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Multilayered Reflections of a Social Justice Bricoleur: Becoming More Purposeful in My Postgraduate Pedagogy

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Abstract

The aim of this narrative inquiry self-study project was to become more purposeful as a change agent in my postgraduate pedagogy. My objective was three-fold: I had a social justice agenda and also wanted to improve my pedagogy and my students' learning. My reflective pedagogic approach was designed to practice culturally responsive pedagogy and critical pedagogy from which I and my participant students would benefit. I practised reflective pedagogy and also asked that the students reflect on their teaching and learning experiences inside and outside of my lectures; a colleague who served as a critical friend conducted a peer-review exercise. My findings were that through multilayered analysis of my lecture reflections from previous years, my 2016 reflections, my students' reflections of my pedagogy and of their teaching and learning outside of my lecture, as well as the feedback from my critical friend, I was able to consider the nuances of the different voices and experiences and to adapt my practice in response to the needs of the students and their lived experiences.

Keywords: reflective practice, purposeful pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, critical pedagogy, multilayered analysis

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Introduction

I am a white, middle-aged South African woman who started teaching 33 years ago as a secondary school teacher of English and, in the ensuing years, I have held various positions in the field of English education. I am currently an English teacher educator and have lectured a postgraduate language honours module at a South African university for five years from 2012–2016. When I was first approached about teaching the group I had the thought, “Am I able to teach honours students?” For the first three years, I shared the module with another lecturer and we each took responsibility for six

weeks of the 12-week course. For the past two years, I have been responsible for the module in its entirety, which includes developing the teaching and learning content as well as the coordination of the module. In my planning for 2014 and 2015, I was considering possibilities for *purposeful pedagogies* which, according to Samaras (2011), are “pedagogical strategies generated from your noticing” in your teaching (p. 137). However, I realised that I was scratching the surface of the possibilities that were presenting themselves and that I had effected very few changes before 2016, which I felt meant that I was not yet enacting purposeful pedagogies.

In this article, which draws on my doctoral inquiry into my own pedagogy as an English teacher educator (Campbell, 2017), I explore how I used multilayered pedagogic reflection in a language in education honours classroom to consider macro and micro issues within South African language classrooms.¹ My aim was to enact critical pedagogy wherein education is understood in its social and political context (Giroux, 1988) and through which I could become culturally relevant in my practice as I began to understand the cultural capital that the students brought to the lectures.

Methodology

In this study, I viewed myself as a bricoleur because I “used research methods actively rather than passively as I actively constructed research methods from the tools at hand rather than passively receiving the ‘correct’ universally applicable methodologies” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 324). I employed numerous techniques that drew on narrative inquiry and self-study methodologies and was thus generating field texts through methodological bricolage (Kincheloe, 2005).

In what follows, I explain my understanding of self-study and narrative inquiry with specific reference to the aspects of these methodological approaches that I drew together. Pithouse (2011) identified self-study as “teachers and teacher educators examining their own teaching to improve their practice” and narrative inquiry “as a way of making sense of the lived experiences of teachers, learners and researchers in educational settings” (p. 178). As Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) explained, “self-study can be narrative when it follows narrative strategies” (p. 19). Thus, narrative inquiry and self-study can work hand in hand, and this becomes clear in Pinnegar and Hamilton’s (2009) observation that, in recalling our personal practical knowledge, we will be telling, reliving, and retelling stories of lived experiences (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) which is what I and my students were doing in the study.

The method that I employed in recalling personal practical knowledge was to reflect on my teaching and learning experiences and I asked that the students do the same. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that in recalling memories from the past, we are bringing them forward into the present and, in recounting these stories, there is a shift as we find a new place for them in our lived experiences. Kitchen (2009) described this process of narrative inquiry as the “study of how people make meaning from experience and telling or collecting stories. Collecting stories is the beginning of the process but it is through the multidimensional exploration of these stories that narrative knowledge emerges” (p. 37).

¹ In terms of procedural ethics, the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University where I studied provided approval for ethical clearance (Protocol Reference Number: HSS/ 0476/ 014D). Gatekeeper permission was sought from the cluster leader, and permission was granted to conduct the research in the cluster. It was easy to get access to the students given that I taught all of them, and they were asked to sign a consent form. I assured them that those to whose work I referred or those who chose to participate in discussions with me and their peers were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All participating students signed letters of consent and read what I have written in order to confirm that it is a true representation.

Given that I collected stories through my reflections, these explorations were key to making my practice more culturally relevant and, in bringing my lecture reflections forward into the future, I was going backward, forward, inward, and outward, which is what a narrative inquirer does (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I was encouraging my students to do the same when I requested that they reflect on their teaching and learning experiences. However, it is not enough to reflect and explore stories that emerge from these inward, outward, backward, and forward musings. I needed to act on what was revealed and in doing so, my pedagogy became more responsive and relevant to the students' contexts. To do this is in line with what Schon (1987) referred to as *reflection-on-action*, which is the phase of reflective practice wherein one thinks about the action, talks about it, and then makes changes. Together with *reflection-in-action*, reflection-on-action involves the modification of one's pedagogic practices in order to benefit the students. The students' reflections were also taken into account in this reflection-on-action stage because reflection is not limited to individual internal exploration but includes the social aspect of interaction that is referred to as collaborative reflection (Farrell, 1999; Mede, 2010).

During my backward, forward, inward, and outward musings, I worked with participants who were the 2015 and 2016 honours students. In 2015, there were 11 participants in the group and in 2016, there were 16 participants. I worked far more closely with the 2016 students because it was during this year that I was reflecting on the 2015 module and effecting changes every week. This group comprised of five black men, seven black women, and four Indian women. South African schools are categorised according to quantiles based on a range of criteria. The participants all taught English as a second language in South African schools that fall within Quantiles 1, 2, and 3 meaning, that they are amongst the poorest schools in the country and serve economically disadvantaged communities. All participants stated that the majority of their learners battle to understand English and to relate to the prescribed content.

A colleague, who is also in English education and who has served as my critical friend for a number of years and was instrumental in assisting me as I attempted to make my pedagogy more purposeful, also served as a participant. We share similar research interests and I trust her advice. The field texts composed to illuminate the possibilities for purposeful pedagogy with my 2016 honours students were my written lecture reflections, narratives from conversations with my students, their e-mails and lecture reflections, and peer-review feedback from a colleague. Hence, there was dialogue and I interacted with people on many different levels. This, Leavy (2009) noted, is critical to cultivating and understanding our subject matter. Once I understood the subject matter through careful analysis, I needed to act on what I had learned from my field texts as I sought to become culturally responsive in my teaching.

The analysis of my field texts was multilayered given that I initially analysed my 2014 and 2015 lecture reflections, which were used to plan what I thought were purposeful pedagogies for my 2016 teaching. The second layer of analysis was when I interrogated what my student participants had told me about their backgrounds, their experiences of teaching and learning, as well as engaging with their responses to my lectures. Feedback from a colleague, who served as my critical friend allowed for different perspectives on my pedagogy (LaBoskey, 2004) through a peer-review exercise, and the feedback from this exercise became the third layer of analysis.

Conceptual Stance

Theoretical bricolage (Kincheloe, 2005) is an apt description of my choice to draw from a range of complementary concepts and the concepts underpinning this study are those of critical pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and reflection. In this study, I was hoping that to understand the

students' contexts would place me in a position to transform my pedagogy in a culturally responsive way and to be less traditional in my teaching. Freire (1970) likened teaching in a traditional manner to depositing knowledge in students (which he referred to as the banking model of education) and, as early as the 1970s, he moved beyond discussions about teaching methods into the domain of emancipatory education and critical pedagogy wherein the relationships between education, society, and the world are explored. Critical pedagogy, which is an approach to language teaching, concerns itself with reconstructing oppressive relations of power (Kincheloe, 2005). From a critical pedagogy perspective, what often happens in a classroom is that the cultural wherewithal of the teacher is emphasised and those learners whose cultural backgrounds do not coincide with that of the teacher are at a disadvantage because their views and lived experiences are negated (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Hooks (as cited in Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009) made the point that in confronting class issues in the classroom, critical teachers must reject the notion that learners must deny their own experiences. Similarly, Giroux (1988) argued for critical teachers to embrace "the notion that students come from different histories and embody different experiences, linguistic practices, cultures and talents" (p. 125). In my understanding, this means that in my classroom everybody should be heard and their presence recognised and valued—which is what I was striving toward in this study as I sought to respond to the experiences and contexts of all participants.

According to critical pedagogy, the cultural differences that are often ignored in a traditional classroom should be viewed as strengths rather than deficiencies, and Giroux (1988) argued that in the classroom the relationship between culture and power should be acknowledged. The histories, experiences, and knowledge that all of the students bring to the class should be acknowledged rather than treated as if they do not exist. In this study, I was attempting to suspend my beliefs and to respond to the contexts of the students because education should be understood in its sociohistorical and political context, and should commit to transformation towards justice, equality, democracy, and freedom (Biesta & Tedder 2007; Giroux 1988).

Gaye and Kirkland (2003) noted that teachers who are culturally responsive monitor their own beliefs pertaining to the cultural differences in their classrooms, and advised that to do this would require deep introspection—which was my point of departure in this study. In addition, they emphasised that teachers need to educate themselves about the cultural contexts of those who are in their classrooms and to then adapt their pedagogy accordingly, which is what I was attempting to achieve in this study by engaging with the students and asking that they share their histories and experiences with me. Once I knew more about the students, I was able to work toward empowering them by posing problems to be solved. Through generating knowledge shifts from myself to the students, I was encouraging them to think critically in order to take their places in the conduct of democratic life (Giroux, 1988).

However, to know about the students was not enough and in thinking about my practice, I realised that to engage in pedagogy that was responsive to the students, I needed awareness of my students' life experiences, which is a cornerstone of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay & Kirkland, 2003) along with self-awareness.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not about lowering high expectations, but rather about providing strong support by approaching effective instruction through a cultural lens. Soudien (2006) argued that a major challenge in South African higher education is that of epistemological change and that the focus of transforming higher education should not be on skills and competencies, but rather on developing students' understanding of the South African sociopolitical context, which was my intention in this study. In my view, this is especially important within teacher education because teacher educators need to understand the socioeconomic contexts of their students as well as to impress upon them the need to understand the contexts in which they will be working in order to

respond to the needs of their learners. Gay and Kirkland (2003) proposed that one way that teacher educators could create such awareness amongst student teachers is through modelling what it is to be conscious of classroom diversity. In addition, constant reference should be made to the environments in which the students will one day be teaching, and I tried to heed this advice with the 2016 honours group.

I wanted the students to become responsible for their own learning and for every individual to construct knowledge differently and actively as they negotiated ways of choosing, gathering, understanding, and ordering the knowledge in ways that fitted their sociocultural settings (Adams, 2006), and I realised that I needed to take care to state explicitly why I was doing what I did in lectures. I wanted my pedagogy to have a purpose within and outside of the classroom and, according to Samaras (2011), “pedagogical strategies generated from your noticing” in a self-study project can be understood as “purposeful pedagogies” (p. 137). She advised that when practicing purposeful pedagogies, a clear rationale should be evident, but what one must realise is that this is not binding and may change as learning progresses. This is because pedagogy is not a linear process but is fluid and constantly changing. Teachers need to reflect and be open to effecting changes in order to be responsive to what is happening inside and outside the classroom. I realised that in critically reading my teaching, I would need to be reflective and I was inspired by Dinkelman’s (2003, p. 57) argument that “self-study is not the whole of teaching but that it mirrors and systemises that part of pedagogy that is reflection.” Samaras (2011) emphasised that reflection is an important aspect in planning and enacting purposeful pedagogies.

As Loughran (2007) noted:

For some, [reflection] simply means thinking about something, whereas for others, it is a well-defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action. . . . One element of reflection that is common to many is the notion of a problem (a puzzling, curious, or perplexing situation). What that problem is, the way it is framed and (hopefully) reframed, is an important aspect of understanding the nature of reflection and the value of reflective practice. It is also a crucial (but sometimes too easily overlooked) aspect of learning about teaching. (p. 33)

From this, I understand that to engage in reflection is much more than writing down thoughts about how successful or unsuccessful a lecture was. Loughran’s thoughts on reflection make it clear to me that in reflective practice one is constantly going back and forth and making changes to pedagogy, that is, fluid and wherein there is not a rigid structure. To reflect on purposeful pedagogies is “to consider the implications of your pedagogies on an interpretive level and a critical level” (Samaras, 2011, p. 128). In reflecting, it is important to consider questions such as how your pedagogy is contributing to a social justice agenda as well as how it is improving student learning (Samaras, 2011).

Reflective practice has roots in Dewey’s (1910/1933) work and he stated that to think reflectively is an active attempt to resolve the doubt and settle the hesitation and mental difficulty that occurs when we think. In writing about reflective practice, Schon (1987) made the distinction between *knowing-in-action*, reflection-on-action, and reflection-in-action—with reflection-on-action being what happens when one thinks about action, talks about it, and then makes changes. This, together with reflection-in-action, which involves awareness of, and changes to, one’s actions during teaching, must benefit the learners given that the motivation behind reflection is to improve practice. Reflection has been acknowledged as a tool for learning that can result in changes in teaching (Brookfield, 1995; van Manen, 1990).

In this study, I chose to collaborate with colleagues and students because I was aware that collaboration with others allows for the opportunity to critically examine one's own practice and provides opportunities for professional and personal growth. For example, in Mede's (2010) study that examined whether collaborative reflection aids one's practice, it was concluded that collaborative reflection encouraged participants to look for ways of improving practice and that in the sharing of knowledge and experience, solutions were found to problems.

I Want To Do More With Them

"I want to do more with them" describes my intention for purposeful pedagogy that is culturally responsive in my honours module in 2016. In 2016, I felt much more confident about language in education because it was the fifth year that I was teaching the module. Because self-study is not only about the self, I needed to make changes that were not only about me but also about my students and their learners (LaBoskey, 2004), which is in keeping with my intentions to be a culturally responsive change agent. It was important that my own backwards, forwards, inwards, and outwards reflections, as well as those of the participants, be translated into action.

In 2016, I consciously encouraged the students to examine the relationship between language, power, and pedagogy and to relate what they were learning to their classroom situations. Because many of the students who enrol for this module are employed as teachers, they bring with them knowledge of the South African school contexts. Our classroom discussions about their pedagogy often indicated that the students were reluctant to change what they were doing in their classrooms because they were of the opinion that what they were doing was working. I kept stressing that teaching and learning English should be fun and suggested activities in which the learners would be engaged and through which the students would get to know their learners better. The majority of the students who are currently teaching stated that my suggestions would not work due to factors such as large classes and having to complete the prescribed curriculum. They also stated that some of my pedagogic suggestions such as group work, pair work, and projects in which the learners constructed their own knowledge with guidance from the teacher would not be effective within the contexts in which they are currently teaching.

I realised that I needed to acknowledge the contexts within which the students lived and worked and, to this end, resolved to interact with individuals in the group—which are tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy. I had to set my assumptions aside and learn about the students through dialogue. It was important that I revise my pedagogy, not because the students could not cope, but because I wanted to become more purposeful in my teaching. To achieve this, I needed to know about the students' ways of being, their language practices and their values. I could then include concepts and content that would resonate with the students and that they could take into their own classrooms. In order to achieve this and to become more relevant in my teaching, I needed to listen to the students' voices and to make my teaching responsive to their experiences of teaching and learning English.

Part of my strategy was to hand more responsibility for learning over to the students and, in becoming more purposeful with my honours group, I resolved to keep the sessions simple and yet not underestimate the students (Ball, 2016). Revising my pedagogy was not a case of walking in and implementing something new. Given that I needed to be responding to the landscape in which the students were living and teaching, I felt that it was important that I knew the conditions within the schools in which the students were working in order to relate the course content to their contexts and this is where dialogue and interaction were necessary. To this end, in my first encounter with the students, I divided the class into groups of three and asked that they discuss their own learning experiences as well as their current teaching conditions and what changes they would like to see in their classrooms. Rather than me asking the students in a general way about the teaching and learning

conditions in South Africa, which had been my starting point in previous years, the group work encouraged students to explain to others “what they think, why, and how such changes seem to fit with the requirements of the socio-cultural context” (Adams, 2006, p. 252). I gleaned much about their working and schooling conditions by listening to the student engagements and at the end of the lecture, in keeping with my resolve to bring the students contexts into my teaching, I asked that they e-mail me about the contexts within which they work.

I used the e-mails and discussions to compile the following synopsis of the conditions under which many of my students work. In terms of social conditions, comments such as the following were forthcoming:

Poverty is an issue because many of the students live in informal settlements²

The children are hungry

Learners come from extremely poor homes

40% of school enrolment are from child-headed households³

Many learners are unwell and due to the strong medication they take, they fall asleep during class time

Many learners struggle with the work being done at school as they do not receive any additional help at home.

These comments gave me insight into the conditions in which the students taught and I realised that some of them were teaching in contexts wherein survival was a daily battle for their learners. These real social problems impact on teaching and learning. Awareness of the conditions within the schools, assisted me in transforming my practice and, in doing so, I was becoming more responsive to the diverse sociocultural issues that students bring with them to the classroom.

None of the students in the class taught in well-resourced schools and, in class discussions, there was talk around the disadvantaged communities in South Africa and how little had changed for the poor in the democratic South Africa. In addition to talking about their learners, the students also observed a shortage of teachers, lack of electricity, large classes, no functioning timetable, and no first aid. Students complained that theft of resources was a problem; lack of hygiene was a major issue and that many learners lacked basic “common skills” such as putting litter into a dustbin and keeping their surroundings clean.

Many of the comments about the conditions under which the students worked revolved around their colleagues. These included comments such as:

Teachers are not enthusiastic

Staff politics is a problem

² Informal settlements make reference to shack houses that have sprung up without government approval. These settlements lack basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation.

³ Kellerman (2014) describes a child-headed household as one where the person who heads and cares for, the family is a minor under the age of 18.

Some teachers do the bare minimum and offer no extra support to the learners

Some of my colleagues do not come to school

There are colleagues who will not teach in English

Some have poor English skills and there is a shortage of teachers.

Awareness of the issues around social problems, lack of resources, operational challenges, and the conditions under which the students taught was tantamount in my endeavours to make my teaching relevant. Our class discussions centred on ways in which the students could be proactive and together we explored ways in which they could cope within the current landscape. In this way, the learning became a negotiation because I was no longer prescribing what I thought should be happening in their classrooms.

An example of what I learned is that I had stressed the importance of encouraging learners to read and been very dogmatic that this in itself would have a positive impact on the learners. However, the group discussions in class about the schools in which the honours students worked revealed grassroots issues around reading with comments such as:

Reading books often have to be shared during English lessons

We had a small library but it was burned down and never replaced

In the foundation phase⁴ shelves are provided for a library corner, but it is the responsibility of the teacher to stock it with books which leads to many of the classrooms not having any books

Many of the children do not understand what they are reading and many of the caregivers are not literate.

A problem that I found concerning is that students reported that many of the learners do not seem to understand what they are reading.

As a teacher educator of English, I am particularly interested in the comments around books and reading. How would my insistence that learners would improve their English skills through reading have any bearing under conditions such as these? If learners struggle to read, how can they read with understanding? Not to be able to read impacts on all areas of learning and this was noted by one of the members of the class, a teacher of maths, who selected language in education as an elective. She was lamenting that because many of her learners are unable to read they cannot do mathematics because reading is important in order to grasp the basic mathematical concepts. Mathematics is not limited to performing calculations in isolation but also depends on the English language because learners must read and solve word problems, talk about their mathematical thinking, and cooperate with their peers to complete a task (Abedi & Lord, 2001). This student blamed the teachers of English, and those in the class who teach English were very defensive and stated that they are aware of the problems around reading but they have a prescribed curriculum to complete and there is no time to teach their learners the basics. They explained that what happens is that those who struggle to read get left behind in all learning areas. Some of the students in my class who were teaching in the further education and training phase (FET)⁵ said there were learners in their classes who were struggling to

⁴ In South Africa, the first three years of formal schooling (Grades 1-3) are referred to as the foundation phase.

⁵ FET phase refers to the last three years of formal schooling in South Africa (Grades 10, 11, and 12).

read. Knowing this, I could better understand why some of the students were of the opinion that my suggestions about classroom activities were not suitable in their contexts.

I realised that I needed to take heed of the conditions under which the students lived and worked when making links with the course content and their teaching contexts. The pedagogy that I modelled needed to be such that the teachers could adapt my way for their own classrooms and we needed to collectively come up with practical solutions that responded to their contexts. To know about my students' learners and to teach accordingly is to practise culturally responsive pedagogy and critical pedagogy, and in responding to what I now knew about reading in the schools, in ensuing lectures, I chose to approach the sessions by outlining the realities and using these as the starting point rather than making grandiose suggestions about what my students could and should be doing in their classrooms. I realised that when we were talking about the contexts in which the students taught and when our discussions revolved around their learners, my students were far more engaged and interested in class. In their post lecture evaluations one student wrote the following:

I enjoyed the discussions . . . it was interesting and encouraging to learn that I am not the only one acknowledging that there is a serious challenge teaching language. I enjoyed how we negotiated solutions to my learners' problems as a class and I learnt that we need to consider our target audience and know about our learners when we are teaching.

The above comment gave me confidence that I was responding to the needs of the students in our classes and that perhaps they will in turn attempt to do the same in their classrooms. What confirmed that the students were taking agency in their own classrooms was when a student informed the class that she had decided not to use a comprehension passage from the prescribed text book. Instead, she selected a short information booklet from the local clinic as the comprehension text. Her lesson evaluation stated that the learners were actively engaged and that they responded to the comprehension questions well. In commenting about the success of the exercise, she wrote that the information booklet had direct bearing on real issues that the learners confront every day, that the language was accessible, and that the images assisted the students in making sense of what they were reading. The student had recognised that she has agency in her classroom and she had made a decision based on what she knew about her learners. In relating the lesson to her peers in the honours class, she indicated that her learning in the language in education module had empowered her make changes in her practice to respond to the needs and context of her learners.

Another student indicated that she recognised the value of our classroom interactions and wrote the following about me:

Her teaching style relies heavily on student involvement and interaction . . . this strategy comes after she has learned something about who we are and about the learners whom we teach and I will try to do the same in my own classes.

What I liked about our classroom interactions is that the students felt comfortable to speak their minds and were happy to be involved. In the 2016 class, there were some particularly conscientious students who had enquiring minds and did not accept all course content without question and I found the robust discussions stimulating. When I asked that students respond to questions, I was careful not to badger individuals and, in cases where students looked uncomfortable, I would invite anybody who wanted to, to respond. I tried out what was practised by Adrianna, a teacher participant in Ball's (2016) research, who repeated learners' responses and invited others in the class to discuss the responses. On doing this myself, it was my experience that interesting discussion often followed. The way in which I structured the 12-week course was to lecture one week and then prescribe articles that had to be

read for the following week, and these articles were then discussed in class. One of the students whom I had taught when she was an undergraduate student had been teaching for three years and had enrolled for her honours degree as a part-time student. In one of the first sessions, she stated that as a preservice teacher she had been excited to teach English because I had made it sound exciting and had given her ideas as to what she could do in class. I was rather pleased until she added that I have no idea as to what it is like to teach in South African schools, that is, that they are under resourced, the teachers are disinterested, the learners are poor and hungry, and many of them cannot even speak English. Her parting shot was that my ideas would never work. The student was disillusioned and disappointed with the real world of teaching. This comment confirmed, for me, the importance of responding to the South African school landscape in my teaching.

Because of what the student had said about the disjuncture between my suggestions for their pedagogy and the reality of their teaching contexts, in the lectures that followed her comments, I suggested that the students think of their target audience and the contexts in which they taught. I stressed to the students that, in their practice, they should not be depositors of knowledge (Freire, 1970), should but jointly construct knowledge with their learners and link what they taught to social reform, thus creating “agendas of possibilities in their classrooms” (McLaren, 2009, p. 80), which is what I was attempting to achieve with them.

Giroux (1988) noted that critical educational theorists make a strong case for traditional educational theory as oppressive, and emphasised that schools are designed to perpetuate the inequality in societies. I wanted to create awareness of this in my students and for them to realise that, rather than immersing their learners into the existing status quo, they should give them the wherewithal to change their circumstances, which is a tenet of critical pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is about providing strong support to learners by approaching teaching and learning through a cultural lens. I wanted my students to take ownership of their learning by adapting what they learned in my classes to their own classroom situations and to respond to the landscape in which they were teaching. I believe that many diverse students fail not because their teachers do not know their content, but because the connection has not been made between the content and the existing mental schemes, prior knowledge, and cultural perspectives of the students.

In my endeavour to model such pedagogy in our sessions, I always encouraged the students to refer to their own experiences as well as to the content of the lectures and that of the articles that had been read in preparation for our classroom discussions. My intention was to encourage the students to be actively involved in their learning with my guidance. It is important to note that the students’ learning was carefully scaffolded and my intention was that our lecture discussions would emanate from a position of knowledge for the students because of the lecture, their reading of an article, and the submission of a written response.

One of the themes of the course was language learning approaches, and the lecture content covered language teaching methods. I stressed the importance of using purposefully eclectic methods rather than just choosing one method and adhering to that, which is what I had recommended in the past. In the lecture, I made links to the students’ contexts constantly and was mindful to stress that my suggestions about language teaching needed to be adapted to suit the contexts within which the students were teaching. I also suggested that the students reflect on their own experiences of having been taught English and how they were currently approaching the teaching of English. The next step in their journey as teachers of English was to use what they had discovered in the backward, forward, inward, and outward reflective process and translate it into purposeful action that was responsive to the contexts within which they were teaching.

To achieve this was not as straightforward as I had thought and the incident on which I report below confirmed to me that I needed to be explicit in my teaching and to not assume anything. The students were required to read an article titled, *Autobiographical Narrative in a Language Classroom: A Case Study in a South African School*, by Msila (2012) and in the week thereafter they had to submit the following task (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Comments on autobiographical narrative

Read the article by Msila (2012) and with **reference to your own classroom practices**, write a 1-page narrative in which you **comment** about what is said about the value of autobiographical narrative.
Note: those of you who have never taught in a school, can refer to your teaching practice experiences during your undergraduate degree.

At the time, I was quite happy with the task but, on reflection, I realise that I should have spent time explaining autobiographical narrative and linking the article with the students' teaching practice. Nash (2004) stated that "all narratives are as much about their adherents as they are by their adherent. . . . the stories we construct turn around and construct us, and we them . . . forever" (p. 26). It would not have been clear to the students why I had selected this article and asked that they complete the task above. It now seems to me that there was a disjuncture between the lecture content and the article. I wanted to highlight the value of knowing oneself through reflection and how this would benefit classroom practice. The link between the lecture, the article, and the task is clear to me but in my reflective diary I noted that I had not made the connection clear to my students and the exercise was not purposeful.

I should have taken the advice of Samaras (2011), and organised my strategies by planning better because "it is critical to reflect on the impact of your planned pedagogies before enacting them" (p. 137). Shepard (2000) made the point that open-ended activities demand that the students think critically and are able to solve problems that are complex within their own contexts. I imagine that this is what I had intended with the assignment but I should have been more purposeful as advised by Samaras (2011):

Consider the rationale for each strategy and the possible positive and negative consequences of the strategies you are planning. Reflect on the implications of your pedagogical strategies for your students, your school, and the community. Incorporate any theoretical research evidence that supports the solution strategies you are proposing. (p. 138)

Nevertheless, something that really pleased me is that, after critically reflecting on the Msila article, a student responded by sending me the following e-mail on the eve of a lecture.

From:
 Sent: 06 April 2016 18:36
 To:
 Subject:
 I couldn't help but feel overwhelmingly disappointed as I neared the conclusion of Msila's article. I just feel it was poorly written as I was reading I kept jotting down the discrepancies if I can put it that way that I kept discovering in it. I don't know maybe I'm being too judgemental its just that I've recently read another article called "Co-Characters in an immigration story sixth-grade students' narrative interpretations of Literature and life" and I really enjoyed it. It was so well written and the research findings were interesting to read as well. But we'll talk tomorrow maybe you'll enlighten me perhaps I'm missing the whole point of the article. Goodnight :-) Kind regards S

My response was as follows:

From:
 Sent: 06 April 2016 18:43
 To:
 Subject: Re:
 Wow. Thank you for this response to the article. Please mail the article that you have read and we will discuss the two tomorrow. Yes you are correct in that it is not a literary masterpiece but in my mind the message is clear.
 I am certain that you have not missed the point and am pleased with your criticism of the article.
 See you tomorrow.

I was pleased that the student had taken the time to engage with the article and that he was really thinking critically. The fact that he had sourced another reading with which to draw a comparison was very exciting for me because he was taking responsibility for his learning and providing evidence for his claims, and I had stressed the importance of evidence to substantiate claims. The other factor that thrilled me was that he had e-mailed me his thoughts on my choice of article. In the past, my relationship with my students was not such that they would have felt comfortable to e-mail me—they would have completed the task and submitted it without question. The article that the student attached is far more relevant to my students and I will most certainly prescribe it for this exercise in the future. I was encouraging the students to engage in meaningful discussion because “meta-learning encourages pupils to examine thought processes, thereby avoiding overly simplistic acceptance and/or the adoption of ‘fact’: the thinking in which students engage is seen as vital to the learning process” (Adams, 2006, p. 245), and this incident indicated to me that I was on the right track and that the students were taking control of their learning.

In addition to my reflections and those of my students, in my lecturing I tried to be creative, innovative, and enthusiastic, which are traits of English teaching practised by Adrianna (Ball, 2016). Student feedback confirmed to me that I was beginning to achieve my goals and in the post lecture feedback a student stated:

Delivery is spot-on and I can always tell that the lecturer is thoroughly prepared . . . she interacted well with students . . . her passion, dedication, zeal for her work propels me to work even harder and I love that she got to know about us.

Through our discussions, I learned much about the honours students and the conditions under which they worked, and it pleased me that my efforts to get to know my students did not go unnoticed. In keeping with my resolve to interact with people on different levels, and because I viewed myself as a bricoleur (Kincheloe, 2005), I needed to bring in voices other than my own and those of my students and, to this end, I invited one of my colleagues to my 2016 honours class to conduct a peer-observation exercise as a critical friend.

Scaffolding My Learning: A Colleague’s Voice

Including the voice of my colleague as a critical friend through a peer-review exercise added another layer to my reflective practice. The terms *peer-observation* and *peer-review* are often used interchangeably but Hendry, Bell, and Thomson (2014) made a distinction between the processes. Whereas peer-observation is simply where a peer watches another in order to learn from the other, in peer-review the observer is commenting on the performance of the other in order to improve one’s own practice as well as that of the colleague under observation. Hendry et al. (2014) argued that when

peer reviewing, what is learnt by the observer will be hindered because that person is there to be critical and to write a report. Rowe, Solomonides, and Handal (2010) defined peer-observation as an exercise

where two or more colleagues collaborate in observing each other's teaching and then provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. It can provide a number of benefits to the teacher and the teaching institution. (p. 1)

They identified two main purposes in peer-observation. First, quality enhancement in which colleagues support each other and the range of teaching practices increases because participating individuals focus on their development and should be critically reflecting on their practice. The second purpose is quality assurance, which is more of a peer-review exercise. In commenting on the benefits of collegial support, Pressick-Kilborn and te Riele (2008) commented that the feedback from others involved in our teaching can prompt reflection on certain issues that were discussed. This was the case in the peer-observation exercises in which my colleague and I engaged.

Peer-observation is a process and, when embarking upon the exercise, one must have very clear objectives; Rowe et al. (2010) identified a cycle in which these objectives come into play. The first phase is to brief one's colleagues in terms of the expectations. I wanted my colleague to observe the delivery of my lectures, teaching materials, course design, my presentation skills, how I used questioning in the lectures, how I gave feedback when the students responded to my questions, and my classroom management. What is most important to this study is that I requested that she comment on the extent to which I had tailored my teaching to include the students' contexts. The "during observation" phase is when the observer attends the lecture and pays attention to the issues that have been outlined and this is followed by the post-observation phase wherein discussion about the lecture happens. I wrote in my reflective journal before the feedback sessions to enable comparisons between her observations and my own, which made the discussions much richer. After writing my reflections, the following questions were considered as outlined by Rowe et al. (2010): What aspects do I feel I ought to improve? What do I need to do this? Who can help? What challenges might I face? How do I measure my improvement or lack thereof?

In a peer-observation exercise such as this, it is important that colleagues are nondirective, developmental, and collaborative, which are mentor roles as defined by Kullman (1998). The process was collaborative and, in addition to completing the forms, my colleague also took notes. In our meeting, I compared her feedback with what I had written in my reflections. What was interesting is that in instances where I had commented positively on something, she was not always that complementary and vice versa. I learned much from the feedback of my colleague, and found that what she had to say was more beneficial when coupled with what I had noted in my reflective diary. Hendry and Oliver (2012) identified four themes that emerged in their study of peer-observation, and one of these was learning from feedback. An example of such learning was the point made that I do not treat all students in the class equitably. My colleague wrote: "The lecturer should find means and ways to engage students who do not respond to questions," and another observation stated: "Try not to ignore students whose hands are up." Contrary to what my colleague noted, my reflections about this particular lecture make sweeping statements such as: "They are really a lovely interactive group of students, they were really interested and engaged and worked well and asked intelligent questions and a fun session in which there was a lot of interaction" (Journal entry, May 3, 2016). My post-lecture reflections became much richer because of peer feedback and, in planning more purposeful pedagogy, I referred to the peer feedback along with my reflections and those of my students.

My colleague's observations forced me to confront my lecture reflection in which I had noted that the students were interactive and that they were all interested and engaged. When I reread my reflection and critically examined it whilst thinking about the lecture, what had been noted by my colleague was absolutely true—contrary to what my comments suggested, I was only interacting with a handful of students and not being responsive to all in the class. What I realised when reading my reflections and thinking back on the lectures is that I had written blanket comments that made it sound as if all in the group were participating and that I was engaging with all. However, in examining these reflections, I realised that in as much as I thought that I was engaging with all students and was being innovative, my pedagogy had not changed much from my days as a teacher of English in a school over 30 years ago. I was still standing in the front of the lecture room engaging with those who were displaying interest and leaving the others to their own devices, which was inconsistent with what I thought I was doing. When I started teaching in 1986 during the apartheid era, and for my entire secondary teaching career, I taught in all-white government schools and there was, thus, not much diversity within the classroom so perhaps I could get away with not getting to know my students and their contexts. The postapartheid classroom is a space that is more diverse and, as a white middle-aged woman, I needed to try and understand all students in the room. What should be happening in the classroom is a process of collaborative knowledge construction through engagement with all of the students. Zeki and Guneyli (2014) stated that to teach in a way that is constructivist is to bring about a change in approaches, methods, and roles and also that meaning making should have as its base, the existing knowledge and beliefs alongside new knowledge and experience. However, my pedagogy in which I engaged with a few students was not constructivist and I needed the voice of my colleague to bring this to my attention. The peer-observation feedback was important because it highlighted the importance of encouraging all in my class to participate on equal terms.

In a 2010 study at Macquire University in Australia, Rowe et al. (2010) reported on a case study for professional development and the findings indicated that a peer-observation exercise highlighted aspects of practice that the participants had not noticed themselves and showed what needed to be improved. This was in line with my experience in this peer-observation exercise. Once I realised that I was ignoring some students, I made an effort in subsequent lectures to engage with different students in all of my classes and to encourage those who had been hiding behind others to interact. It is interesting that in my reflections following these sessions, I commented that there was much less fidgeting going on and that most of the students seemed to be listening. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the students noticed that I was engaging with many of their peers and they were more alert in case I called on them to answer questions. The increased responses could also have been because I took the time to phrase questions clearly and repeated students' responses to ensure that all heard what had been said. I have also realised that I did not always follow this student engagement mode of teaching through to the end because another observation from my colleague was that I tend to ask questions and answer them myself, without giving the students sufficient time to engage with the questions. I reflected on this, and made a conscious effort not to do this, and in later reflections noted that more of the students were responding to my questions. As noted by Pressick-Kilborn and te Riel (2008), the observation by my colleague is what prompted me to reflect on what I could change and action.

In observing my colleague, I also learned what not to do when engaging with the students. An example of this is that when one is lecturing in a stepped venue, and walking up the stairs and talking, there are many students who are sitting behind you as you move up the stairs. These students cannot hear what is being said and are isolated for the time that it takes for you to walk up and down the stairs. In the case where I observed this, I suggested that the colleague stand in the front of the room when talking and only move around when the students were engaging in activities. In reflecting on my own practice, I realised that I am guilty of not practising what I was suggesting. In the lectures following the peer-review exercise, I had a heightened awareness about this and other issues and was able to make small

changes in order to improve my practice. For example, I suggested that rather than jumping in with background information a colleague spends time finding out what students know and then scaffolds on that. However, I have realised that I do not always practise this in my classes and that, in addition to finding out about the contexts in which my students were teaching, I also needed to find out what they know about the topic under discussion in order to know what I was building on. This small addition meant that I was scaffolding.

In writing about critical friends, Samaras and Roberts (2011) stressed the importance of working in collaboration with peers and stated that to work with peers in a supportive environment should improve practice because one's teaching becomes explicit when getting feedback from others. This is exactly what happened when I invited colleagues into my lectures and attended their sessions. The views of, and comments from, my peers allowed me to better understand the shortcomings in my lectures and what was working for the students. What was possibly more beneficial for me was that when observing the lectures of my colleagues, I was able to learn much about my own practice and how it could be improved.

Conclusions

In reviewing my learning in this study, I have observed that, in becoming more purposeful as I move toward addressing social issues in my honours teaching, my lecture reflections have become multilayered. After my lectures, I wrote reflections on all aspects of the sessions and requested that students do the same. I then reflected on my pedagogy when I examined what I had initially reflected along with the students' reflections. These were considered in conjunction with my peers' observations and what had been revealed as possibilities for my pedagogy. In revisiting the reflections, I considered not only the lecture content and delivery thereof, but also how issues such as personal stories impacted on the lectures (Nash, 2004). My learning from the reflections was multidimensional because I moved "back and forth between particulars and universals" (Nash, 2004, p. 60). This resulted in layered reflections in which every layer was purposeful and honest as I considered the nuances that different voices and experiences brought to the reflections. This was, however, not enough and I have realised that this layer must be coupled with action and it is through this action that my pedagogic learning developed. A big change in my practice was to become part of the group and to no longer dictate the pace or the content of the sessions. The students were given a voice and a vote as we all worked toward responding to the communities in which we work.

My new-found awareness has implications for my growth as a culturally response pedagogue because I now have a better understanding of education within its sociohistorical and political context (Giroux, 1988), and feel more equipped to respond accordingly. In talking with the students about their lived experiences, I was encouraging them to reflect and to share their experiences with me. I became aware of the pedagogies to which my students were exposed when they were at school, along with the conditions within their communities, schools, and homes, amongst other issues. I came to see that to construct knowledge jointly with students is most effective when I am more aware of individual students' experiences and contexts and am able to build on these (Adams, 2006). I also learned that getting to know the students better would not automatically equate to pedagogy with which the students and I were comfortable. What was also important was to foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect as we jointly constructed knowledge and formed our group identity.

The students change every year, and the South African landscape will not remain static, and this practice of multilayered pedagogic reflection needs to be taken forward. It is my belief that to continue to reflect on more than one level and to encourage my students to do the same could assist both my students and myself to respond to the macro and micro issues within the South African context in our teaching.

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