

Approaching Connectivity with Professional Journey

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ABSTRACT

The study has been conducted over a period of six months during my participation in a certificate course on enhancing academic practices at the higher education level. The focus of analysis was to understand and analyse issues related to my professional journey of becoming a teacher. This case study discusses that a teacher's engagement in a dialogical self-regulated inquiry is essential and provides a unique mode of teacher development at every stage. The findings indicate that continuous examining my teaching and learning experiences pushed me to re-establish and reaccelerate my journey towards becoming an effective teacher. My analysis suggests that to promote self-inquiry approach relationship between work culture, teaching and professional development support needs to be strengthened in terms of its conduct, quality, purpose and use.

INTRODUCTION

Mythological Approach: Self Inquiry

This case study began with a fundamental question; what constitutes becoming an effective teacher at any level of formal education. The questions engaged me in a self-dialogue through reflective inquiry approach^[1]. My engagement in the self-inquiry indicates that an ongoing professional space within the self and at their workplace where perceptions and practices are discussed, revisited and expended, is crucial to continue with the processes of becoming an effective teacher^[2]. The purpose and use of this professional space is to invite/ generate deeper perspectives and practices to unpack theories and practices of becoming effective teachers.

The theoretical foundation of self-inquiry is based on the assumptions of that individual's engagement in, and commitment to be engaged in critical reflection promote perceptions and practices, as Kemmis & Carr (1986) write: ".a form of research which places control over processes of educational reform in the hands of those involved in the actions". McKernan (1999) states that: "Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the professional is the capacity for self - evaluation and self- improvement through rigorous and systematic research and study of his or her own practice"^[3].

Building on individuals' critical reflection, recent literature suggests that transformation of practice needs engagement and participation in the 'pedagogy of practice'^[4].

Through dialogic engagement and inquiry, academic staff development may be viewed as a space of possibility, a process of becoming, understanding and engaging with teaching and learning in increasingly critical, creative and co constructive ways – pedagogy of practice (cited in Gosling, 2014, p. 21)^[5].

Self-inquiry, individually and or participatory, empowers a teacher and makes them responsible for using professional conversations, within self and/or with community of practice, for understanding strengths and weaknesses of practices, and for accelerating continual learning. Teachers' and/or practitioners engagement in understanding of own practice, where actions and professional justifications are simultaneously attempted, raise their potential to be knowledge producers rather than as knowledge reproducers^[6].

My own involvement in self-inquiry on my activities and various practices helps me to understand the reality of my practice, difficulties and my own contribution to achieve my development in teaching and learning context. As Kemmis and McTaggart (1988a) state^[7].

..self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (p.5).

In this regard, evaluating teaching through the self-inquiry is viewed as substantive rather than technical, academic rather than administrative, analytical and appreciative rather than deficit-based^[8]. Beyond my approach to enhancing content and pedagogy, the self –reflective inquiry provides me to use my feelings, experiences and judgments as a learning web to attempt a journey of learning and unlearning to becoming an effective teacher.

This study was conducted over a period of six months during my participation in a certificate course on enhancing academic practices at the higher education level in UK^[9]. The focus of analysis was to understand and analyses issues related to my professional practice through the evidence gathered from my self-reflexive commentary on various phases of my growth including my participation in the academic practice course. Reflection and analysis of the reflection engaged me in examining my teaching and learning experiences, pushed me to re-establish and reaccelerate my journey towards becoming an effective teacher. In order to gain critical understanding of reflection, various other forms of data such as anecdotes of observations, sample of feedback from colleagues and the tutor were referred in the analysis.

Conceptual Framework: Professional Learning Web

The current literature discusses feedback, self-reflection or peer/ mentor review as an important tool to enhance academic practices at higher education level, proposing that the institutions should include staff development opportunities to encourage and empower continual learning of their staff. The available venues for staff development at the workplace.

– such as conferences, seminars, etc., are valuable opportunities for staff’s learning; however, the most effective learning takes place when they have been provided with a space to reflect and discuss their practices, to create shared meanings, and to develop critical perspectives on their teaching practices in collaborative and non-judgmental settings. The content for such conversations could come from peer review and/ or self-monitoring feedback.

An issue of limited interpretation, however, has also been raised in the literature, where mainly ‘evaluating’ teaching has been misinterpreted by many institutions. In such cases, peer review or self-reflection has been used as a means of evaluating performance instead of developing practices, generating new learning or transforming practices. Elton (1984) suggests that ‘evaluating teaching and assessing teaching are rather two distinct notions, at least, in terms of their purposes, if not in conduct’^[10]. The assessment of teaching is mainly product-oriented and used by externals for teacher appraisal, whereas, the evaluation of teaching is processes-oriented and used by the teachers themselves for their professional growth and development states, It has been very useful to have a fairly impartial and supportive colleague looking at the practice and opening up reflective conversation; however, to achieve its real purpose, the focus should be on development, not on evaluation for the purpose of appraisal.

These theoretical perspectives mainly invite teachers to undertake a self-regulated inquiry towards their development and growth. Research indicates that the teacher transformation involves two continua^[11]. A shift in believing in qualitative view about knowledge instead of quantitative; and change in practice from individualistic and unidirectional to dialogical learning approaches.

Carnell (2007) suggests that transformation of learning is linked to the transformation of teaching. The learner of the 21st Century lives in an information loaded era. Knowledge and information are widely spread and easily accessible through media and technology. Receiving knowledge is not an issue any more for learners; rather, what to select from it has become a challenge. It is important to recognize that a shift in the practices is more important today than ever before. Teachers need to be creative in the design of innovative and active learning approaches, innovative and reflective in their examination of pedagogical practices, and philosophical in developing deeper perspectives of teaching. Indeed, it is also important to recognize that work culture has its own authority to define teaching and learning and, therefore, transformation in practice should be seen as multidimensional processes, and a collaborative process^[12]. To initiate such holistic process, it is important that teaching is recognized as a scholarly work and the notion of evaluation of teaching for appraisal be revisited – work culture should view good teaching as a self-reflective and developmental process, instead of technical, procedure-based activity (Pratt, 1997).

To establish such shift, teachers need a collaborative, supportive and learning culture within and around them so to develop their role and practices as effective teachers’ continuously.

When teachers are committed to the value of change, they give meaning to change. However it is important to recognize here that critical reflection is central to nurturing culture of self-learning within the workplace; also, that a commitment of learning together fosters confidence and promotes trust and compassion through self and mutual dialogue.

My inquiry began with the question that was raised during the course, ‘What is your learning moment?’ How did/ do you learn? Who is an effective teacher? These questions opened up ways for self-reflections on my learning journey – its evolution and issues^[13]. The next section describes and analyses this journey.

Learning Successions: Becoming a Teacher

At schools

My mind gets refreshed and my heart gets filled with respect when I recall my school teachers – in my memories, they are

smiling, speaking softly, showing care and concern to ensure the completion of my work, listening to my problems and encouraging my contributions– I was a shy student and would hardly speak to them, but I was not frightened. I felt my teacher personally connected with me as a person as well as a teacher. I am not sure what specifically they taught me but I could still remember the care and empathy that I demonstrate, as a teacher, were absorbed at very early stage of my learning. My reflection indicates, “Effective teachers are those who are always loved and remembered by their students.” My learning was that a teacher’s attempt to provide a caring and comfortable environment to learners or their understanding, love and respect for learners made them effective teachers.

At higher case

At a later phase, I entered the higher education institute, and experienced a very different learning culture. The teachers were expert of their academic subjects and inspired me with the knowledge they commanded over. I wanted my teachers to listen to me, talk to me, understand my problems, and discuss things with me, but they were busy intellectuals – experts of their field and out of their students’ reach. However, upon my successful completion; I recognized that teachers’ commands over subject knowledge make them confident and successful (Darling-Hammond, 2000)^[8].

As a teacher, early phase

Self-examination of two different learning scenarios led me to establish a value system for becoming a teacher. I joined a secondary school as a mathematics teacher. I loved my students; my students also loved me. In fact, ‘individual attention’, ‘care’, and respect for each student – these had been the distinguishing characteristics of my teaching the textbook knowledge effectively. Teaching had, thus, become a self-rewarding and enjoyable process for me^[14]. Though I was not aware of any theories of transformational teaching, I would still transform my students’ experiences by putting my heart into teaching. Yes, being a teacher at secondary level was the best choice for me.

At a professional institute

At the fourth year of my teaching I joined a Master program in teacher education at the Institute of Education in Pakistan, where I got exposed to new ideas and theories of learning, which were based on the philosophy of ‘social constructivism’ (Vygotsky, 1981; Jaworski, 1994), reflective practice and teachers as change agents^[15]. I got introduced to an active collaborative learning culture, where I was able to share my understanding and perspectives, my disagreements and rationales, and try out innovative ideas and construct theoretical and practical understanding of active learning and effective teaching. My engagement in self- reflection enabled me to learn how to maintain continuity in learning and professional development –thus, learning becomes a lived experience for me^[16].

I, thus, started considering myself as a responsible and independent, active learner becoming an effective teacher. My intellectual horizon, along with my ethical perspectives as teacher, was enriched – I was thrilled, for I was happy to discover that these experiences fit best with my teaching values; I further enhanced my abilities to teach, engaging their hearts and minds. Later, I joined the institute as a Teacher Educator – my practice was transformed further as I worked on ways to transforming my student teachers’ learning so that they could, in turn, impact the students’ learning at large^[17]. A culture of support and inquiry sustained and accelerated my professional growth. My theoretical perspective and professional practices were getting further strengthened; the learning endeavor was more complex and advanced, more stressful and yet enjoyable at the same time, more endless than a project with an end to it.

At teaching board

Later, I joined a private organization abroad as a faculty on secondary teacher education program. The new work culture followed the patterns of practices discussed in research (e.g. Pratt, 1997); a place where the scholars and/ or educators are competent in their specialized field of subject and are very much skilled in developing learning goals and activities (lectures, seminars, assignments, etc.) for their coursework at higher education level. I found myself becoming less connected individually and/or collaboratively in reflecting on how students learn and in what ways does teaching affect their learning, and how the student learning experiences can be enhanced and maximized further at higher education. The existing research highlights that the current practices at many places at higher education do not recognize teaching as a scholarly work; the evaluation of teaching is mainly done/ supervised by administrators and management, who are involved in decision making regarding promotions. The purpose of evaluation of teaching is limited (as discussed in Bruce, 2008) – it is procedural and performance-based rather than self-reflective and development focused.

I did not recognize my teaching practices positively as I would have experienced earlier. Perhaps, it was an issue of my integration within the community of practices that existed at the workplace^[18]. I had come from a background where reflective discourse, collaborative learning and researching practices were the key attributes. Moreover, my lack of involvement in any systematic research projects created a further sense of isolation. I got self-pressurized to rethink my professional identity so as to fit in the workplace cultural norm, and to re-affirm my identity as a member of the local practice rather than an outlier. A clash between my belief and new practices occurred – I stopped enjoying teaching – I wanted to get out of this intellectual and emotional crises, as the teaching appeared to be a burden for me, as portrayed in my reflections below.

My lectures include power-point slides and a small element of group work – but the main focus remains on searching literature around various theories of learning so that I could discuss new perspectives. This is contrary to what I would believe in my previous role. In my earlier teaching practices, my students used to be active participants in their learning; discourse, reflections and collaborations were the means to construct learning. I feel that I am moving backward – limited collaboration and dialogue; teaching ‘content’ than the student. I do not like teaching!

Skemp (1979, p. 33) states, ‘certain actions are reinforced as a result of their outcomes, so learning follows action’^[19]. My analysis is that certain actions are also reinforced as a result of intellectual isolation so teaching follows external forces and the internal fear caused by the quantity of the force. My practice had shifted to mainly being evaluation-driven rather than based on the earlier desire to develop, nurture and transform ideas, perspectives and lives – this created a gap between my practice and sense of fulfillment from that practice. My reflective potential got affected as well. I realized that I had been moving away from an appreciation of practice to deficit based judgments/ perspectives, where reflection also mainly involved comparing my practice to follow the external requirement rather than valuing comparisons and contrasts as an opportunity for professional learning.

Professional Rescue: Re-Transformation

With my participation at the academic enhancing certificate course, after a couple of years of self-confrontation, the desire to reinvent my professional practices and appreciative reflective potential was re-ignited. For me, the course provided a space to generate professional discourse around ways to maximize learning and teaching practices. The underlying principles of the professional discourse and position of participants in that discourse were driven from a social constructivist and co constructivist perspective of learning, based on the primary idea that individuals are rationale human beings and they bring a wealth of experiences (formal and informal) along, and learning is established when they are able to discuss new ideas and relate them to prior learning and real life experiences in an interactive and dialogical environment.

According to Vygotsky, ‘good learning is always in advance of individual development’ and for me it was re-achieved through the ‘pedagogy of practice’^[20]. Learning is a process to leading the change in knowledge, skills, behavior and attitude; working with many other participants from various disciplines and organizations in a collaborative, supportive culture; discussion on deeper learning perspectives and practices; ways to becoming effective teacher – all these connected me back to a community of learning. A community that flourishes effective practices in the classrooms, where teachers and learners are learning partners instead of viewed as two distinct roles; knowledge is not delivered, instead, it is constructed collaboratively. Good teachers extend students’ critical abilities and discussions in their learning with a minimum ‘teacher talk’ (Stephens and Crawley, 1994) – they empower students’ participation and thinking and provide appropriate facilitation to find own answers rather than viewing teacher as the ultimate knowledge authority^[21].

The evolving perspectives and practices/ experiences were not new to me, but my prior knowledge had been frozen – however, my engagement at this course contributed significantly to break my intellectual inertia. I found myself reconnected with the community of learners, and a community of innovative practice and practitioners – we were speaking the reflective language, constructing and co-constructing theories together, in a non-judgmental manner; feedback was given to understand teaching and learning instead of rewarding the performance. I felt rescued professionally!

The examples discussed in this section are taken from the two sessions I taught during the course of this study. Each of them was observed by either a tutor or a colleague to get feedback on teaching practices. Additionally, the examples included in this section involve my reflective notes and student feedback. The students in the class were 28 student teachers from the secondary education program. The participant teachers were from diverse contexts and with diverse teaching background; some with adequate experience and some with no experiences. The session aimed at helping the student teachers examine the pedagogical approaches (such as assessment, discussions in classrooms) and their applicability in the classrooms. My teaching approach was guided by the constructivist and co-constructivist perspectives teaching is a process where knowledge and ideas are mutually constructed with discussions and dialogue; students’ prior learning are mutually respected and utilized to comprehend the new information around them.

My analysis suggests that the feedback received from the course tutor, colleagues and students served as an opportunity to establish additional perspectives towards my professional practice and my confidence towards the pedagogy of innovative teaching. For example, an analysis of my teaching indicates that I mainly critically looked at the areas of development instead of having a balance perspective to judge my practice. The constructive and appreciative elements of my reflective analysis were not very explicit in my analysis of teaching. Perhaps, I needed an external force to bring the appreciative element upfront. Data Source: Self-Professional Conversation.

I asked	I responded
Did I consider and integrate students’ background, learning requirements and	It was difficult to consider each individual background and experiences in planning the session, as they came from different contexts, different background and disciplines –

perspectives?

however, their common goal to becoming a teacher was the major consideration in my planning. I aimed for them to deconstruct their meanings and experiences of assessment and develop theoretical perspectives about how assessment serves the learning processes and learning goals.

Did I use various approaches to maximize learning outcomes?

I designed various active learning activities to provide them with a space to discuss with their fellow students, infer meanings out of them, and relate this learning to construct their assessment practices in their classrooms. However, they did the learning culture let students feel respectable, responsible and independent active learners?

Did I adequately facilitate their understanding of different theories and perspectives on classroom assessment, enabling them to draw upon the notion of assessment for learning topic was very broad and my objectives were rather specific – towards the end, I felt pressure to take them through all the slides (content) I had planned for them – thus, I ended up with the lecture approach.

The student teachers were encouraged to speak, listen to each other, and to develop mutual perspectives. But everybody did not speak; some dominated the discussions in group.

Long term goal: the need to know the student-teachers' perspectives to understand my role in the teaching

The self-conversation indicates that the examination of my teaching was mainly defensive and deficit-based, instead of being appreciative and developmental. My questions indicate my theoretical principles but the response remains more structured than judgmental^[22]. I was constrained by my own professional discomfort. Perhaps, my theoretical perspective and guiding rules were used as prescribed formula to judge my teaching quite narrowly. However, the tutor's feedback on the same lesson provided me with an enhanced understanding and a balanced perspective so as to examine my reflection on practice as well as the practice itself. The tutor's feedback was positive, constructive, appreciative and critical, and provided me with a sense of achievement.

Extracts from the Tutor's Feedback: Data Source: Tutor's post observation comments 03 February 2015.

Even though you have not written the objectives and learning outcomes clearly on this form, during the session you provided the students with a very clear set of objectives and learning outcomes. That is what I am more interested in rather than what you have written here.

I really enjoyed the way you started the class by greeting the students. ...The task you have given to recapitulate the previous session engaged the students very well. This activity provided a firm platform for both you and the students to enter into the key focus of your discussion. The beginning of the discussion was very effective-asking the students to ...I also enjoyed the relaxed nature of your classroom set up. Another key strength of your method of teaching was that you engaged the students throughout by eliciting key points. This created a very positive dialogic environment in the classroom. This enabled the students to come out with very...I think you have very well planned your session to achieve the learning outcomes you have designed.

Professional strengths and self-appreciations were further gained when I received positive feedback from the colleague on my next lesson. I felt rather positive about my practice and its acceptance by the community of practice that I belong to; though the feedback was from one individual, the fear of practice decreased and the sense of isolation started evaporating – to transform into collaboration.

14 Extracts from Peer Observation Feedback: Data Source: Peer Observation Feedback January 27, 2015.

- Friendly and open introduction
- Efficient allocation of students to groups where teacher checks no time wasted.
- Student involvement from outset.
- Teacher highlights ground rules – in effect modeling how this may be done in a classroom.
- Careful timing of components, which ensures effective pace.
- Teacher models effective questioning techniques
- Teacher values student contributions by giving credit in response to points raised.
- Teacher poses challenges to students to encourage creativity.
- Strong evidence of subject/pedagogical knowledge and understanding of teacher.
- Good balance in session with teacher input and student participation effectively shared.
- Teacher exhibits excellent example of modeling the attitudes and actions associated with effective teaching and learning.

With regard to my experiences, I agree with Jones *et al* (2006), 'praise and celebrations are powerful motivators' (p. 10)

and teachers, regardless of range of experiences, must know how well they are doing. Self reflection has its value but peer and mentor feedback is important to affirm and validate self-analysis, and to also provide the teachers with additional perspectives to generate new learning. I found the students' feedback helpful to understand and analyze teaching from their perspectives and learning experiences:

Data source: Student feedback from the Google document, 27 March 2015. I felt that the content that waswas relevant and beneficial to us as teachers, but needed to be delivered in a manner that was more engaging and effective as I noticed that my classmates and I were unfocused at times and distanced from the learning that was ongoing. However, the theorists and research component was very valid and necessary in each session and has filtered into my teaching practice. Obviously, we will need many more sessions and more experience with both these topics to gather a sense of mastery, but perhaps a scenario based approach could be more engaging/effective?

The students' feedback is specific and indicates the lens they used to evaluate teaching, the feedback also reminds me that students are smart enough to examine what their needs are and if teachers fail to respond to their needs, it may not result in meaningful learning outcomes. The analysis suggests that the peer or mentor feedback is essential for faculty development^[23,24]. Through my journey of becoming a teacher, there were various instances when I found myself as static in my professional practice. Despite having a strong moral perspective as teacher and the self-reflective instance, I found myself undoing my pedagogy of practice when interacting with a new working culture/ setup. Research indicates that 'discomfort arises when external culture conflicts with teaching values' (Carnell, 2007) – for me, the discomfort arose when I forced myself to undo what I had learnt over the years as a transformative teacher. I believe in the power of 'self' in changing practices and culture; however, my analysis now suggests that unconsciously my internal power was being dominated by external structures (the debate of agency vs. structure). This indicates that becoming a teacher is not a smooth process – teachers need continual learning spaces at every level regardless of their professional expertise and experiences.

Synthesis of Learning: Connectivity and Sustainability

My analysis suggests that professionals require continuous dialogue with self and others to refresh their perspectives and practices. It is important to indicate here that becoming a teacher is on-going individual as well as collaborative reflective process. However, working in isolation, for a long period, along with other contextual and individual barriers cause an unseen professional inertia; regardless of its length, it could hinder a teacher's professional growth. It is evident from my reflective inquiry that perceptions and practices of a teacher are influenced by their experiences and interactions with the context where teaching and learning take place. Thus, inertia exists in various forms and due to different reasons, and cannot easily be realized or cured unless teachers find a space where practices are shared and discussed openly and critically in a professionally secure environment – it is important to understand that teachers need to refresh their perspectives and practice from time to time. Developing and/ or sustaining effective teaching approaches is both, quite demanding and complex – teachers, regardless of their expertise and experiences, tend to follow a routine of professional practices; sometimes, factors such as work pressure, contextual constraints, and/ or professional isolation could also cause unintentional or unconscious inertia in relation to their professional practice. Regardless of one's reflective approach towards teaching, approaching self-inquiry does not occur automatically.

My analysis suggests that learning (student or teacher) is a universal concept and/or need regardless of their context and the level of their education. Teachers need space, forum and appreciation and deliberation to refresh their perspectives, invent and reinvent their practices, and sustain professional growth. Thus approaching self-inquiry for development involves consistency and continuing interaction between the two components:

- Internal Professional Support
- External Professional Support

Internal support comes from a commitment to continuous examination of beliefs and practices through self-dialogical inquiry. Self-reflective dialogues are guiding principles for individual practice, and that what a teacher reflects influences what the teacher does in the classroom. My experience suggests that despite having strong beliefs and experiences of constructivist teaching approaches, I felt a loss of confidence and control over my teaching practice and started operating in ways that were considered as more important by/ at the workplace. Teachers need external support, too, which could come from their participation in ongoing discourses and professional courses. External conflict and sense of rejection of practices cause isolation and intellectual crises; teachers need to be part of a community of learners, where they can discuss new perspectives of learning and teaching, revisit their existing practices, and find ways to regulate their learning so as to construct effective teaching practices. Teachers need a collaborative culture of learning, where practices are shared and reviewed and co-constructed through and commitment to self-inquiry is enlighten. Carnell (2007) indicates that a culture of support, where people 'speak the same language and share the same belief', gives confidence to accept the resistance, and to sustain professional approach. The clash between internal values and outside expectations causes pressure and, therefore, the teachers at higher education level need to have such professional forums at their workplace or professional courses to question the cultural barriers hindering their practice as well as to strengthen their professional beliefs and practices.

My experience at this course suggests that there were fellow participants who were not aware of active learning approaches and when exposed to those, they started to examine possibilities and challenges^[25]. The staff needs a comprehensive faculty development support mechanism to gain confidence to learn from and with each other. I, thus, conclude that academic teaching and learning are universal concepts regardless of the context and level of teaching.

Transformation of learning perspectives cannot be examined in isolation of transformative practices at all levels – teachers and management. The availability of comprehensive pre- and in-service education programs for individuals, together with professional help and counseling within an organization is, thus, mandatory.

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