

RE-EXAMINING PERSONAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHING AS UNIVERSITY TEACHER'S SELF *MUHASABAH*: A STORY FROM A DOCTORAL JOURNEY

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Abstract: *In this narrative account of my doctoral journey, I share my story of how I re-examined my personal practical knowledge of teaching in higher education. The research journey took me back to my familiar educational landscape, during which I conducted my fieldwork. It was the time when I was a narrative inquirer, one who embraced the dual role of a critically reflective teacher/lecturer (Brookfield, 1995) and a reflexive researcher (Etherington, 2004). The opportunity to revisit my practice and unpack my teaching with a pair of new eyes had allowed me to confront and challenge my habitual frames of reference and taken-for-granted assumptions (Mezirow, 1997; 2000) about teaching and learning. These were indeed the roots of my puzzle of practice (Russell & Munby, 1991). At the end of my research journey, insights from critical reflections on my personal and professional selves led me to revisit the traditional concept of self muhasabah, in relation to my teaching professionalism. By sharing these episodes from my doctoral journey, I hope to highlight the relevancy of critically reflective practice to self muhasabah in the context of teacher professional development. My learning experience is also an exemplary story that accentuates how such complementary nature of these two concepts can be practically applied in any given educational settings as a mechanism for personal growth and continuing professional development (CPD) among teachers, educators and practitioners.*

Keywords: *Personal Practical Knowledge, Practitioner Research, Narrative Inquiry, Critical Reflective Teacher, Reflexive Researcher, Muhasabah*

And So The Story Begins

I have been teaching in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) since 2001. Over the years, I learned that teaching in the context of higher education does not allow any room for intellectual stagnation. I realise then that continuous personal and professional growth is a lifelong learning process for a university lecturer like me. Obtaining a doctoral degree is considered to be a demand on my career development, but for me pursuing one has always been my personal aspiration. Nevertheless, as I returned to university as a post-graduate student to experience student life all over again, little did I expect that the learning experience during my doctoral journey would have such a profound effect on the way I see my self, personally and professionally.

In this narrative account of my four-year doctoral journey, I present a story that depicts my personal learning experience as a post-graduate research student. My story is based on the chronology of the significant events that occurred along the course of the journey.##My narrative is of three parts. The first part highlights my transformative learning experience during my doctoral journey. The opportunity to study abroad had indeed broaden my horizon of thinking, thus facilitated me to see my teaching practice with a *pair of new eyes*. How I confronted and challenged my “taken-for-granted frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59) about teaching and learning during the course of my research fieldwork are presented in the second section of this paper. I then share the lessons I have learned throughout my intellectual

journey in the final part of my story, particularly on how I revisited the concept of self *muhasabah*.

The Transformative Time

I began my MPhil/PhD program at Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol in October 2006. The inputs from the eight units that I attended for my Master of Philosophy research training had helped to broaden my perspective on various qualitative research methods in social sciences, particularly in the educational context. With an academic background that was strictly confined to the positivist/empiricist paradigm, being introduced to the different “alternative inquiry paradigms” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109) in social sciences research was intellectually stimulating.

Further readings on qualitative research methodology (for example by Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) had not only provided me with new understandings on qualitative inquiries and their designs, but had also made me reflect and re-think about my own proposed PhD research. One particular episode that sparked my interest on qualitative approaches was when I was introduced to an article by Phillion (2002). Having read how she attempted to have better understandings on her own teaching practice, I was struck by seeing how a researcher’s personal thoughts and feelings were allowed to be visible in qualitative research writing. The idea of how a researcher was given the authority to express his or her own personal pronoun, *I* or *me* (Bassey, 1996) in an academic writing was a new discovery for me. It was, in fact, a concept which I thought very appealing.

Discussions with Sheila, my supervisor, and her suggested reading list about this particular genre in educational research, had further ignited my interest to know more. I then became an enthusiast when I came to know that Sheila had already ventured into the similar genre for her doctoral thesis and her other writings (for instance Trahar, 2006a; 2006b). All these early discoveries introduced me to the term “narrative inquiry”, especially from the writings by prominent authors, D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (1990; 1994; 2000). My reading of their books and articles had taught me that personal stories, experiential learning, reflective practice, and narrative thinking, were essential elements that served as potential strategies of inquiries. I learnt that storytelling was a powerful tool for a researcher, especially while he or she “frames the research puzzles, enters the inquiry field, and composes field texts and research texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xiii). Upon reading these materials, I discovered that narrative research and the writings on narrative inquiry were very engaging and powerfully resonating. After all the study of narrative “is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). I could not help but think about and reflect on my own teaching experience when reading how other researchers wrote about theirs. Brought to light was my serious intention of employing narrative inquiry as my research methodology. By employing this particular methodology, I hope to bring in the issues surrounding my professional roles and responsibilities as a university lecturer into my proposed PhD research project. Such awareness marked the beginning of my “transformative time” (Schulte, 2005, p. 31) as a doctoral student.

Indeed, critical reflections on my learning experience as a post-graduate student at the MPhil level resonated with my responsibilities as a university-based teacher educator. While trying to connect my learning process in Bristol to what I was doing so far in all my years of teaching, I was actually confronted with my own “puzzle of practice” (Russell & Munby, 1991, p. 164). Looking back at my practice, I had always been uncertain and doubtful, whether I had done my

best in my attempt to be “a good teacher”. From this inherent puzzle of practice, combined with the insights gained from my personal learning experience, I re-formulated my research puzzle. Specifically, I framed mine as a narrative inquirer’s research into her practice, one that offered the means of making transparent an inquisitive journey towards reframing personal practical knowledge of teaching. Personal practical knowledge according to Connelly and Clandinin (1988) is “a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation” (p. 25). It is “imbued with all the experiences that make up a person’s being; its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of, a person’s experiential history, both personal and professional” (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362). With the intention to re-examine personal practical knowledge of my very own teaching practice, my doctoral journey then brought me back to my familiar educational landscape.

Journey In The Midst

From July to October 2008, I was back in my familiar educational landscape for my research fieldwork – in the university and the Faculty that I belonged to. During the four-month period I revisited my classroom teaching experience and conducted an educational foundation course to a classroom of undergraduate students. It was a crucial process in the course of my research as it allowed me to re-examine the existing knowledge found in my teaching practice - in my past experience and my “present mind and body” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 1). Enthused by my personal learning experience, I attempted to explore the significance of “experiential learning” and “reflections in learning” (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993) and in doing so I incorporated these two concepts in the way I conducted the course I was assigned to. The classroom teaching experience allowed me to identify and scrutinise the root of my uncertainty, doubt and dilemma surrounding my teaching practice that became the foundation of my puzzle of practice. I challenged my habits of mind by embracing myself to the role of a critically reflective teacher/lecturer (Brookfield, 1995). My lecturer/teacher self was not alone while embarking on this fieldwork journey. Travelling along was also my reflexive researcher self (Etherington, 2004) who was convinced that unpacking my very own teaching practice through self-study was one part of the multiple traditions of practitioner research (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Assigning myself to the dual roles and responsibility of a practitioner-researcher during the fieldwork meant that I was working within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space wherein I was located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Realisation towards my puzzle of practice had made me come to the awareness that throughout my years of struggling to be “a good teacher”, I still faced many challenges. This was especially true when I did not receive any formal training in teaching and yet ended up becoming a teacher educator. In truth, I had been secretly dwelling with my struggle to transform my traditional teaching strategy from a “teacher-focused strategy” (Trigwell, Prosser & Taylor, 1994, p. 78) into a “student-centred” approach (Lindblom-Ylänne et al; 2006, p. 286). I did however make several attempts in transforming my traditional teacher/lecturer self into a facilitator to my students. Despite my enthusiasm in incorporating student-centred approach of learning into my teaching strategy, I found that not all students were willing to cooperate and participate. This then made me revert to my traditional approach of lecturing without the fear that by doing so my practice was merely meant for “the transmission of knowledge” (ibid., p. 285).

I have to admit that my preference for lecturing in class had been influenced by my idealistic notion about teaching. It was deeply rooted within the Islamic worldview, one that upholds the

superiority of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and the notability of the pursuit of knowledge. Such notions had been deeply embedded in me, as a person who was born and brought up in a Malay-Muslim culture. I always knew that I was not alone in holding on to such belief, and sharing with me the same notion are the other Malay Muslim academics, such as Tamuri (2007) and Zaini (2009a; 2009b) who regard lecturers as scholars or *mu'allim*, the learned ones, the bearers of responsibility towards acquiring knowledge. For this particular reason, Muslim lecturers, and in this sense, Muslim educationalists in general, are given the trust and accountability for the acquisition and promulgation of knowledge. Such characteristics become the ideal elements to perform the duty as a teacher because in Islam, the teacher "has an ethical duty, i.e. as a *murabbi* (a trainer of souls and personalities) and not only "a transmitter of knowledge" (Tamuri, 2007, p. 376). As teachers to be, I wanted my students to incorporate such concepts while studying this professional course. My hope was they were able to grasp the ideal that to inculcate these values within their selves is extremely important. Upon graduating and taking their positions in schools, as teachers, they should practice the ideals of the Malaysian National Philosophy of Education (NPE), which is based on "the firm belief in and devotion to God" (Ismail et al., 2009, p. 162).

Overwhelmed, at times, by such idealistic view towards knowledge and teaching profession, I believe my past teaching approach had always been one that was considered to be a "teacher-directed" approach (Ramsden, 2003, p. 147). My concept of a good teacher/lecturer was based on the thoughts of how well prepared I was in conducting the lecture. Efficiency in teaching for me meant that I should master the content of the subject matter and that all related information was in my fingertips. I could recall the moment in which I spent a large amount of time and effort in preparing my class material. Admittedly, I was not familiar with the subject matter but having the ideal concepts of being a responsible lecturer, I was determined to master the course content. I was overly occupied with the idea that it was my responsibility to be prepared with all the knowledge in hand. I assumed that it was my obligation to deliver what was best for my students, whom majority were the first year undergraduate students. I tried my best to master all the basic concepts then prepare all the relevant examples to support my lecture, again relying heavily on my references. I continued with my lectures, ever more believing that first year students need to be guided in order to facilitate their understanding. At this time, little did I realise that I was practicing what Ramsden (2003) refers to "teaching as telling or transmission" (p. 108). The opportunity to revisit my practice and unpack my teaching then allowed me to confront and challenge this "habitual frames of reference" and "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Mezirow, 1997; 2000) about my past teaching.

During my fieldwork, I planned and implemented a number of active learning activities. The active learning activities, which were based on the characteristic of cooperative learning, were specifically designed as an attempt to transform my traditional teaching strategy into one that promotes student-centred learning approach. Along with the active learning activities was students' reflective practice towards their learning activities. Students were requested to reflect on their classroom learning experience and to engage in individual reflective journal writing. It was another learning activity that I attempted, as a way of promoting reflective practice among my teacher students. In a way, I listened to Brookfield (1995) when he suggested that I should look into the issues related to my classroom teaching by employing multiple lenses. One of the ways of seeing through another lens was by seriously considering the views and opinions of my students. Learning journals were also the means of gathering students' stories about their personal learning experience. In facilitating students to reflect on and write about their personal classroom experience, I provided an accessible medium for them in expressing their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Each student was expected to send me weekly electronic reports during the

fourteen-week academic session through email. From students' learning journals, I tried to understand their perceptions and expectations towards my classroom teaching and then gained insights into my practice.

Being critical to the class preparation and implementation of my lesson plan for the course had made me start to reconsider my idealistic belief on my practice. However, it was during the time of managing students' weekly learning journals that my feelings and thoughts about my practice had been further challenged. Reading and analysing the manifest and latent contents of each student's journal entry had paved the way towards a new dimension in revising and updating my personal practical knowledge. Indeed, my students' written feedback that was based on their classroom learning experiences had provided me with new lenses through which I progressed in transforming the way of seeing my educational landscape that I thought was so familiar. Truly, I found it propitious to employ and utilise students' weekly journals entries to both aspects of my pedagogical and research knowledge.

After spending hours of reading students' feedback and understanding the underlying messages, I gained new insights on my puzzle of practice. The first thing that came to my knowledge was that I needed to scrutinise my assumptions on my students and their nature of learning. Their journal entries seemed to be an excellent information provider for me, as a teacher/lecturer as well as a researcher. Throughout this process, my teacher/lecturer self was taught to be appreciative towards students' sincere feedback, and at times, bold comments on my classroom approach. Putting aside my immature sense of anguish during the first incidence of receiving several of the students' harsh criticisms towards the course and my teaching style, I realised later that most of what the students had been emailing me were actually constructive opinions.

Examining their entries, I realised then that my students were actually collaborated with me in finding ways of improving my teaching, by assisted me in identifying my strengths and weaknesses in conducting the course. I then became aware that as long as I was willing to accept the contents of each journal openheartedly, I should consider them as just a profusion of students' perceptions and expectations about themselves and their learning. I learned that there were a few potential ones among the fifty-two students in my class who had positive attitudes towards their chosen profession and were willing to embrace teacher education with positive outlooks. There were also those who were sufficiently mature in knowing exactly what they could really expect from their learning process. From these students I gathered inspiring suggestions on how they wanted their classroom learning environment to be. Having examined all these ideas carefully, I found myself realizing how I had always underestimated the first year undergraduate students - their maturity, capabilities and potentials - throughout my previous years of teaching.

Some Lessons Learned

Now that I have reached the end of my doctoral journey, looking back, there are a number of important lessons that I have learned along the way. One of the lessons had taught me that in reframing my personal practical knowledge in teaching, becoming a critically reflective teacher/lecturer allowed me to confront and challenge my assumptions about my teaching approach and my students' learning. The journey had also made me learned to have the sense of "openness and collaboration" (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 1).###Learning to understand how students perceived their prior and present learning experiences facilitated me to revise and expand my knowledge of classroom pedagogy.###As a Malay Muslim practitioner/researcher

such introspection brought me closer to the traditional concept of self *muhasabah*. In the Malay Muslim culture, exercising *muhasabah diri* is the platform for an individual “to review what has been done, to learn what was wrong and what was good for society, to make corrections, and to improve ourselves for the following day” (Rogers, 2001, p. 433). As Carney (1983) highlighted, the concept of *muhasabah* is regarded as “a second order virtue” in Islamic ethics (p. 171). I believe that as a teacher/lecturer and a researcher, this concept is another foundation that serves as my guidance for my teaching profession. This is due to the reason that practising self introspection is considered to be “having a good character” (Zaroug, 1999, p. 61), and thus essential as part of the ethical guidelines for my professional improvement.

Trahar (2007) mentioned that examples of academics who teach in higher educational landscape researching their own practice are rare. My study hence demonstrates that critical examination and reflection on personal practical knowledge of teaching could be an insightful endeavour for practitioners who wish to revise and improve their teaching. For a Malay Muslim teacher/lecturer like me, this academic journey had led me to acknowledge the compatibility between the Western concept of critical reflective practice to the Islamic notion of self *muhasabah*. This study also exemplifies that critical examination or self *muhasabah* into personal practical knowledge of teaching can be part of the practice that promotes personal growth and continuing professional development (CPD) among university academics. Previously, such practice have been widely discussed within the school setting (for example, studies by Clandinin, 1985; Connelly & Clandinin; 1988; Whelan, 1999; Loughran & Russell, 2002). Hence, this suggests that the same practice can be carried out by educators from other educational institutions who are concerned with their teaching professionalism.

My doctoral journey has been one, I believe, to be thought provoking and insightful (see Narina, 2011). I have learned that “the journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in seeing them with new eyes” (Proust, as cited in Freese, 2006, p. 100). Through my story, I hope to pass this message to teachers or educators who are in the pursuit of new knowledge of teaching and learning.

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