

Reflective Practices as a Means to Improve Teaching

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ABSTRACT

William Arthur Ward wrote, “The mediocre teacher tells, The good teacher explains, The superior teacher demonstrates, and The great teacher inspires”. As a teacher, our secret wish is to inspire because teachers can change lives, both positively, and negatively. It is the former that as teachers, we hope to deliver. Nonetheless, studies show that teachers rarely indulge in professional training to upgrade their teaching skills because of various time-consuming responsibilities. Likewise, there has been little research done to successfully identify that teaching academics strive their best to teach well, despite most universities stating the value of teaching as utmost in their mission and vision. In this paper, I propose that teaching quality can be upgraded through reflective practices. Upon reflection, good teachers will be able to find ways to enhance their teaching quality, whether in self-development, material enhancement, class management, student rapport or achieving the learning outcomes. Reflections allow us to ponder and to understand our actions, and others’ behaviours; reflections also allow us to assess and evaluate prior occurrences and problems, hence, the possibility to formulate solutions. The insights we gain from reflective practices can improve our lives in many ways, and most of all in the work we do as teachers, thereby enhancing our own teaching practices, student quality and nation development.

KEY WORDS: Learning; adult students; reflection; teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important resource for any country because good quality education can change a country’s human capital by increasing the people’s knowledge, skills and competencies, thereby elevating the country’s quality of life and economy. Every country listed on the world map aims to offer its people the highest quality of education it can afford because education is the primary goal of every individual, starting from childhood to adulthood (Jenssen & Engesbak, 1994). Good education empowers the individual; it can transform the individual into becoming self-sufficient, self-reliant, productive, and a contributing member of the society in which he/she lives. Foshay (1991) asserted that education helps the individual to fully realise his/her full potentials. Through education one develops one’s intellect, sense of critical thinking, maturity, insights as well as problem solving skills, and creativity. Margaret Ammons, the Associate Secretary of ASCD, was also reported to have said, “The purpose of education has changed, from that of producing a literate society to that of producing a learning society” (Ammons, Educational Leadership, October 1964). In fact, many countries and leaders are so aware of the importance of education in enhancing the country’s development that huge amounts of funds are often set aside for education programmes.

The concept of education is varied, depending on contexts (Jenssen & Engesbak, 1994), but taking the idea of formal education as one which begins at school, it can thus be seen that education begins with teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Teaching and learning is a process

where the teacher teaches, and the learners learn, traditionally. But teaching and learning is a cyclical process. It not only involves the teachers and the learners, it also involves many other variables, such as the learning materials, the classroom, the learning environment, other stakeholders, government policies and the teacher's own philosophy about teaching (Borko, 2004). In the classroom setting, teaching and learning involves the teachers and the learners that is their physiological make-up, their psychological preparedness, their economic means, their current knowledge, their physical ability and so on (Dobmeier & Moran, 2008). Next is the condition of the classroom – how small or big the room is, the condition of the chairs and tables, or the cleanliness of the place. All of these factors can affect teaching and learning because they interact with each other to impact on the teaching and learning process, both on the teacher as well as the learners (Rocco & Smith, 2006). Ultimately, these factors affect the quality of the teaching, and the learners' ability to acquire new knowledge, behaviours and skills, all of which would contribute to their learning experiences, which would eventually shape their attitude, beliefs, values, skills, competencies and potentials (<http://vikaspedia.in/education/teachers-corner/teaching-and-learning>). This outcome of education is important for our country because education can transform an underdeveloped country to become a developed country, with technology advancement, economic progress, and world-class citizens. However, to do that, we need great teachers because teachers can contribute towards nation building by teaching well, if not by guiding their students with excellence (Hirah-Pasek & Golinkskoff, 2016).

Therefore, as teachers, we must aim to focus our attention on the Teaching and Learning process involved by constantly thinking of how we can improve teaching and learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). One way to do this is through conducting research on one's own teaching process through reflective practices (Webster-Wright, 2013).

Without doubt, the insights we gain through reflecting on our own experiences and that of our learners, can help us as teachers (Ronfelt, Farmer, & McQueen, 2015), to develop better techniques and strategies for improving on the quality of our teaching, thereby adding value to the education that the younger generation acquires. In that regard, this paper aims to shed some insights into how reflective practices can change the way we view our learners. It is an approach that is rarely practised by teachers because it is a mindful activity that requires the individual to do nothing else but to just think and evaluate. Despite its good benefits, reflective practices are seldom engaged because teachers are busy. Nevertheless, it should be the aim of every teacher. The reason is because by engaging in reflective practices, teachers become more aware of their own behaviours and practices (Lala & Priluck, 2011). The inward mechanism which teachers use to review their daily actions can help the teachers concerned to do the appropriate thing, i.e., to 'right what was not right' and to do something that 'could be better'. In that regard, it is hoped that the reflective practices can be introduced as one source of professional development for teachers and academicians alike.

METHOD

This paper was derived from my personal experiences. I had conducted two workshops on Teaching of English as a Second Official Language (TESOL) for participants who wanted to acquire a world-recognised degree from the United Kingdom (UK) and to work as English teachers throughout the world. Each of these workshops were for five days. These workshops were self-financed programmes, and they have been organised throughout the world for interested participants. I served for one institution as a facilitator conducting such workshops.

The main techniques I used to capture the teaching and learning experiences from these workshops were by writing about these observations into a journal. These observations encompassed my own interactions with the students, and my own observations of their attitudes and behaviours during the duration of the five days of interaction, for each workshop. I also verified my observations and journal entries with a colleague who was also present at the workshop to oversee the entire event.

From my entries of the interactions and observations, I then began to reflect on the events more deeply. The reflections occurred at the end of each workshop. In general, I discussed what I had observed with the colleague, as a measure to ensure that I had not been biased with my own observations. Nonetheless, this reflection was made more meaningful after I had conducted my second workshop, which was about three months apart from the first workshop. Naturally, the comparison between both workshops were more evident due to some unpleasant episodes of events which involved the students from the second workshop. In my reflections, I wrote about the events and my own observations. I then pondered over the events internally, asking myself questions, and making attempts to search for the reasonable answers which could be plausible enough to support what I thought about those occasions which had transpired. As I reflected, I began documenting my own feelings, which were a mixture of happy, sad, frustrated, joyful, disappointed, thankful, and grateful emotions. The process of thinking, and asking myself questions, and then reading up my journal entries again to detect my own doubts and comparing these with the available literature made me validate my own analysis. Then I conferred these findings of mine with my colleague who had been present in the two workshops. The more we discussed, and the more she agreed with me, the less doubtful I was with my own analysis. This helped me to further confirm my own analysis so as to ensure that I was not biased.

Students for the TESOL workshop

Two groups of students were involved. One group was from the Philippines and the other group was from Malaysia. All were Christians and both groups had almost the same number of adult students attending the

workshop, each workshop was about three months apart from each other. One was held in Manila, the Philippines, and the other was conducted in Penang, Malaysia.

Workshop 1 - students from the Philippines

This group comprised 28 adult students, with almost equal number of males and females from Manila, the Philippines. All were Christians and majority were pastors or the wives or children of pastors serving in churches in the poorer parts of the district of Quezon City. Four of the female participants were teachers, one from a kindergarten, one from the primary school, one from the secondary school, and one from a college. Two of the female participants were paraplegics and one female participant was a radio announcer for a children's programme. Their ages ranged from 18 to 65, with about 35% (ten of them) below 35 years old, 7% (two of them) being 65 years old, and the balance of 58% (or sixteen of them) above 35 years. Only two of them had attended college. Being Filipinos, they were extremely friendly and gregarious; they were also musically inclined because they liked to dance and sing during the break sessions of the five-day workshop. However, most were below the average income group, hence their financial status was not extremely stable. Nevertheless, most had been dressed in simple and inexpensive attires, were modest and humble in their behaviour, and timid when it came to communicating in class formally. I sensed this from the way they kept their space with me, talked to me, treated me with affinity, and the approach they used to ask me personal questions. According to my own assessment of the Filipino participants, as an English language teacher of more than 30 years, I would rank their English language proficiency to be at the lower level of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) band, A1, A2 to B1. Two could be considered to be at the B2 to C1 level. Some of these participants have had some ministry exposure to foreign countries, and some had not lived overseas before. Their participation in the TESOL workshop was mainly sponsored by their churches except for two who paid their own fees. All these 28 participants asked few questions during class, possibly because the contents of the workshop were above their understanding, but they all worked very well as groups. They each seemed to show great support for each other in the way they approached their assignments as a team. They were also very friendly and warm with me.

Workshop 2 - students from Malaysia

Similar to the above group of students, all the 30 participants who attended the workshop held in Penang were Christians. They were Malaysian Chinese and their ages ranged from 25 to 65 with only two being 25 years old, and recently graduated from two local universities. About 75% of these adult students have university qualifications, whether local or abroad, and almost all, except for three pastors, held professional occupations such as human resource managers, engineers, microbiologist, artists, a Chinese medical practitioner, and educationists. Some were based internationally, some locally, and some were about to be posted to their new postings to a foreign country. In this regard, their economic status was above average.

I gathered this based on my conversations with them, their professions, the way they were attired, the cars they drove, the places they lived, and also because their participation at the workshop was self-sponsored mainly, except for two who were sponsored by their churches. Almost all of them had a good grasp of the English proficiency, particularly in their written language, hence were in the C1 and C2 level mainly, except for a few who were in the B2 level. Although they were adults, they were extremely competitive; they asked a lot of questions pertaining to their assignments, and the grades they would acquire for passing the assignments (a total of five). They were also very serious about their attendance in the workshop, no one was ever absent in the five-day workshop, and if one had to leave early, he/she would always inform me. Based on my observations of their interactions with each other, and with me as the facilitator, I noticed that they were restless, serious, less friendly, more private and less inclined towards knowing more about me, unlike the Filipino students. They were more inclined towards completing their assignments well and getting good grades.

RESULTS

Events leading to the reflective practices

The events that led me to apply my reflective practices (Webster-Wright, 2013). and to ask myself how best to disseminate my knowledge to these students were triggered by the unacceptable behaviours of the students from workshop 2. First and foremost, they complained about my colleague's poor command of the English language. This was conveyed to me by my colleague. Several unkind remarks were made about the way she used English, in writing to me in subsequent interactions with me. Then they complained about the TESOL programme which did not have the relevant and accessible references for them to refer. They also complained about the assignments being too long and too difficult (Weisul, 2011). and they criticized the time span given to them to complete their assignments. They also had other issues about the programme such as workload, references, websites, vague instructions and so on. Although they did not have any complaints about me personally as the facilitator, they would text me personally about their individual requests pertaining to their assignments. This practice involved almost half of the class of participants, most of whom expected me to have the answers to their queries, and to be at their beck and call for an entire week. As a professional, I have had the experience of dealing with fussy adult learners; I also have the skills to disseminate my information to them appropriately. I entertained their individual requests fairly well until more and more texted me on an individual basis on inquiries, without much respect. They were texting me as if I was an unknown, without any formal form of address. They asked for details, they revealed their dissatisfactions with the programme and they all wanted an immediate answer from me. Out of disgust at their demands, I consulted with my colleague about this irregular practice. She further verified my observations of the rude, demanding, haughty and competitive learners, and their communication style.

Further to their imposition on my time and privacy, I also thought that they were being extremely demanding when they asked me for information which I should not disclose, such as, what their marks were like, did they pass, what can they do to get a better grade (this is after the assignments were submitted). Then they began to make their complaints about the programme which should have been stated in the evaluation forms, and not to me, the facilitator.

Where I liked the humble and modest attitude of the Filipino students, I was disgusted with the 'demanding' attitude of the Malaysian adult learners. Although one or two were grateful for my assistance when they texted me personally, the others were disrespectful. I understood their anxiety as students, and I was willing to assist since I was in the position to guide them in their assignments which were to be examined by the UK examiners. Nonetheless, when I noted how they were imposing on me, and taking my time for granted, I decided to refrain from lending them a hand. I further consulted my colleague on this decision of mine, and she totally agreed with me about their behaviour and bad attitudes. Thus, she supported my decision.

In comparison, the Filipino adult learners in workshop one were not only modest, kind and accommodating, they were willing to learn, hence much easier to share knowledge and information with them, Unlike the competitive Malaysian adult learners, they were tensed too but not with their grades, rather with how they could tackle their assignments. In this regard, I would describe them as more relaxed, more reticent, more unassuming, and more absorbent. They were taking in the information well, ready to learn and gain more. Although they hardly ask questions, they were more fun to teach because they sang, they danced, they chatted with me like friends, and they even asked for advice to talk well and dress well.

My verdict of the adult learners from Malaysia was that they were opinionated, difficult, interrogative, demanding, distant, individualistic, and competitive and even neurotic. Every few minutes, there was a hand asking about something, as if they needed individual attention from me, and they did not hide this fact. Because they were demanding and neurotic, I also held back my answers, and made them do more research for their assignments. I was also more defensive, distant and hesitant as I tried to keep my distance from them. This is where the negative attracted the negative vibrations. Naturally their attitude and behaviour also put a lot of pressure on me as I had to find very valid answers to justify why certain things needed to be done the way they should be done. I also had to be extra cautious with my words so as to be less committal in whatever my responses were. During our correspondence, I also had to text in proper English so that they would not have any reason to be judgemental about my personal and professional quality. Over the five days, I was not relaxed nor free with my nerves because they expected a lot from me every minutes of the schedule.

Reflections

I reflected on my attitude. I asked myself why I was more irritated with the students from workshop 2 and I realised that I was also at fault. I had allowed myself to be consumed by the students' behaviour, thereby losing my fluidity as the teacher who could have managed her class with better techniques. I had allowed myself to be defensive because of their educational background and their social status. I lost my own identity as a teacher who could inspire the students when I forgot what I was supposed to do.

It was not appropriate that I treated the Filipino students in an easy way, giving them all the responses which they needed for their assignments just because I thought they were deprived. In this way, I had crippled them. I should have also allowed them to learn more the harder way through their own research methods. They would have learnt more than I could have shared with them. They should have been given opportunities to be self-sufficient in order to understand the assignment questions.

As for the Malaysian students in workshop 2, I should have welcomed their critical attitudes because that is what our students should be – critical and not just accepting. I also realised I had treated them like students, forgetting that I should have asked them how they wanted to be treated in the class. Perhaps, with their diverse backgrounds, I could even use some of their expertise for my workshops. I may even have positioned myself as one of them to observe why their demands were so critical. There could be reasons about their nature of learning which I had closed my own attention due to my own attitude.

CONCLUSION

All lecturers who are also teachers should attend professional development training so as to upgrade themselves in various ways such as learning to be a better individual, a better teacher of the new millennium, and to be creative and flexible so as to accommodate to changes happening within the society. As teachers, we should give students what they want and not what we want because information can be found anywhere. If we persevere to give them information which can be found everywhere, then our role as a facilitator may be redundant. Nonetheless, our performance as a role model, sharing our philosophy and our soft skills as communicators within the classroom setting should be skills or strategies which they can absorb for their future betterment. As teachers of the new millennium, we do need to build student-rapport, accept student diversity, and student differences, as well as learn about inclusion and humility in learning.

As a modern society transformed by globalisation and technology advancement, our society needs a higher quality of teaching and learning environment. To accomplish that, teachers absolutely need to be equipped with a great deal of knowledge and skills both for disseminating information, for teaching and learning, and also for assessment practices.

As teachers we should always remember that teacher development is a continuous process that helps to advance teacher skills, teacher knowledge, teacher proficiency and knowledge, all of which can improve our students' learning. Studies (Freiberg et al., 195, Omoteso and Samudara, 2011; Stronge et al., 2011, Stronge et al., 2008) have shown that when teachers are effective classroom managers, their students also achieve better levels of accomplishments, and they show a higher interest in learning (Kunter et al., 2007). Since classroom management is an essential skill for teacher education and teacher professional development, teachers must always strive to maintain and keep their level of knowledge to be up to date so that they can deliver quality teaching (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Pianta, 1999).

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