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Process and Product: A Depiction of an Action Researcher's Learning from Reflective Writing in an Asian University Setting

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Abstract:

This paper is a scholarly personal narrative (SPN) emerging from an action research cycle. A strategy to deal with a puzzle in the TESOL classroom was found and trialed and its contribution to student success evaluated. However, during the trial, a critical incident occurred. This led to reflections and an emerging understanding regarding the complexity of intercultural communication, and particularly non-verbal paralinguistic features. Through the retrospective analysis of these personal reflections and discussion with students and colleagues, the author gained fresh insights into cultural differences in his educational context and experienced learning to prevent such misinterpretation in the future.

Key Words:

Classroom-centered action research, scholarly personal narrative, intercultural communication.

Introduction

The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSoTL) states that its goal is to foster inquiry and disseminate findings in tertiary settings. This means that a teacher's work is a source for study and that any potentially useful inroads made into the learning/teaching field, if shared for discussion, could be transformed into products inherent in each professional field (Ng and Carney, 2017, p. 2). Brookfield (2013) also suggests that the personal can become worthwhile to the scholarly community as sharing events in a narrative may be unique to the individual but they often contain universal elements (p. 127). Sharing research shifts it from the personal to the social or the commons, a conceptual space for exchange of ideas and community building among education stakeholders (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. 1).

Reflective writing is described in *Me-Search and Re-Search* (2011) by Nash and Bradley as non-traditional and Ng and Carney (2017) state that SPN is little known. However, these authors go on to say that it is an important methodology. Through classroom action research (AR) and reflective writing, teachers can become more conscious of their practice and how to problematize their work (Burns, 2010). However, as Whitehead (2009) points out, the questions we ask about our practice can be influential in what we do (p.110). In other words, classroom research requires careful planning and implementation. Equally, SPN requires rigorous scholarly practice and systematic reflection. It is important that the creative personal narrative enlarges, rather than undermines (Nash, 2004, p. 22) the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Preparing To Write Scholarly Personal Narratives

Critical incidents are known to be contexts for teacher development as they can be the subject for reflection (Griffin, 2003; Tripp, 1993). Describing the critical incident through SPN can help to validate one's teaching as authentic data (Walsh and Mann, 2015; Ng and Carney, 2017). However, one of the conditions that Griffin (2003) brings up for the narrative to be scholarly is the use of a structured or systematic model to scaffold the reflection (ibid). Further, SPN is more readily accepted as scholarly if the writer is guided to use theoretical literature (Brookfield, 2013). I was acutely aware of these points when I chose to construct a reflective instrument based on the Argyris and Schön (1978) Double loop Learning Model to guide my action-reflection cycles. This model comprises a single and double loop. The single loop (Figure 1) facilitates a common action research cycle. At the experience stage, one seeks to make sense of an issue through reflection. Then, at the generalization stage, the practitioner seeks theoretical literature from experts to generate understandings of the situation. Following that, at the testing stage, the teacher conducts an intervention as a possible solution to the issue and examines its efficacy.

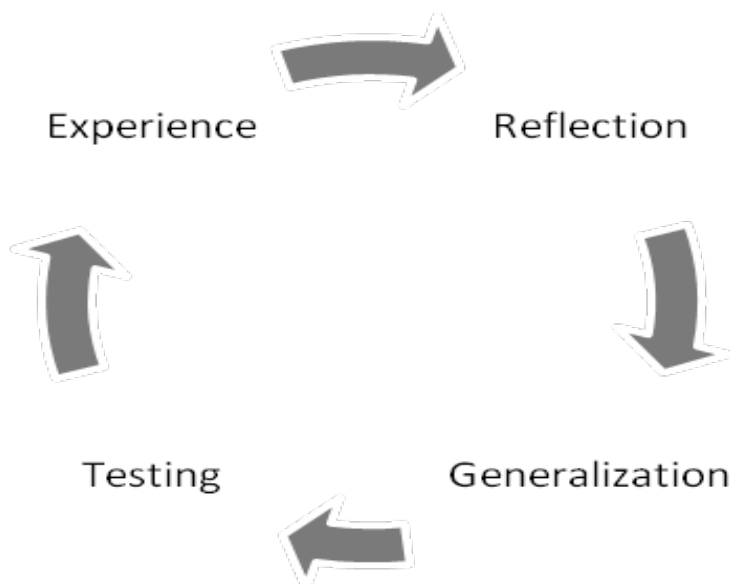


Figure 1: Single loop learning cycle

In contrast, the next cycle, the double loop (Figure 2), goes beyond the action-reflection-intervention stage and is said to be potentially transformative. It may lead a teacher to a deeper understanding of his values and habitual acts. This is said to result in a new understanding and one which might lead to the formulation of a paradigm shift in one's beliefs and practices if one explores the topic and finds other possible reasons for its occurrence and other potential strategies to deal with it. It was this level of deep learning that the research sought to facilitate.

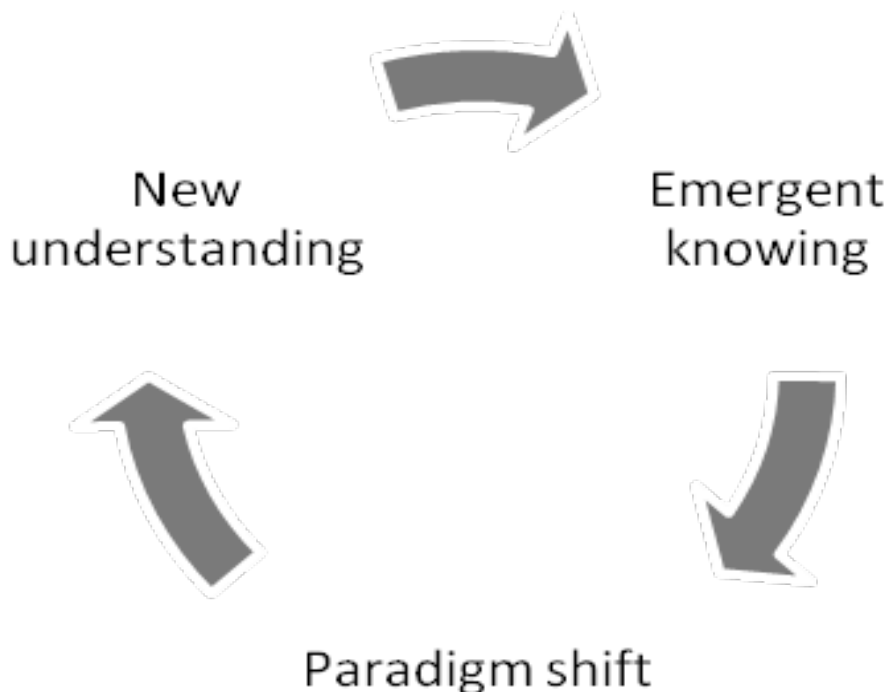


Figure 2: Double loop learning cycle

To systematically operationalize the model by reducing its abstraction, constructs from three other sources were used. The first element is from Daloglu (2002) who has designed a simple but effective framework of questions to facilitate action research projects. These can guide a practitioner through the single learning loop of the model. They are: what do I already know but benefited from observing/ teaching? What did I not know but learnt from my observations/ teaching? What would I like to implement in my own teaching? What are my comments on and reactions to the experiences I have had? The second element is deliberative reflection from Valli (1993). Deliberative reflection refers to using knowledge from the literature in the field to inform practice. This concept can inform the responses to Daloglu's (2002) questions. The final element is from Walker, Whittaker, Stent, Maloor, Moore, Johnston, and Vasireddy (2004) who present several types of linguistic move that can be used to develop meaningful dialogue within a text. As I retrospectively read my research journal postings employing the Daloglu/Valli construct, I embedded comments into the text. These were most commonly probe (asking questions to elicit more information), challenge (questions to encourage a reflector to justify an opinion or argument) to engage with the content of the reflective journal content and to evoke deeper learning. A flow chart representation of the research process is provided below in Figure 3. This presents the way I operationalised the double loop-learning model.

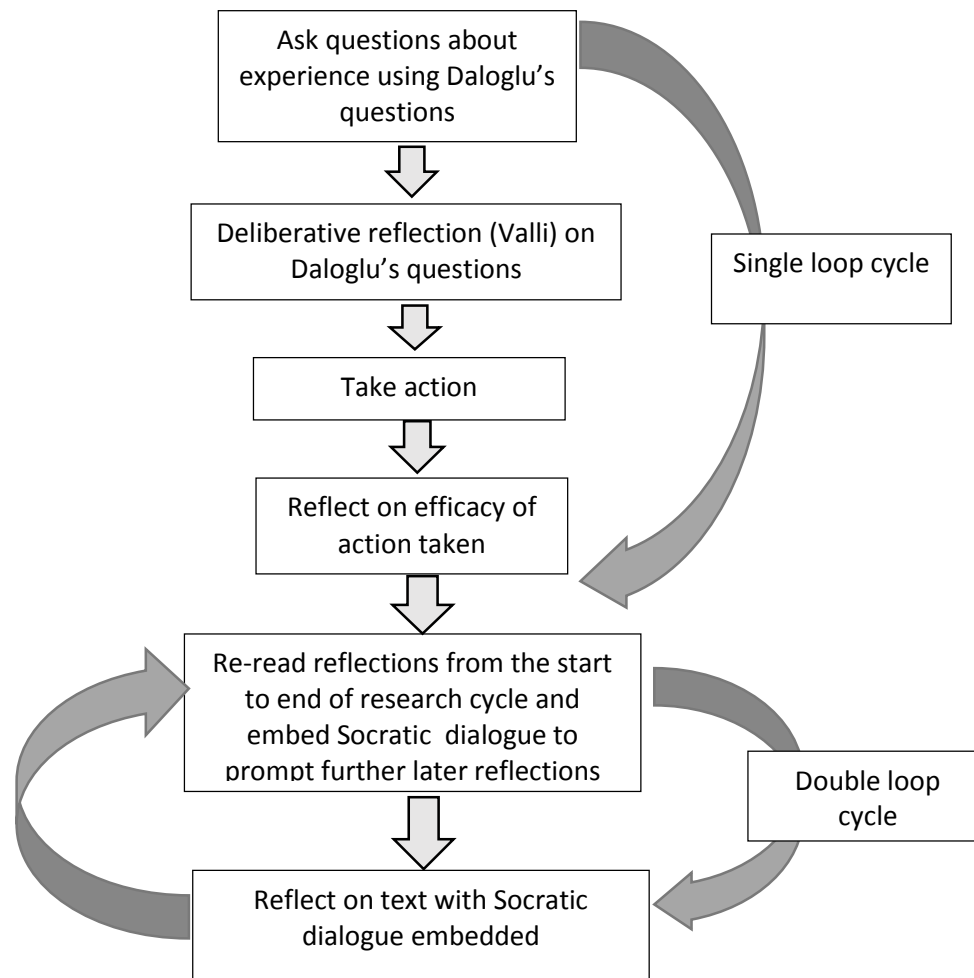


Figure 3: Facilitating the action-reflective cycle to engage in deep learning

The Study

Context

The tutor, the course and the students

During my 20 years as an English language education professional, I have adopted a diverse variety of educational approaches. However, one general rule in my practice is that I try to go beyond the lesson plan and work with the students organically during a session to cater to needs as they arise. This kind of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987) creates a challenging but often more meaningful learning environment. I believe it might be a modus operandi of my tutors from UK universities as I have memories of them doing the same. However, spontaneity may not fit all teachers or students. Moreover, if it is a western characteristic, then as Cameron (2002) notes, it is possible to impose 'Anglo-centric ideologies on genres and styles of communication' (p. 67). This may result in occasions for potential anxiety in the classroom if the culture in which you teach does not share the same pedagogical practices or values.

I teach an English language course in a leading Asian University to students who either use English as the first or second language. The course runs over 12 weeks with approximately 48 contact hours in the classroom. It seeks to develop students' academic persuasive essay (APE) writing skills. There are a variety of Content and Language Integrated courses taught by content specialists to do this. This module is entitled 'Sport and Competition'. Sport is analysed using a multi-disciplinary lens as a cultural global phenomenon. The reading corpus comprises 12 academic journal papers and is selected from diverse academic discourse communities such as the sociology of sport, sport ethics, sport science and sport medicine. The students are first year undergraduates from multiple disciplines including but not restricted to Engineering, Political Science, Economics, Life Sciences, Maths and Law. Although the medium of instruction is English, there tends to be a range in the academic level of English language and academic writing skills. This is one reason why these cross disciplinary programmes have been set up. It is the government's view that all students, no matter their major, have a solid base in English and academic writing skills as well as an ability to express themselves critically over an issue that they find meaningful.

The classroom session that triggered the SPN

One of the tasks building up to the writing of the APE is a summary-reflection of an academic journal article. This acts as one of the formative assignments. To build up to this task, students are taught skills such as annotating readings, using sources to develop an argument, as well as summarizing skills. I found that the usual demonstration of lexical relations such as synonymy and hyponymy was ineffective. What students needed was a strategy for finding the core meaning the author wished to convey, not how to rewrite by avoiding plagiarism. Therefore, to teach summarizing I trialed a new method. I asked students to deconstruct a text into a syllogism. A well-known syllogism is from Aristotle: Men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal. Butt (2003), in *Using Functional Grammar – an Explorer's Guide*, presents it in this way as a theme-rheme analysis (Figure 4):

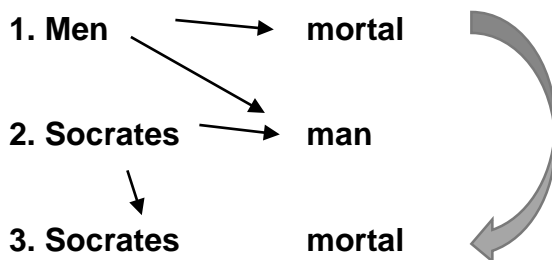


Figure 4: Example syllogism

For the summary of a text, the concluding sentence beginning therefore is the author's thesis. The two claims before this relate to the thesis; they are the conditions that lead to that conclusion. For the teaching of this new method, I presented this syllogism, demonstrated how to deconstruct a text in this way and then asked students in groups to create a syllogism for another text. The groups' findings led to interesting discussions and the use of the syllogism for this purpose proved effective. However, what became the source for an SPN occurred when introducing the syllogism in Figure 4 to the class. This is presented in the findings in section 4.

Confucian educational principles

As the students in my educational context come from Asian backgrounds, mainly immigrant Chinese, there is a strong culture towards Confucian educational principles (Tan, 2015). In western countries, good teaching has been associated with affinity-seeking (Dolin, 1995; Frymier, 1994) and self-disclosure (Sorensen, 1989). However, a Confucian learning environment is said to promote more distance between the teacher and student (Tan, 2015). This distance demonstrates respect for the teacher and is necessary as education is serious and the teacher is the provider of knowledge. Progress is achieved through hard work and, as Tan (2015) explains, students look to the teacher to demonstrate to them how they can achieve progress. This leads to the importance of *guan*, meaning govern in the classroom. Therefore, teacher-controlled and teacher-fronted classrooms are more accepted in Asian contexts. Additionally, a part of Confucian educational principles is that the teacher should act as a role model of a good learner. That is why he has reached his position (Tan, 2015). As Li (2004) explains respect toward knowledge and teachers, who ideally embody the self-perfecting process, is sensible and expected (p.145). As will be presented in the findings, the critical incident evoked much deliberation about whether I was appropriately taking on the teacher role in front of my students, and this became a source for scholarly reflection and intellectual insight.

METHODOLOGY

Approach

SPN combines “intellectual content and honest personal voice” (Nash, 2004, p. 30). Through personal narrative, teachers can create a pool of data which becomes an artefact to be studied (Ng and Carney, 2017). In this study, research journal entries were produced as part of an action research project, or case study, in the way that the process is presented in Figure 3. It was the retrospective reflections answering the prompts and challenges regarding a critical incident that led to this scholarly personal narrative.

One important aspect of this research is that it is a case study and therefore a holistic approach to the study was taken. That is, unlike traditional investigations, doing action research may produce narratives about experiences that might not have been related to the intervention. Although a hypothesis might be tested or a question asked, what can emerge through reflective writing are questions and insights not imagined prior to the research. This closely equates this approach with inquiry-oriented, discovery learning, which has its origins in Bruner (1961). The National Science Foundation (2000) defines inquiry learning as:

An approach to learning that involves a process of exploring the natural or material world, and that leads to asking questions, making discoveries, and rigorously testing those discoveries in the search for new understanding (p. 2).

The new understanding emerging from an expected critical incident is what is being explored in this study.

Data collection

The research took place over 24 weeks or two semesters divided into 2 periods. The first period was conducted over the duration of a module, a period of 12 weeks. During this time, narratives were written about classroom experiences, one of which was the trialing of the syllogism to deconstruct a text. This produced a pool of data of over forty-eight journal reflections of approximately 300–600 words. After that, the texts were re-read on regular occasions and dialogue embedded into these texts for further later readings and retrospective study and reflective writing. Then over a following semester of 12 weeks, the texts were analyzed further in light of the Socratic Dialogue embedded, and literature from the field considered. This period led to deep learning and emerging understandings that are presented in the SPN.

Results: Reflective Practice and Theory Building

The catalyst for the SPN is found in the following journal reflection. This was produced after the session explaining how to use a syllogism to deconstruct a text. I wrote:

I told students we were doing something new to me but something I felt was a powerful tool for summarizing. I showed them an example of the kind of text they need to summarize. We then discussed two different syllogisms of that text and agreed that the second syllogism conveyed the general meaning better ... The class went really well. It really demonstrated how we differently perceive meaning but more importantly, it did help the students to see how best to break the text down into its main meaning.... I'm not sure if everyone liked it when I said "I've never done this before" – there was a little laughter at that.

When I reread this entry, I thought back to how the newness of the activity and sharing honestly with students that this was the first time I was applying it, had caused a momentary malaise. I challenged myself with Socratic Dialogue to think about how I felt when the students had laughed. At the moment of this reaction from students, I had not really had time to think as I was busy presenting the syllogism. However, in hindsight, it became the subject of an SPN.

It has already been stated that western educational systems tend to look positively upon a teacher associated with affinity-seeking (Dolin, 1995; Frymier, 1994) and self-disclosure (Sorensen, 1989). Similarly, Mosston and Ashworth (1990) point out that informing students that you are exploring new strategies with them can have a positive impact on the climate of the classroom. However, this might be different in a Confucian educational setting where the teacher is considered the knower and knowledge source for student progress (Li, 2004; Tan, 2015). In this case, stating that something is new might diminish a teacher's ethos as it might be viewed as unprofessional to trial a new idea in a formal setting, class, rather than before-hand to prepare for the activity. Additionally, it might be deemed unprofessional as the teacher is admitting gaps in his repertoire. Shulman's (1986, 1987) depiction of the habitus of a teacher are well-known. As he observes, teacher knowledge is complex. TESOL teachers must simultaneously demonstrate knowledge of subject matter (linguistics), pedagogy (task management) and context (curriculum and students). It is the melding of these knowledge domains

that is at the heart of teaching (Tsui, 2003, p. 58). I wanted to know if being open about the newness of the activity may have affected my teacher habitus so that I could learn from the experience.

Continuing to reflect on the incident, I also realized that I had demonstrated knowledge by being able to present the concept of the syllogism and then to discuss the students' syllogisms in a spontaneous way in the classroom during the session. The classroom intervention entailed group work and then whole class discussion about which group's syllogism was more appropriate. In this way, students might be concerned about my admission that the strategy was new and being trialed with them rather than during a less formal setting, and therefore not a part of my repertoire, but they would have to agree that I understood my subject and was able to participate in an intellectual conversation. Additionally, by admitting that this was exploratory action research, I was demonstrating a quest for new learning, another important element of the teacher habitus in Confucian philosophy. As noted, Li (2004) points out that the teacher should ideally embody the self-perfecting process (p.145). In other words, I was role modelling a good learner by demonstrating that I was not fearful of trialling new ideas. It was far from what Dewey (1933) terms mental sluggishness.

The question about whether I had presented myself as a scholarly, effective teacher led to scholarly inquiry. Van Dam (2002, p. 238) explains how the classroom has multiple interdependent systems, including non-verbal paralinguistic systems. Features, such as laughter, can be important and liable to misinterpretation if the cultural setting is new to stakeholders. Due to the hierarchy between the teacher and students, laughter of the kind I interpreted might lead to a face-threatening situation (Goffman, 1967). Face is the identity that we have created and seek to maintain in our social interactions. Individuals are emotionally attached to the status that their face proffers them and others cooperate to maintain each other's faces using politeness (Goffman, 1967). However, face can also be lost through social interaction and, as Yutang (1935) and Agassi and Jarvie (1969) explain, this loss of face is synonymous with a loss of dignity.

At this stage, I asked local students and colleagues their interpretation of this moment in class. Did they think it was a loss of face? The responses that I received were uniform throughout. It emerged that the students' laughter was most probably due to a form of nervousness, not judgement. After learning that they would be subject to the trialling of a new strategy, they may have felt pressured to make the intervention succeed. They most likely felt responsible that in the case of failure, the cause might be due to their incompetence, not mine. This was a completely unpredicted explanation and one which led to further reading and a new understanding of differences in sociocultural norms.

Intercultural phenomena in the form of non-verbal features, such as laughter in the classroom, can have diverse meanings. In a paper of pragmatics and sociocultural distinctions between cultures in the classroom, Gelb (2012) discusses the presence of nervous laughter. She states:

When she [the teacher] calls on the international students directly, some of them respond with nervous laughter, blushing and/or averted eyes. Others remain stone-faced and silent (p. 2).

This form of laughter is, according to these scholars, common among Asian students when asked unexpectedly to do something in a public sphere. Being asked to perform spontaneously with the possibility that what you do is not appropriate is cited as a source of anxiety by He (2013) who states, Chinese students:

Often do not regard errors as a natural part of the FL [foreign language] learning, but as a threat to their image and a source of negative evaluations either from the teacher or their peers (p.347).

Although this event occurred in Singapore, not China, most of the students on the course were of Chinese origin with past generations of immigrant Chinese travelling there during the English colonialization period.

Being knowledgeable about meanings of this kind can help to navigate common miscommunications of this nature. To create a culturally-friendly awareness, it is important to find out about and critically evaluate cultural characteristics of the people in a new context to develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997). As Samovar et al. (2010,) observe, awareness of difference fosters feelings of membership and inclusion (p. 351). If I had known that I was pressuring the students, I could, with hindsight, have avoided this situation by first emailing the group to explain what we would do during that class to provide them time to find out about the syllogism first.

Conclusion

To conclude, as a teacher researcher, this incident has led to subject matter reading and teacher identity development as well as an emerging and developing understanding of a particular educational context. Following the work of Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997) in the scholarship of teaching and learning, it is important to realise which opportunities can be taken for learning from every scholarly study (p. 35). It is hoped that this paper will be useful to other scholar-teachers on two principle levels. First, the reflective process has been outlined (see Figure 3) and this should be transferrable to other research contexts. Second, the author has shared insight into sociocultural difference between a western teacher and Singaporean students. This has been presented to demonstrate the importance of becoming fully aware of local educational contexts to prevent such misinterpretations.

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