. The motivation to improve also came from their
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15 perception of self-worth in relation to the group. As one of the interviewees explained,
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17 “There is a sense of comparison. ... You need to improve in order to feel that you are on
18 a par with others.” They also felt that they owed it to the teacher to do well.
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22 To a lesser extent, Shirley also gave public recognition for good effort by either
23 displaying exemplary work or praising students who had shown improvement. Similar to
24 Rosemary’s students, Shirley’s students were keen to be publicly praised by the teacher
25 and felt that it boosted their self-confidence. One student said that being praised in front
26 of the class by the teacher motivated her to “outperform the good students”. Another
27 student felt that although her English was not as good as other students she hoped to one
28 day gain recognition, particularly from the teacher. Shirley also criticized poor quality
29 work, but always commented on group performance rather than individual performance.
30 She never criticized students in front of the whole class. Nevertheless, similar to
31 Rosemary’s students, the shame that her students felt at being criticized was a source of
32 motivation for them to work harder.
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50 51 *Reconceptualizing Peer Response*

52 For Shirley, peer response initially meant completing a task in the writing cycle in
53 which students filled out peer response forms to provide feedback. She did not require
54 students to revise their writing on the basis of peer feedback; and as these forms were
55 designed by other teachers, there was little ownership of meaning on her part. However,
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3 an opportunity to modify the peer response form made her realize that when the guidance
4 on providing comments was geared to her students' needs, they provided very good peer
5 feedback. She began to see that peer response, properly supported, could be an effective
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10 mediating tool to help students improve their writing. Consequently, she developed
11
12 strategies to scaffold the peer response processes which enabled her students to learn
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14 from each other, to benchmark their own writing against each other, and to co-construct
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16
17 reader and writer identities.
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19
20 *Peer response as “gunmo” and benchmarking.* Once Shirley discovered that
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22 students responded better to peer response questions geared more to their own needs, she
23
24 began to design tasks related to the specific objectives of each writing task and the
25
26 anticipated difficulties her students might have. As well as including open-ended
27
28 comments to encourage creative feedback, she also asked students to raise two questions
29
30 about their partner's draft to which he or she must respond. The positive outcome this
31
32 achieved enabled her to see peer response as providing an additional perspective for
33
34 students in the learning process, and she reconceptualized it as a process of *gunmo* [觀摩]
35
36 (Cantonese, meaning observing what others have done and improving yourself through
37
38 discussions with them⁶), or learning from each other. Her students pointed out that the
39
40 opportunity to observe [觀] (*gun*), showed them how a writing task could be handled in
41
42 different ways, and how the teacher's instructions were interpreted by their peers. This
43
44 process opened up the space of learning (Marton & First Author et al., 2004) and allowed
45
46 students to see the possibilities available. Shirley's use of the expression [摩] (*mo*), which
47
48 means to improve yourself on the basis of your observation and discussion with others,
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50 suggests that self-improvement was understood as a group effort, rather than an
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52 individual effort.
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Leveraging on the importance that students attach to marks, Shirley further operationalized *gunmo* by asking her students to give a mark to their peer's writing. The purpose of doing this, she explained, was to get students to benchmark themselves against their peers and to set targets for themselves. She said, "When they give 50, they have to think about the benchmark used. As the students said, 'I cannot just give 50. I have to read carefully. It's just passing, so I give 50. If I give 60 or 70, then the writing has to be much better.' ... I also asked them whether they would give a lower mark if their peer's writing was not as good as their own." In other words, the individual's performance is assessed in relation to the performance of others, and one's sense of self-worth is related to one's perception of the worth of others.

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The student interview data corroborated Shirley's report. The students particularly mentioned that they not only benefited from their peers' questions, but also from raising questions about their peer's writing, as this required more "brain work" than just giving comments. They pointed out that when they asked for clarification, they realized that they had to make sure that their readers understood what they were saying, and as a result became more reflective about their own writing. Although they were a little apprehensive that they might hurt their peers' feelings if they gave them low marks, and that their negative comments might be too direct, they felt that they would be better able to help their peers if they provided frank feedback. Most of the students interviewed took the marks given by their peers seriously, although they all realized that the teacher's assessment was the "real assessment".

The co-construction of reader and writer identities. To encourage students to take peer response seriously, Shirley required each student to solicit comments from his/her partner, and make a pledge to take the comments seriously, through a specially designed form prefaced by a note from the writer to the reader:

1
2
3 *Dear Heidi,*

4
5 *I would love to know what you think about my story. Please feel free to comment*

6
7 *(on my writing) using the form below. I promise I'll read your comments and*

8
9 *improve my work. Thank you very much!*

10
11
12 *Yours,*

13
14 *Rita*

15
16
17 *The writer*

18
19
20 Shirley explained her thinking behind the design as follows:

21
22 “If there was a reader, their [the writer’s] interest [in writing] would be greater.

23
24 The task would also be more authentic; the writers need to satisfy and respond to
25
26 their readers, and that’s why they have to revise their writing ... not because they
27
28 have to do the assignment again.”
29
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32 Shirley further explained that the writer’s pledge was consciously included to put the
33
34 writer under the obligation to take the reader’s feedback seriously. Asking the writer to
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36 sign his or her name was also intended to put a seal on the pledge made. She said, “After
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38 they had signed their names, they felt obliged [to live up to their promise].” The promise
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40 was also meant to impart a sense of responsibility to the reader. Shirley felt that taking
41
42 away peer response would change the nature of the writing task: The task would not be
43
44 “three-dimensional”.
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48 For each writing task, Shirley provided guiding questions that would facilitate a
49
50 constructive dialogue between the writer and the reader. For example, in a writing task
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52 where students had to write an imaginative story, she found that general yes-no questions
53
54 such as “Do you like the story?” elicited just “yes” or “no” answers, and that students
55
56 receiving only a negative answer from their peers were discouraged. However, when the
57
58 question was re-phrased as an open-ended statement, such as “What I like most about
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3 your story and why”, students provided much more interesting feedback. For example,
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5 one student wrote, “I quite like this story because I like magic. I think you should write
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7 more about mum’s feelings. The idea [i.e., the content] is okay.” To help students provide
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9 suggestions for improvement, Shirley posed a further statement, “What I think you
10
11 should improve on and why.” These two re-phrased statements helped students to focus
12
13 on the positive elements of their peers’ writing and to reflect on the evaluation that they
14
15 should give them.
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20 In other words, the students’ construction of a writer identity was facilitated by
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22 giving them a sense of audience when they wrote. At the same time, their construction of
23
24 a reader identity was facilitated by the obligation to provide feedback on their peer’s
25
26 writing and the awareness that their comments would be read and taken seriously.
27
28 Shirley’s views were triangulated with those of her students. All, except for one, felt that
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30 the pledge to their peers either personalized the communication between them or fostered
31
32 their sense of obligation as a writer and as a reader. For example, one of them said, “It is
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34 my peer’s invitation, not the teacher’s order because the note said *I would love to know*
35
36 *what you think about my story.*” Similarly, another student commented that even though
37
38 the note was drafted by the teacher, providing peer response was no longer merely a task
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40 assigned by the teacher: “I felt that my classmate really wanted me to assess his writing
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42 and tell him what he needed to pay attention to.”
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50 51 *Teacher Authority and Teacher Presence*

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53 *The teacher versus the collective other.* Both Rosemary and Shirley said that
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55 adopting peer response strategies had not put the teacher’s authority into question. The
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57 students considered the teacher the final authority, although they also took their peers’
58
59 views seriously.
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3 We asked both Rosemary's and Shirley's students what they did when they
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5 disagreed with their peers' and teachers' feedback. All of them said that they would ask
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7 other classmates first, and if more than one classmate agreed with the feedback, they
8
9 would accept it as correct. Some of them also consulted grammar books or the dictionary.
10
11 If there was a discrepancy between the grammar books and the teacher's feedback, all of
12
13 them said that they would go to the teacher. We asked them how they would rate the
14
15 importance of the following categories as a source of authority: grammar
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17 books/dictionary, the teacher, other classmates, and themselves. The results showed that
18
19 except for one student in Shirley's group, students from both groups rated the teacher as
20
21 the most authoritative source. Grammar and reference books and the collective other
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23 were rated more authoritative than self. This suggests that while the teacher had the
24
25 highest authority, peers were also considered a useful resource for learning.
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32 *Teacher presence and dialogic interaction.* Both teachers highlighted the
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34 importance of *teacher presence*. They stressed that it was important to let their students
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36 know that the teacher was constantly monitoring the quality of their work, and that asking
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38 them to provide peer feedback did not mean the teacher was relinquishing her
39
40 responsibility. For both of them, the teacher's presence was realized in the written
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42 comments they gave to their students in the form of dialogic interactions, that is, the
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44 interactions that they had with the students in the form of an on-going written dialogue.
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46 The nature of their dialogic interactions with students was somewhat different, however.
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48 Rosemary interacted with her students in a personal way, for example, sharing her
49
50 personal experiences, giving advice, empathy, and encouragement. In the words of her
51
52 students, her written comments were "warm and close to one's heart". Shirley's dialogic
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54 interactions with her students were focused on making sure that her students had
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56 understood her written comments, as her students were in junior forms and their language
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3 ability was weaker. To scaffold the interaction, she drew up a very simple schema: if they
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5 agreed with her comments, they had to write “thank you”; if they disagreed, they had to
6
7 put a cross; and if they did not understand her comment, they had to put a question mark.
8
9 Shirley recalled that this schema was developed after a couple of students took the
10
11 initiative to respond to her comments, making her realize that when students did not
12
13 incorporate her comments in their revisions, it might not be because they were lazy.
14
15 Shirley explained, “Maybe they did not agree with me, maybe I misunderstood them,
16
17 maybe they did not understand my comment. ... Maybe they just did not know how to do
18
19 the revisions.” The dialogue not only provided information that helped her to improve the
20
21 quality of her teacher feedback, but also established bonding between her and her
22
23 students. This was supported by the student interview data. One student said, “The
24
25 teacher has given you a lot of comments, and you have to at least give some response; if
26
27 not, [the teacher would feel that she] was talking to the air, and she would be
28
29 disappointed.” Another student said, “If I have questions, I may not dare ask the teacher
30
31 orally. Then I can write one or two simple sentences to ask her, and if she reads it and
32
33 responds, then I feel she cares about me.” Teacher presence was an important source of
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35 motivation for improvement for both Shirley’s and Rosemary’s students.
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46 Discussion

47
48 The findings of this study show that both Rosemary and Shirley skillfully
49
50 developed pedagogical strategies to exploit opportunities for learning opened up by
51
52 process writing. Having taught in the school for a number of years, both teachers had
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54 profound knowledge of the patterned practices and cultural traditions of the learner
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56 community. As Coldron and Smith (1999) pointed out, practices or traditions are
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58 “resources that inform the action of individuals by making available patterned sets of
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3 meanings, oppositions and possibilities for creative articulation” (p. 713). These
4
5 traditions constrain as well as nourish possibilities for creative action. Both teachers
6
7 creatively exploited the possibilities, and in the course of doing so, reshaped the
8
9 traditions and practices over time.
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12 13 14 15 *Multifaceted Nature of Self-Group Relationship*

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17 In Chinese culture, the individual self is referred to as the “small self” and the
18
19 group, society, and nation are referred to as the “large self” (Bond, 1986; Hofstede, 1980).
20
21 The dictum “Sacrifice the small self for the sake of the large self” is taught at a very early
22
23 age. An individual is not a complete entity but is defined in relation to others; self is
24
25 “group-oriented, other-directed, relational, collective, and interdependent” (Gao, 1998, p.
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27 1) (see also Sun, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Rosemary’s organization of peer response groups
28
29 was congruent with this tradition. So were Shirley’s conception of *gunmo* [觀摩], peer
30
31 benchmarking, and the co-construction of reader and writer identities. As the findings
32
33 show, students perceived their performance as related to, and measured against, the
34
35 performance of the group and their peers. The urge to emulate others and to bring their
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37 work on a par with their peers was one source of motivation for improvement; the sense
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39 of obligation to their peers, groups, and the teacher was another.
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47 The Chinese cultural tradition of maintaining group harmony has been perceived
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49 as a constraint in group collaboration, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper
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51 (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Thonus, 2004). However, self-group relationships are multi-
52
53 faceted, and group harmony is only one aspect. In the context of an individual goal versus
54
55 a collective goal, the former may give way to the latter. In the context of competing
56
57 collective goals, one collective goal may give way to another. Rosemary was able to
58
59 perceive the “array of choices” that was available in her classroom: For her students, who
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3 were all from working-class families and could only access higher education locally, the
4
5 collective goal of helping each other to do well in public examinations was a source of
6
7 strong motivation. As her students reported, Rosemary always reminded them that they
8
9 would have a much better chance to obtain university education if they helped rather than
10
11 competed against each other. The students' rating of the objectives of group collaboration
12
13 showed that given the more important goal of academic achievement (which is highly
14
15 valued in Chinese societies), students were much more ready to give critical comments
16
17 and less concerned about jeopardizing group harmony. Similarly, in the context of being
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19 charged with the responsibility to assess their peers' writing, Shirley's students put the
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21 goal of performing an assessor's role properly over and above the goal of not hurting the
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23 feelings of their partners.
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32 *Teacher Authority and Learner Autonomy*

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34 Teacher authority is an aspect of Chinese culture that has been perceived as a
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36 constraint in developing learner autonomy amongst Chinese learners. Instead of seeing
37
38 the two as dichotomous, Rosemary and Shirley construed them as complementary. As the
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40 findings show, when students lacked confidence in their own English competence, and
41
42 when differences in opinion arose, consulting with their peers and looking things up in
43
44 reference books afforded excellent opportunities for autonomous learning. Rosemary,
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46 whose students were more senior, gave less structured peer response tasks and allowed
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48 more room for her students to explore how they could handle these tasks. Shirley, on the
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50 other hand, devoted time and effort into designing peer comment forms that not only
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52 provided the linguistic and cognitive scaffolding her students needed, but also
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54 incorporated open-ended tasks that encouraged them to think for themselves and ask each
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56 other questions.
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3 Both teachers creatively articulated teacher authority as *teacher presence*. The
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5 notion of teacher presence embodies not only the teacher as a source of knowledge, but as
6
7 somebody who cares about the students' academic progress and emotional well-being.
8
9 This dual attribute of the teacher is at the heart of the concept of "master teacher" in
10
11 Chinese educational philosophy (Ma, 1992; see also First Author & Wong, 2009).
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13 Through the written dialogues, Rosemary was able to foster her relationship with her
14
15 students as "teacher and friend" [亦師亦友] (*yishi yiyou*) – a widely used expression to
16
17 describe the relationship between Chinese master teachers and their students. Similarly,
18
19 Shirley was able to use dialogic interaction to help students to overcome their initial fear
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21 of raising questions with her and to establish a teacher-as-friend relationship with them.
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31 *Face and Motivation*

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33 Finally, face, one of the notions in Chinese culture most frequently invoked by
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35 researchers (Hu, 1944; Ting-Toomey, 1988), was drawn on by both teachers to motivate
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37 students to learn. Shame or embarrassment, which relates to negative face, is an elaborate
38
39 and important emotion in Chinese culture. Children are brought up so that they do not
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41 shame their family (Hu, 1944; Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999; Tarr, Kim, &
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43 Sharkey, 2005). They are also encouraged to work hard to bring face to the family (Gao,
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45 1998). The findings of this study show that Rosemary perceived the possibility of using
46
47 public disapproval (hence losing face) in conjunction with public praise (positive face) to
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49 motivate students to improve. Congruent with the interdependent construal of self,
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51 students' sense of embarrassment (*yu* or *no*) arose from their sensitivity to their
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53 performance being evaluated as falling short of the teacher's expectations and
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55 unfavorably compared with their peers. The sense of embarrassment motivated them to
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57 improve so as to protect themselves from being publicly criticized again. This can be
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seen from the interesting finding that “to avoid being publicly criticized by the teacher” was actually rated higher than “to be publicly praised by the teacher”. In the case of Rosemary’s students, the motivation to work hard so that the group and the whole class would not be adversely affected is analogous to children being urged to work to preserve positive face for themselves as well as their family, a value which is inculcated in children from a very young age in many Chinese families.

Although positive face and negative face were not consciously invoked by Shirley, the interviews with her students showed that they were sources of motivation. Although Shirley’s students were more focused on getting praise from the teacher and being able to outperform their peers (positive face), the shame associated with letting their teacher down (negative face) was also a motivation.

To summarize, the findings show that both teachers’ successful pedagogical strategies were developed out of their profound knowledge of the sociocultural contexts in which their practice was located, their sensitivity to the cultural traditions, and their perceptions of the constraints and situated possibilities. Their skilful and sensitive exploitation of these possibilities created a rich environment for learning.

Conclusion

Drawing on the theory of situated learning and teacher knowledge as situated, we have examined the ways in which two L2 writing teachers in Hong Kong perceived and responded to the possibilities for learning how to write in their culture-specific contexts of work. As noted at the beginning of this paper, some researchers feel that the process approach to the teaching of L2 writing is a pedagogy that may favor certain sociocultural groups over others and that the adoption of this pedagogy with little regard to the cultural backgrounds of learners may be detrimental. The two teachers in the study were introduced to the process

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2
3 pedagogy with a general understanding that it allowed students to revise their writing with
4
5 input from their peers and teachers before submitting it to the teacher for grading. This shift
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7 from the absolute authority of the teacher to the sharing of authority by the students
8
9 challenged a deeply rooted belief in Chinese culture, both amongst students and teachers.
10
11 Although both teachers were initially skeptical about their students' competence, and the
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13 students themselves were lacking in confidence, in accomplishing the task, the teachers were
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15 able to develop effective strategies that enabled students to draw on the teacher and their
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17 peers as a resource for learning.
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22 The findings of the study reported in this paper show that the teaching of L2 writing
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24 must be understood in light of the teacher as "the whole person in action, acting within the
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26 settings of that activity" (Lave, 1988, p. 17). Understanding the settings of an activity entails
27
28 an awareness of how cultural traditions shape people's beliefs and behaviors, as well as the
29
30 processes in which they are engaged. As research on culturally relevant pedagogy has shown,
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32 when pedagogical practices build on or align with students' cultural values and practices,
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34 academic achievements are enhanced (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tyler, Boykin, & Walton,
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36 2006). However, what is more important is that the findings of this study also show that we
37
38 must be mindful of the multi-faceted nature of cultural traditions so that we do not make
39
40 simplistic generalizations that lead to cultural stereotyping. As pointed out at the beginning of
41
42 this paper, cultural stereotyping over-emphasizes the constraints imposed by social structures
43
44 and overlooks the dialectical relationship between context and the individual's response to it.
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46 The pedagogical strategies that the two L2 writing teachers developed over the years
47
48 demonstrate their profound understanding of the rich array of choices offered by the Chinese
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50 cultural beliefs and traditions shared by the students and the "small cultures" of their
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52 classrooms (Holliday, 1999). These strategies are the fruition of the synergy between local
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54 and "foreign" practices, which have different cultural traditions and assumptions, and the
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3 teachers' subjective and intersubjective understanding of these practices. Most importantly,
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5 the study shows that the pedagogical choices made by the two teachers were not dictated by
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7 cultural prejudices about particular pedagogical approaches, or about their students, but by
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9 the single most important concern of helping students learn.
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13 Understanding the situated nature of teachers' work, and the situated possibilities in
14
15 the social space and the cultural and educational landscape in which teachers are located, is
16
17 essential in any teacher education program. The so-called subject specific "methodology"
18
19 courses in teacher education programs are more often than not focused on decontextualized
20
21 pedagogical strategies and skills with little regard to sociocultural factors that are critical to
22
23 pedagogical success. This study suggests that although a critical examination of assumptions
24
25 about cultural traditions underpinning pedagogy and their implications for teaching and
26
27 learning is important, and must form an integral part of any teacher education program, it is
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29 equally important to empower teachers, as agents, to respond to possibilities for teaching and
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31 learning that emerge from the local context.
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Endnotes

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²The presence of the second author, (Author's name), who is also the Head Teacher, in no way compromised the validity of data because of the close relationship that she had with the two teachers. On the contrary, her presence enhanced the quality of the interviews as she was able to elaborate on the questions asked by the first author in a way that the two teachers could easily relate to.

³A search on the British National Corpus (a corpus of 200 million words of spoken and written Modern English) showed that among the 44 instances of occurrence of this phrase, the overwhelming majority referred to the same difficult situation. The Chinese saying is a colloquial version of the formal idiom, "tungzhou gongji" [同舟共濟]. Its origin can be found in The Art of War [孫子兵法] (*Sunzi Bingfa*), a classical text about military strategy, which says that when you are in a boat with others and a storm occurs, you work together to save each other, just as your left and right hands work together.

⁴Cantonese words are given in Yale transcription. Their Putonghua equivalents are provided as well, in some cases, to cater for a wider readership. *No and yu* are two commonly used slang terms in Hong Kong. They do not have corresponding written forms nor in Putonghua.

⁵The origin of this saying can be found in the *Doctrine of the Mean* [中庸] (*Zhong Yong*), one of the *Four Books* of Confucius. In the Chinese classics, *Liji* [禮記], "Yong"

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4 [勇] “bravery” is considered one of the three most important virtues, the other two being
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7 wisdom and charity. “*Chi*” [耻] is the sense of shame that both Confucius and Mencius
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10 considered to be an essential quality of being a good person. For example, Confucius
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12 responded as follows when he was asked what was necessary to be a real scholar,
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14 “Conducting himself with a sense of shame (*chi*) ... such a person can be called a
15
16 scholar.” (Confucius, *Analects*, book 13, verse 20). Similarly Mencius maintained that “A
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18 person may not be without a sense of shame (*chi*). The shamefulness of being without a
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20 sense of shame (*chi*) is shameless indeed.” (7A6) (see Van Norden, p. 164, 2000; Shun &
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22 Wong, p. 165, 2004)
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27 ⁶The term *gunmo* (*guanmo* in Putonghua) originated in the Chinese classics. *Liji*
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29 [禮記] [see *Xueji* [學記] Chapter 18, 20-50 B.C. in Han Dynasty, (Wang, 2007)], was
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31 coined by the Chinese philosopher, *Zhuxi* [朱熹], and has been widely cited in Chinese
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33 education literature.
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