“The Thought We Have Learnt”: Internally Persuasive Discourse in Chinese Post-Graduate Journals

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This paper adopts a view that any learning experience is basically meta-cognitive and is mediated through an essentially Bakhtinian ideological process involving internally persuasive discourse. This process often involves tension and conflict for individuals as they engage with new understandings and ways of thinking about important concepts. To illustrate elements of these new ways of thinking, examples of my research with Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language post-graduate students, based on a Bakhtinian notion of ‘ideological becoming’ are analysed. Through a preliminary analysis of data I suggest that by using reflective journals as part of a dialogical process, these students are able to engage effectively with key issues in learning.

Keywords: Bakhtinian dialogical processes, authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, narratives of rethinking, reflective journals

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an account of ongoing research related to my experience as a teacher and researcher in a university in south-west China. The research is based around cognitive and socio-cultural processes involved in developing new understandings and concepts in a semester unit of a post-graduate course in Applied Linguistics in the English Department of the university. The procedure involves developing new understandings – a ‘voyage of discovery’– at a time of increasing concern being expressed by Chinese academics of the lack of rigour in more traditional English major programmes at university level. In the words of Irvine, “new understandings are akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (1). In the case of the Chinese research programme, the processes of thinking and learning are based around reflective journals written in English, which students use to write about their ongoing dialogue with ideas and concepts presented in the course. The journals were a continuous and empowering thread throughout the programme.

1 The phrase is a direct quote from the reflective journal kept by one of the students who took part in the research.
2 The Link Between Thinking and ‘New Learning’

I begin by elaborating some of the underlying factors in learning in general and learning in a cross-cultural setting, particularly in relation to students undertaking a course-work masters degree in Applied Linguistics. Central to my thinking are encounters with dialogism theory as articulated in various Bakhtinian texts (e.g. Bakhtin 1981; 1984; 1986) as well as the theorists and teachers who have been influenced by Bakhtin (Baxter; Baxter and Montgomery; Freedman and Ball; Knoeller; Holquist; Wells). In this paper I attempt to show how Bakhtin’s relational dialogic theory informs and extends our understanding of teaching and learning in a particular Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

2.1 Bakhtin and the Voice of Dialogism

A fundamental premise in the paper is the complex Bakhtinian notion of ‘dialogism’. For Bakhtin (1984) the essence of dialogue is relationship, usually expressed in the form of a relationship between the ‘self’ and ‘another’. As noted by Baxter “to engage in dialogue, participants must fuse their perspectives to some extent while sustaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives” (114). Just as dialogue is simultaneously unity and difference, Bakhtin (1981: 272) regarded language and culture as the product of “a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies,” the centripetal (i.e. forces of unity, homogeneity, centrality) and the centrifugal (i.e., forces of difference, dispersion, decentring). These forces are “verbal-ideological” (Bakhtin 1981: 272). In Bakhtinian theory, ideological becoming refers to how we develop our ways of viewing the world, including our system of ideas. Freedman and Ball state that it is important to note that the “concept of ideological becoming does not refer to the development of isolated concepts or ideas…Bakhtin is concerned with more than individual growth because he places the individual firmly within a social context”(5).

Morson and Emerson provide an interesting discussion relating to Bakhtin’s theories by proposing what they see as important properties of discourse and communication. In particular, they speak of the “ongoing process of dialogue” (50). Dialogue for Bakhtin, therefore “is a special sort of interaction which unfortunately is often taken as a synonym for interaction” (49). Morson and Emerson note further that a closely related problem for Bakhtin’s process of communication has to do with the “image of interacting monads” (50). They go on to state that for Bakhtin “neither individuals nor social entities ever constitute a monad. They are much looser, messier and more open than that. The most interesting and most unfinalizable aspects of any interaction arise from the relative disorder of the participants” (50). These factors are important for the current paper because
INTERNALLY PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE IN CHINESE POST-GRADUATE JOURNALS

of the practical prerequisites in terms of students working interactively in ‘relative disorder’ in a prescribed role as critical friends while they build understanding in relation to course material.

2.2 Authoritative vs. Internally Persuasive Discourse

In the context of the properties outlined above regarding the dialogical basis of cognition and communication, Bakhtin (1981) argues that when we recognize that there are diverse voices in interaction, then we attempt to bring these together under two distinct categories of discourse: authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. In relation to the first of these, Bakhtin (1981: 345) explains that we struggle against “various kinds and degrees of authority” – against the “official line”. He explains further that the struggle occurs because “[t]he authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it” (342).

A factor that is particularly noteworthy in contrast to the authoritative word is the concept of everyday discourse, or Bakhtin’s internally persuasive discourse. As noted by Freedman and Ball “internally persuasive discourse has an almost opposite set of properties to those of authoritative discourse. … It is what each person thinks for him–or herself, what ultimately is persuasive to the individual” (8). Freedman and Ball add further that as we come into sustained contact with the discourses of others, these discourses enter our consciousness much as authoritative discourse does. “However, unlike its authoritative cousin, internally persuasive discourse is subject to change and is constantly interacting with our ever-evolving ideologies” (8).

2.3 Narratives of Rethinking

A practical link to the Bakhtinian discourse systems outlined above comes in the form of ‘narratives of rethinking’, a term coined by Knoeller to take into account the way that students test perspectives and recount turning points in their understanding of topics in class discussions. Students convey persuasive appeals to classmates by tracing the process by which one arrives at a particular point of view. Knoeller notes that Bakhtin’s theories of ‘dual voicing’ provide a powerful tool for analysing narratives of rethinking as well as classroom discourse generally. Knoeller’s work suggests that “narratives of rethinking often incorporate one of two types of voicing” (151). One type is textual, where ‘voice’– the language of authors or authorities, whether read verbatim or paraphrased from memory– is central. In the traditional approach to learning in the Chinese context, students rely on a process of memorization to take in the ‘authoritative voice’ of a teacher or prescribed text.

The other type of voicing is termed by Knoeller interactional: “the voices of those actually present and participating in the discussion – such as when voicing recapitulates what students
themselves have already thought and said” (151). Figure 1 illustrates the procedure. As noted by Knoeller, students frequently use ‘voicing’, either spoken or written, to recount a prior position on a topic (perhaps a literature text or a particular theoretical stance on language teaching) to provide a platform for narratives of rethinking.

![Figure 1.](image)

Figure 1.  (Adapted from Knoeller 151)

3 **Rethinking ‘Certainty’ in a Post-Graduate Programme**

The recent challenges brought about by China’s ‘opening up’ have created tensions and uncertainty concerning the effectiveness of existing approaches to developing English major programmes in Chinese EFL settings (Hua; Li and Li; Ouyang). I contend that this situation provides opportunities for research and the implementation of alternative approaches, including approaches based on dialogic perspectives, as a basis for rethinking of established procedures. In particular, when considering the Bakhtinian notion of the ‘authoritative word’ as this applies in the Chinese learning tradition it can be quite culturally confronting but ultimately very rewarding for post-graduate students to have to move to a position which encourages internally persuasive discourse and the practical notion of narratives of re-thinking. In some respects this experience resonates with that of Huhua Ouyang, an expert in English language and culture in China, whose research describes the problems associated with the “highly complex and often dangerous remaking of ideologies and power relations inherent in pedagogical reform” (397).
In view of the foregoing therefore, the identified problem for my research project is the growing concern among Chinese educators and academics relating to the lack of communicative flexibility and effectiveness among English major university graduates at a time of ‘opening-up’ in Chinese society.

For the purpose of the current paper however, I propose the following research question:

From a Bakhtinian perspective of ‘innerly persuasive discourse’ what possibilities are there for developing effective pedagogical outcomes relating to a teaching/learning programme for Chinese post-graduate students?

The methodology is based around the single-case design of the ‘case study’ (Yin 2003: 39-40). Within the category system for single-case designs outlined by Yin, I chose the “revelatory case” (42) because as far as I have been able to determine, the phenomenon being investigated (a Bakhtinian perspective) is relatively new in a Chinese EFL setting. In addition, the methodology seemed to be pertinent because of its ability to address “descriptive questions (what happened) or an explanatory question (how or why did something happen)” (Shavelson and Towne 99). In terms of the research from which the current paper is derived, the case ‘project’ is a dialogic system of interaction based on the following data compilations: journal records from my role as a participant-observer, classroom observations of discussion between student pairs (‘critical-friend’ pairs), semi-structured interviews and selections from “physical artefacts” (Yin 2005: 387) in the form of reflective journals. The ‘operational framework’ (Yin 1999; 2000) which was developed for the case study, is a ‘logic model’ with a specification of a ‘cause-effect-cause-effect’ pattern over time (Wholey; Yin, 2005). This is outlined in Figure 2.

![Logic Model for the Research Project](image-url)

Figure 2. Logic Model for the Research Project
The logic model typically portrays a path of arrows from left to right, representing links between different parts of the process and indicating the development of theory and practice over time. Although not developed in this paper, a feature is the inclusion of “rival explanations” (Yin 1999: 1217) as part of the design to strengthen claims to the legitimacy of the ‘Outcomes’ part of the model.

The role of journals is central to the study and needs to be commented on further. The structure is similar to that presented by Moon (1999; 2004). In working with English language Chinese post-graduate programmes over several years I was increasingly attracted to the use of reflective journals and the way that these have been used by researchers and teachers at various levels as a ‘tool’ to manage thinking and changing perceptions in learning (Dart et.al; Borg; Clarke; Hatton and Smith; McCrindle and Christensen; Moon 1999). In previous years I had gradually introduced the reflective journal to senior undergraduate as well as post-graduate Chinese students as a means for these learners to implement and orchestrate their changing perceptions of thinking. As implied in the logic model (Figure 2), over time the way that I utilise the journal has evolved. Initially, it was implemented simply as a means to summarize content material presented in class sessions. In later years, and particularly in relation to research, the role and function of the journal has been modified to encourage students to utilize the following:

a) graphic organizers: diagram formats which function basically as a semantic network of the material (usually articles) being discussed. A flexible ‘model’ for the procedure was demonstrated at the beginning of each course of study.
b) notes: representing the evolving thinking behind ideas presented in class sessions – written in such a way that is evolving and ‘internally persuasive’.
c) ‘critical friend’ responses: usually in the form of brief annotations added to the notes in the journal as a response to paired discussion. The purpose is to draw attention to weaknesses in the arguments and/or provide alternative suggestions and ideas. This feature of the programme is embodied in the basic sense of ‘tensionality’ within the Bakhtinian ‘centripetal/centrifugal’ meaning outlined in the first part of this paper.

How are the journals dialogical? This occurs in various ways. Rawlins notes that “writing is a social activity seeking to comprehend social activity” (68). Authors engage in the productive tensions of learning through questioning and responding to questions – there are not ready-made answers. Sometimes we discover that we are not asking the most edifying or revealing questions. That is, the answers we discover actually pose better questions.
In previous experiences as a post-graduate teacher I had gradually developed a system of encouraging the development of dialogic ‘tensions’ in the way that I introduced new concepts into courses. I was concerned to create conditions that ‘forced’ students beyond being dependent on a kind of ‘authoritative discourse’ – or ‘prior discourse’ which does not allow for any negotiation, to instead encouraging these students to become involved in Bakhtin’s notion of ‘internally persuasive discourse’. An underlying principle of discourse that is internally persuasive is that the ‘word’ is not final but, like experience itself, is ever incomplete and growing. Journals became an integral part of this process and were catalysts for what Knoeller, terms “narratives of rethinking.” As noted further by Bakhtin: “Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other” (1981: 282).

4 Data from the Programme

The data for this paper are drawn from the ‘voices’ of participating students in the programme consisting of semi-structured interviews as well as samples from their journals. In the main study from which this paper is derived, the collective “mantra” (Yin 2005: 387) conforms to a process of ‘triangulation’ or establishing converging lines of evidence to establish robustness of findings.

For the purposes of this paper I present three examples of data (there are twenty five respondents in the overall research programme). These examples have been chosen to represent a style of thinking which is beyond a ‘surface level’ response and are related to elements of meaning and understanding in terms of the Baktinian dialogic presented in this paper.

4.1 Example No.1

The material for this example is taken from Unit 7 of the post-graduate programme: The Reflective Teacher: Who, What, How and Why. As part of the work in this unit, students were given two texts: a short story entitled The Test by Angelica Gibbs (1940), a story about a young black woman attempting to pass a driving test in America; and the second, a poem, Telephone Conversation by Wole Soyinka about a young black student responding by phone to an advertisement for accommodation in England. Both texts are powerful statements about racism and as such were quite confronting for many of the students in the course. Despite initial reticence, this led to students expressing their evolving interpretations dialogically. From my perspective as a participant-observer I noted a range of responses. One student seemed genuinely puzzled by the conflicts in his thinking and these are expressed in the following statements: “How can we Chinese students be expected to relate to this topic? There is no racism in China” (extract from my journal notes). This response and
the arguments it generated could be regarded as examples of “narratives of rethinking” outlined earlier. Another student in a journal follow-up to this session responded as follows:

We cannot….experience many things, but we can still have the same feelings as the characters in the works (of literature). That is because we can still imagine those things by our own experience and the knowledge we have learnt. If one just reads the words, the lines of the works without thinking and imagining, the works are still works (but) with dead words. But if one reads with imagination, a vivid picture can appear in one’s mind and the same feeling will be experienced by the reader as he/she were the real man who experiences these things. I don’t agree with my classmates (who stated) that: “I am not dark, I don’t have this experience, I cannot imagine.” In fact many readers haven’t experience the things they have been reading….but we can imagine them by our prior experience and knowledge.

In line with a format for graphically constructing a semantic network demonstrated to the students at the beginning of the course unit, and in addition to her journal report, this particular student attempted to illustrate the way that the ‘narrative of rethinking’ worked for her by drawing a series of box-like diagrams to support her struggle with the ideas described in her reflective journal. A revealing feature in the diagram is the addition of ‘portals’ in the second of her box-like structures, each labelled ‘new thoughts’ (see Figure 3). Although students had not been introduced to the theory implicit in Irvine’s statement (noted on the first page of this paper), the conceptual thinking which seems to be present in this diagram is remarkably similar to the ‘partial opening of new understandings’ notion.
A feature of intriguing interest in this example is an annotation beside the diagram (see Figure 3) in which the respondent asks her ‘critical friend’ to ignore the structure which she has created and instead to refer to a revised structure on the next page (Figure 4). She has written as follows:

Please do not waste your time on this page. Because after finishing this page [i.e. Figure 3] I think there is something wrong….I designed another page at the back [i.e. Figure 4]. I keep this page for myself to see how I think about this question and how my thought has been changed. For this can help me in my future study.
Of particular interest is the way that this respondent’s conceptual responses have changed in this diagram. In fact, it might seem that the attempt to present a linear model on the next page of the journal is as a ‘step back’ or reversion to a ‘safer’ stance in this respondent’s thinking. It could be interpreted to mean that the box structure (Figure 3) with its portals, represented a much more holistic, creative reality in her initial thinking. It is perhaps noteworthy that she wants to “keep this page [the box structure] for myself … for this can help me in my future study.” One might speculate that she is on the ‘boundary’ in Bakhtinian theory, where there is a “multivocal interplay between centripetal and centrifugal tendencies” (Baxter and Montgomery 27) and that “the thought we have learnt” will continue to be a stimulus for conceptual development through dialogical stimuli as this student continues her post-graduate programme.

4.2 Example No.2

The second example is taken from Unit 9 in the post-graduate programme, centred around ‘Schema Theory’ in the reading process. In previous post-graduate programmes, students generally had experienced considerable difficulty understanding this concept. This was possibly because I had presented Schema Theory on the basis of ‘authoritative discourse’ (Bakhtin 1981) i.e. that it is an established ‘given’ in the sense outlined earlier in this paper (refer 2.2). I was concerned to give
students time to inductively ‘think’ their way into the concept. The materials used initially consisted of a series of activities based on cartoons and short stories which students were instructed to study, discuss and write about in their reflective journals. Each cartoon (or short story) had the following instruction:

- Look at the cartoon from *China Daily*.
- What do you think was happening in the cartoon?
- Discuss your ideas with your critical friend.
- What do you think was happening in your head as you studied the cartoon and discussed it with your partner?
- Try to draw a diagram of the way that your understanding is developing as you think about the cartoon and discussed it.
- Write about the way that your understanding is developing.

Most students presented adaptations of a ‘semantic network’ structure in their journals to illustrate their thinking development. However, one student went far beyond a simple semantic network and appeared to be struggling with a generalized ‘deduction’ underlying what she perceived to be ‘schema theory’ (refer Figure 5).

The first sketch (‘picture 1’ in Figure 5) is presented as a triangular structure with points A, B and C joined by dotted lines representing the first stage of a linking together of key ideas. The next sketch (‘picture 2’) is quite intriguing, as now the triangular format is surrounded by layers of dotted lines in a topographical format with each of the points (A, B and C) shown as ‘peaks’. These seem to represent her perception of emerging schematic structures. She states: “Those dotted areas are the schemata derived from one’s knowledge or experience. They are hidden in the text, always ready for us to develop the meaning picture” (written notes attached to the sketches). Again, as in the previous example, this response seems to indicate a “partial opening of previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something” (Irvine 1). An interesting feature in the current case is the addition of a further diagram (not shown in this paper) in which the previous triangular structures now have a ‘new element’ – a square with four points. Thus, according to the notes surrounding the diagram, a “new schema is born”. This diagram is free of the topographical-style dotted lines in her previous diagram. Perhaps this represents a sense that there is now a perception of clarity in what ‘schema’ might mean in this student’s thinking.
4.3 Example No.3

The third example is based around an extension of Unit 6: Schema Theory (refer Example No. 2). A short text entitled *Before the Law* by Kafka and a set of instructions were given to students at the beginning of this section of the Schema Theory as follows:

Read the short text by Kafka: *Before the Law.*
When you have finished reading the text, discuss it with your critical friend.
Try to work out what is going on in your head as you read the text and discuss it.
Can you develop a ‘theory’ about what was going on in your head?

The following responses are based on interview transcripts and extracts from reflective journal entries. The particular respondent is a college teacher with several years of teaching experience. However, she found the process of dealing with theory quite difficult at times, basically because, in
In the following interview T = Teacher; S = Student. (Interview conducted in English).

T: So think of schema theory. We tried to do some exercises; one of them was a story by Kafka: Before the Law. How did you feel about this activity?

S: I found the passage really very difficult to understand – even after being explained.

T: Do you think there are still things in your mind about schema theory that you don’t understand. Do you need to dig more deeply again?

S: Yeah I think…Frankly speaking I have never heard of the concept of schema theory – but after the class and after writing the journal I met this…I found the concept….not the concept but the application of schema theory in listening and reading… But it is…schema theory has so many uses.

T: So do you think the journal helped you unlock the secret of understanding schema theory?

S: Yeah. I think in fact writing the reflective journal is a pleasure…so thinking again. So I think if we don’t have the chance to reflect perhaps we cannot understand more, but by reflecting on something again, perhaps we know more.

A key to the interview data is summed up in the phrase “so thinking again.” One aspect that is particularly appealing about Bakhtin’s dialogic theory are his statements relating to how we can engage with multiple levels of dialogue, including internal dialogue with our own system of beliefs as we are challenged with new ideas or by understandings which are different to those we have come to accept. In particular he notes that “an idea begins to live, i.e. to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, and to give birth to new ideas only when it enters into genuine dialogical relations to other, foreign ideas.” (Bahktin 1973: 71). In this regard the student stating that “by reflecting on something again, perhaps we know more” emphasizes the impact of the journal.

This student’s reflective journal is quite revealing. She struggled with the meaning of parts of Before the Law. She noted:

I cannot understand the last sentence: ‘No one but you could gain admittance through the door since the door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it’. I asked ...how to comprehend it. He tells us the person should take the first step to push the door open; otherwise, there’s no possibility of realizing his dream. I relate ___’s understanding of the last sentence to my experience of being a university student. I know that before entering into the threshold of a university, we have to pass different exams. Every exam is like a door. In my opinion, such experiences can provide me with schemata to comprehend the passage. The

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2 Respondents in a research project reported by Marton and Carlsson (1992) also struggled with interpretations of the same story. One student noted: I cannot find the ideas behind, I keep running into contradictions. It was the author’s purpose I think, to make people think, and to arrive at many different solutions when trying to solve the story (p.7).
schemata are from my experience, but it becomes a mental schema. It helps me to understand the implied meaning.

The use of comparison in the extract is an interesting development in this student’s journal. She has used a process described by Taggart and Wilson as “tuning – the refinement of new information to fit an existing schemata” (168) in her thinking about the role of schema. The process of using this kind of ‘reflective journaling’ to explain how her understanding has gradually emerged is a powerful example in the context of the current study. The extract is doubly useful because as noted by Posner, more learning is derived from reflecting on an experience than from the experience itself. “The logs you write, the questions you try to answer, and other activities in which you engage are all merely tools to facilitate reflective thinking about your field experience” (22).

The final entry in this students’ journal states “While processing the ideas in the article (i.e. Kafka’s story), the relevant schemata are stimulated and activated. That is to say, schema is liable to explain something potential, and also modified by new ideas” (journal extract). It is worth noting that this student returned to the section in her journal on ‘schema’ in the final week of the course (some six weeks after the earlier segments recorded above) and wrote “I think I did very well about understanding of schema theory. Perhaps in my later studies, I will find more and more application of schema theory. Also I hope I can do some research about schema theory” (journal extract). A feature of this journal extract for the student is the growing feeling of confidence in understanding concepts such as schema theory. There is a sense in which this reflection, together with her earlier journal responses, resonates with Holquist, perhaps the most prominent exponent of Bakhtin’s thinking, who states “A dialogic world is one in which I can never have my own way completely, and therefore I find myself plunged in constant interaction with others – and with myself. In sum, dialogism is based on the primacy of the social, and the assumption that all meaning is achieved by a struggle” (39).

5 Concluding Comments

I have argued in this paper that the process of helping Chinese students to respond to topics in their post-graduate thinking is related to Bakhtinian notions of ‘ideological becoming’. This may imply straight-forward ‘depth’ of thinking processes well known in Chinese education, but with the added dimension inherent in a ‘dialogism of discourse’ it also involves an expanded view of the possibilities related to conceptual understanding in post-graduate education. Morson, speaking within a largely American context, notes that the range of ‘authoritative’ and ‘innerly persuasive’ discourses appear to be growing along with our cultural diversity” (317). An awareness of this range of discourse types is increasingly the case in Chinese education with ‘opening’ to the outside world. As noted in this paper, within the Chinese post-graduate context in which my research is based, there is growing
awareness of the need for new discourse systems in education, particularly in relation to the training of English major students at university level.

The selections from the case study data outlined in this paper are basically illustrative. The data are presented as examples of ways of thinking which help students develop beyond a ‘singularity of viewpoints’ to those which encourage an emphasis on internally persuasive discourses. Thus, as a teacher-researcher I am intrigued by the possibilities inherent in the ‘opening of portals’ notion put forward by Irvine. However, at an even more comprehensive level I am greatly attracted to Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of ‘ideological becoming’ developed in this paper and which is characterized succinctly in the following statement:

Thus, an active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements…it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social ‘languages’ come to interact with one another.

(282)

The data presented in this paper are a relatively small part of my ongoing research into dialogical procedures developed in relation to the Bakhtinian dialogical system. These examples are by no means final at this stage of the analysis of data, but the procedures and responses have provided initial insights into cognitive and social contexts whereby I am able to construct at least a partial ‘theory’ of internally persuasive discourses about student thinking and learning among Chinese university students. Specifically, Bakhtin articulated what seemed to be happening with this group of students as they engaged with one another’s ‘voices’ (including the voices of reflective journal writing) while they engaged with key topics as they proceeded through their course of study. A final factor that emerges from the selection of data, and one which may prove to be the most enduring in the research, is a perception that “reflective teachers actively, persistently, and carefully consider and reconsider [italics mine] beliefs and practices” (Posner 21).
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