
Practice-Oriented Paper

Self-Reflecting on Alienation and Teacher Well-Being

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In this paper, the authors reflect on their presentation ‘Alienation and Teacher Well-Being: A Research Agenda’ at the CUE 2023 conference. The presentation was intended both to introduce their ongoing project to the audience, and, through the audience’s response, to clarify issues in the framework that were unclear. The paper begins with a summary of the presentation, in which we introduced the concept of alienation, connected it to teacher well-being, and shared some experiences from our professional lives which illustrated this connection. Following this, we reflect on the audience’s response to the presentation, which led to the realisation that the term ‘alienation’ needs to be carefully distinguished from similar concepts such as ‘discrimination’. Additionally, questions from the audience highlighted the importance not just of documenting alienating working conditions, but also of discussing the possibility of overcoming these conditions, thus adding a new element to our ongoing project.

This presentation represented the first step in an ongoing research project, in which we are attempting to use the concept of alienation as a lens through which to view issues of teacher well-being. We had two goals in mind when planning this presentation. Firstly, we intended to introduce the concept of alienation to the audience and demonstrate its relevance to the topic of teacher well-being by sharing our own experiences of alienation in our professional lives. Secondly, the presentation was intended to act as a form of self-clarification. Our project still consists of multiple moving parts which we are yet to completely fit together,

and so we hoped that through giving this presentation and hearing the audience's responses, we would be able to discover the elements of our framework that are in need of further explanation. In this short reflection piece, we will outline the presentation, discuss some of the themes that emerged during our discussion with the audience (though without providing any details of the individual stories shared), and finally outline some of the issues we discovered to be in need of disambiguation moving forward.

Genesis of the project

This project began from a collision between our specialist areas of research—authenticity in the case of Richard, native-speakerism in the case of Rob—and the fact we were coincidentally writing autoethnographic chapters at the same time in which we were reflecting on certain work-related disappointments and feelings of professional estrangement (Lowe, 2024; Pinner, 2024). Through reading drafts of each other's work, we began to discuss ways in which the concept of alienation applied to both of our experiences, and was perhaps a useful lens through which to view questions of teacher well-being.

The presentation

We began our presentation by defining alienation, drawing particularly from the tradition of post-Marxist critical theory. Marx described alienation in the context of industrial capitalism as a loss of control over the direction of one's labour, and thus of opportunities to develop talents and skills in relation to one's work (Ollman, 1976). The contemporary critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi (2014) has reworked the concept to describe situations which represent a "disturbed relation of appropriation" (p. 151), in which people are unable to be "the author" of their own lives (p. 204). In other words, their choices are not freely made, but are rather determined by economic and social structures, thus leading to a life which has a feeling of inauthenticity.

We then each gave a short summary of our individual stories of alienation as foreign-language teachers working in Japanese universities. For Rob, this story focused on his early experiences of working at a university in Japan. In this context, he was essentialised as an "English gentleman" (Lowe, 2024, p.

24), treated as what Hall (1998) refers to as an “unacclimated alien” (p. 105) on campus, and as such discouraged from learning the Japanese language, or from integrating into his department. Partly as a result of this experience, he has been extremely hesitant to use Japanese in his classes and has high levels of anxiety when required to use the language with his colleagues. He also feels this early experience acted as a block to his integration into the professional culture of Japanese higher education. He attributes this early experience to the ideology of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2005), in which so-called native speakers of English are viewed as representatives of foreign language and culture and as inherently more skilled in the language than those considered to be non-native speakers. While this can result in high (even undeserved) levels of professional privilege and success, as indeed was experienced by Rob, it may also lead to teachers being seen *only* as representatives of language and culture, and not as qualified professionals (Houghton & Rivers, 2013). This perception led to Rob being treated as a linguistic and cultural resource rather than a colleague. As a result, he was strongly discouraged from learning the Japanese language, and this prevented his integration into the culture of the department. While not denying his own responsibility for his lack of fluency in Japanese, he suggested that this set of formative experiences, occurring early in his professional life, have had reverberations throughout his career, and still contribute to feelings of alienation and estrangement from his work.

Richard’s story focused on his experiences of burnout and professional alienation that stemmed from the treatment he received around his promotion from a tenure-track assistant professor to a tenured associate professor. Echoing many similar accounts that can be found regarding promotions within university departments (Hawley Nagatomo & Cook, 2018; Henry & Kobayashi, 2010), he found himself wondering if the reason for the sudden difficulties and hubris that arose around his promotion were related not to professional issues but as a result of discriminatory prejudices. The fact that a large proportion of the people he had worked alongside for five years revoked their support and used their own positions of power to prevent or slow his promotion from going smoothly caused lasting ill-feeling between him and some of his coworkers. Whilst he

felt some of this animosity may have been racially motivated, other events with other colleagues have made him realize that this may be due to a more complex and multifaceted set of discriminations and power harassments, many of which lie with old rivalries that were unknown to him at the time. Now, even with a tenured position, Richard often finds himself in a situation in which he is essentialised as merely a representative of foreign culture and internationalism, but rarely as a content expert or researcher. In other words, the qualifications and requirements for his position do not reflect the actual work that he does, a case that was echoed by several other university teachers in Japan present in the audience. The culture at the department has created a feeling of alienation in which he feels like he is not really a part of the department, despite now technically holding the same kind of position as his other colleagues.

Following Jaeggi's definition of alienation, these are both narratives in which the subjects are, on paper, extremely successful. Both have reached the position of tenured academic, to which many teachers aspire. However, through the functioning of professional ideology, and the churn of internal politics, both have also experienced feelings of alienation from their workplaces, as they have been kept in a peripheral state, or held at arm's length, by institutions at different points in their careers.

We then put forward some suggestions as to how alienation may influence teacher well-being and shared part of our rough plan to begin investigating these potential issues. As part of this, we invited members of the audience both to ask us questions and to share some of their own experiences.

Audience response

The audience began by probing our experiences more deeply. One question which stuck out to us was whether this alienation is a permanent state. In other words, is it possible for one to regain control of one's life, and overcome the feeling of being divorced from it? This was an extremely interesting point and one we were not prepared for. Our initial idea for the research project focused primarily on clarifying the circumstances that may cause alienation and not those that would resolve it. This helped us immensely in beginning to formulate a research agenda

that would have a practical focus with the goal of improving teacher well-being.

Several audience members either briefly shared their own stories of alienation or alluded to having experienced similar conditions to those we described. This seemed to suggest that research into teacher well-being using the framework of alienation could be fruitful, and that there may be many stories waiting to be told which would both help in our understanding of the causes of professional alienation for language teachers, and suggest ways in which these alienating circumstances could be avoided or alleviated in the future.

Issues for clarification

One issue that arose very clearly during our interactions with the audience revolved around exactly what was meant by *alienation*. While we began the presentation with a description of this term, it seems that in describing our own experiences of alienation, we gave the impression that the term is interchangeable with *discrimination*, as the audience members began to share instances in which they felt discriminated against by their workplaces. Whilst both of our stories stem from what could initially be quite accurately labeled as forms of discrimination, it is important to separate these two concepts. At a basic level, discrimination is an act, while alienation can perhaps be described as a mental state.

More seriously, the experience of alienation is not necessarily borne of discrimination. In fact, as Jaeggi (2014) explained, alienation can occur even when, on paper, a person is living an extremely successful life. To explain this, we can perhaps consider the following (imaginary) case of a teacher in Japan who is perfectly satisfied professionally with their status as a teacher and enjoys the elements of their job related to lesson planning, teaching, and professional development. However, if this teacher starts a family, they may begin to feel financial pressures to advance their careers. In the Japanese language teaching ecosystem, this often means advancing to a university position. That in turn means studying for academic qualifications, conducting research, and navigating the bureaucratic machinations of funding applications, peer review, administrative responsibilities, etc. Even if this person succeeds in obtaining the job they are working towards, they may not feel satisfied within it. Rather, they

may feel they have been pushed into a professionally unrewarding life by social circumstances beyond their control. This is the essence of alienation—the feeling that choices which should be under one’s control are not, and the estrangement that flows from this.

Conclusion

Our goal in this presentation was to take the first step towards a research project in which teacher well-being could be evaluated in terms of alienation, as defined by Marx and Jaeggi. We intended to outline our project and introduce these concepts to our audience. At the same time, we hoped to use the audiences’ reactions to see if the experiences described in our personal narratives would resonate with those in attendance and to help clarify issues in our own framework.

Our reflections on the session led us to three main conclusions. Firstly, the fact that our experiences seemed to resonate with those of the audience strengthened our belief that alienation is in fact a useful lens through which to view teacher well-being. People in the audience both recognised our experiences and also gave examples of ways in which they felt professionally alienated due to structures beyond their control. Secondly, from the audience’s questions, we realised that it may be important for us to focus not just on the causes of alienating conditions, but also on the possibilities for ameliorating these conditions. Finally, we recognised the importance of clearly defining our terms. If alienation is to be a useful construct, it needs to be clearly separated from concepts such as discrimination, otherwise we risk reinventing the conceptual wheel and adding nothing new to the literature. Overall, the presentation helped us to relay our research agenda to the audience, while at the same time coming to notice points in our framework which need to be clarified and addressed, thus strengthening our overall project.

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Received: October 10, 2023

Accepted: November 17, 2024