

Teaching reconceived: Australian teachers re-thinking personal pedagogy within an overseas study program

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Abstract

The researchers track the processes and impact of reflective practice for a group of Australian teachers involved in a short-term Indonesian intensive school experience. The participants in the study were Australian teachers who took part in a three week school experience, homestay, cultural and language experience in the city of Padang in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Both experienced and beginning teachers were asked to keep a reflective journal prior to, during and after the overseas experience.

Findings included the teachers' realisation of their needing to reconceptualise their teaching practice including their knowledge of teaching, learning, curriculum and pedagogy. No longer were they surrounded by the familiar aspects of their teaching practice. Deep introspection, available through systematic daily reflection, allowed these teachers to face challenges unfamiliar to them. The teachers returned home to Australia changed by the experience. The researchers reflected through journal entries and discussions and came to new understandings about their roles as teacher educators.

From the embarkation point of an agreement with research findings that an in-country teaching experience is beneficial, in this paper we explore ideas about what potential a study-abroad experience had for teachers' views on their teaching, learning, pedagogy and curriculum.

Keywords: teacher reflection; teacher pedagogy; immersion experience; school experience; reconceptualising practice.

Introduction

It is too easy for teachers to become entrenched in their way of doing, seeing and understanding teaching and learning events. As in the Indonesian proverb *Seperti katak di bawah tempurung* (a short-sighted frog hiding under the coconut shell), teachers can become people whose experience and knowledge is narrow and safe (Brataatmadja, 1985, p. 222). They can become cloaked and sheltered in the day-to-day, with little time or reason to reframe their understandings of what is happening in their teaching and learning contexts.

Just coping with the 'press' (Huberman, 1983) of the classroom leaves little energy, time, space or reason for teachers to examine, let alone re-examine curriculum issues or pedagogical frameworks. When teachers relocate to a new country through an in-country program, even for a short term stay, what emerges are opportunities and reasons to examine old beliefs within a new frame, context and culture. The Teach_Indo program (delivered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania) described in this paper provided an opportunity for teachers to re-examine and reframe, by stepping out of the comfort of their safe and well-known 'coconut shell' into a new culture.

This paper addresses the question "How does an in-country experience assist teachers explore their tacit knowledge and understandings of teaching and learning?"

Context

In order to encourage an international perspective the Education Faculty at UTAS offered undergraduate and post-graduate students an opportunity to study for several education units in Padang, West Sumatra. The 'in-country' program during the summer school period was designed for general primary and secondary teachers upgrading their qualifications, or specifically for foreign language or social studies teachers currently teaching in primary or secondary schools throughout Australia.

The University of Tasmania's program offered both preservice and experienced teachers a three-week Indonesian in-country professional development program, where they were placed with a local family, were offered a school experience in a local primary school, given the opportunity to explore language and culture learning in an authentic context, and a link to enrolled units of study within the Faculty of Education's program offerings.

Following the model of a similar successful *Teach in Indonesia* program in December 1998 (Atmazaki & Harbon, 1999), the program included:

- authentic in-country classroom experience;
- language classes (beginners/intermediate/advanced);
- homestay with local families;
- opportunities for field work;
- seminars on educational, cultural, language, religious and arts themes.

There were three aspects which informed the design and construction of this program: the value of in-country learning experiences, the role of reflection in teaching and learning and a CD-ROM designed to assist their entry into a very different cultural context. This paper focuses on the role of reflection as means to assist re-framing of the participants' and researchers' personal pedagogical understandings.

Conceptual framework

Those entering the teaching profession bring with them long-held and firmly rooted beliefs about what a teacher does, how classrooms and schools should operate and how teachers and learners should behave (Barnes, 1992; Boud & Walker, 1991; Britzman, 1991; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Loughran, 1996; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). As learners in classrooms during their own time as students at school, teachers have perceived the classroom management and the custodial moments (Britzman, 1991): the ability to enforce rules, impart textbook knowledge, grade papers and manage classroom discipline. But the pedagogy was hidden (Britzman, 1991). Those sepia-toned “school photographs” of inappropriate images and inadequate expectations can become frozen in a time and context unreal to the present reality and complexity of present day schools, classrooms and day-to-day teaching.

When the researchers provided opportunities for study in Indonesia, participating teachers (beginning and experienced) were challenged to unfreeze their tacit knowledge and beliefs. The Indonesian context provided a way for teachers to assess, evaluate and re-assess their current beliefs about teaching, learning and curriculum.

Living Inside the Coconut Shell

One of the key purposes of teachers experiencing other cultures is to “discover the ways in which other groups of human beings have organised their lives to answer the perennial questions of survival and fulfilment” (Fersh, 1974, p. 33). The University of Tasmania is only one of several universities in Australia who have provided overseas practicum experiences for their students (Booth, 1997; Ferry & Konza, 1999; McFarlane, 1997) and the successful outcomes for students have been variously reported (Hill, Thomas & Coté, 1997; Halse, 1999). Stories of discovery, learning and new ways of person-to-person interaction have developed from the Teach_Indo in-country program. According to research (Grant & Secada, as cited in Wiest, 1998, p. 358) “experiences with representations from diverse populations” are the best and most worthwhile field experiences. In providing school experiences which focus on expanding the students’ outlooks, Wiest (1998) and Stackowski and Mahan (1998) found that “short, more informal, intensive cultural immersion experience” can strongly influence preservice teachers and have far-reaching effects, allowing them to gain a cultural competence (Ryan, 1998, p. 151).

One of the underlying aims of this particular Teach_Indo program, as was the aim of its predecessor, the Australia Indonesia Rural Areas Education Scheme (AIRAES) program (Harbon, 1998), was that the participants recognise their ethnocentricity to explore what was behind the mirrors of their practice and theories in action through a variety of experiences recognising that the context in which they question, reflect and learn will affect what and how these new experiences will be understood. The content and process trialled in the AIRAES program was replicated in this process.

Critical incidents

Learning to teach is a tacit cultural process begun in school, continued in teacher education and in the schools themselves. The long apprenticeship of observation of teaching (Lortie, 1975) means it is easier to develop and sustain routines of habit which are comforting for teachers, children and parents. This tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958) is akin to “know how”,

learnt through personal, context-specific experience and precedes articulated or explicit knowledge.

Life in a classroom means being embedded in a continuous flow of experience with many variables. Routines such as frames, schemas, paradigms, patterns of order, a set of “taken-for-granted” help teachers keep mental effort at a reasonable level and a balance in teachers' internal and external worlds. To survive this press of immediacy, multidimensionality and unpredictability (Huberman, 1983), teachers focus on the day-to-day effects, operate on a short term perspective; live on the surface of the classroom and like Horace (Sizer, 1985) make compromises. In order to survive and manage the complexity of curriculum in a crowded classroom, teachers develop routines, automaticity and ways of knowing. This is problematic as it is difficult for teachers to deconstruct and reassemble their routines without disorientation and the fear of not coping (Olson, 1992). To hesitate is to stall and maybe lose control.

Critical incidents, or “vividly remembered events” (Brookfield, 1990, as cited in Thiel, 1999) affected the participants personally and professionally. The challenge for all the teachers, beginners and experienced, and the teacher educators in the Teach_Indo program, was to confront their current knowledge, practice and beliefs about teaching and how those practices and beliefs were acquired and evaluated in the first place (LaBoskey, 1993) and consider if and how those incidents could inform a re-framing.

Participants in the Indonesian in-country program experienced culture shock or cultural mismatch in personal and professional situations, at the homestays and in schools, as was described in the research of Harbon and Atmazaki (2002). Each day the Indonesian classroom and curriculum presented our Australian teachers a myriad of “critical incidents” (Tripp 1993): cultural mismatches, language misunderstandings, pedagogical differences, practicalities of coping with inadequate resources, the heat and personal hygiene requiring the teachers to reflect on their responses to these incidents. All of these incidents presented opportunity to examine relevant tacit beliefs and values.

Stepping out of the shell

There are claims for practitioners to engage with reflection on their teaching practice and beliefs about curriculum frameworks (Day, 1997; Smyth, 1995) although this reflection may not come without a personal cost. Research has shown that changes in practice can involve de-skilling, risk, information overload and mental strain and may not benefit beginning teachers (Eraut, 1994; McIntyre 1993). The “taken-for-granted” at the base of a sense (and even demonstration) of competence in classroom interactions, are valued by administrations as the teachers maintain the status quo. The “taken-for-granted” are rarely questioned, probed deeply, or even given a reflective glance (Eraut, 1994). Established practices can be seen as “cognitive life buoys” which may impact negatively when teachers respond to only the superficial similarities of the experience and fail to recognise or acknowledge significant differences (Day, 1999).

When teachers engage in critical reflection they are required to step beyond single, to double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Single-loop learning means teachers detect errors at a private and tacit technical level (Day, 1993) and only introduce changes to their practice with the central theory-in-action (Argyris & Schön, 1978) with its norms and value systems unchanged. To move to double-loop learning means that important errors are still detected,

but now the strategies, assumptions and norms involved in effecting and evaluating teaching performance are explicitly and publically examined. The consequences of double-loop learning may be teachers setting new priorities and weighting of norms or even reconstructing strategies, assumptions and norms.

The reference to “sepia-toned photographs” earlier in this paper alludes to teachers being within a frame, or within “a particular set of knowledge and skills” (Putnam & Borko, 2002, p. 39). Our teachers, beginning and experienced, participating in the Teach_Indo program, were situated in an authentic, but very different and unfamiliar, context which challenged their previous frames of understanding of what it means to be a teacher. The teachers were involved in reflective conversations in a real time context whilst in Indonesia and later through assignments completed once they returned home. These conversations facilitated their explorations and understandings of their expectations, experiences and the match or mismatch of their previous “frames”. The teachers had the opportunity to interrogate those matches and mismatches within two authentic contexts: Indonesia and Tasmania.

Creating the Opportunity to Step Out

The teachers who participated in the three week program were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education and the Master of Education courses. There were 10 students all female. All were required to compile a reflective journal which described their expectations and the reality of the experience. These reflections were shared as appropriate during the ‘class’ discussions and then at least one experience was to be written up as an anecdote with its associated reflection. This reflection needed to address the questions of ‘*What challenged you?*’ and ‘*What surprised you?*’ The two teacher educators/researchers also participated sharing their own observations and reflections of their experiences within the Indonesian context and as teacher educators. Students gave their permission to include the incident and reflections in any published research.

In order to prepare and assist learners entering the Indonesian context learning support resources on CD-ROM and in printed text (Harbon & McGill, 2001; McGill & Harbon, 2001; Harbon & McGill, 2002) were provided. These materials were designed to provide guided pre-departure experiences upon which the participants could critically reflect prior, during and after the in-country experience. The areas for this reflection included the anticipated language, educational and cultural differences, possible cross-cultural incidents which could lead to misunderstandings, identification of personal beliefs about language learning, learning and teaching, and a structure to guide the self-reflection process to assist in documenting critical incidents whilst in Indonesia.

Initially the reflective discussions focussed on the immediate, concrete and pragmatic. For example, coping with the classroom set up, the prescribed curriculum, lack of resources, transmission pedagogical practices, the dirt, heat and basic hygiene in different circumstances. Many of the pre- teachers focussed on the concrete problems of the immediate context whereas the more experienced teachers after bemoaning the lack of resources began to question their unquestioned assumptions about a constructivist paradigm when faced with the outcomes of a didactic, transmission model. The problem of pitted blackboards which resisted crumbling chalk was quickly replaced by “*How can I best help these children learn?*” The two teacher educators themselves quickly moved from the contextual issues of the discomfort of coping wearing long dresses all the time and getting around town with limited Indonesian to the discomfort of exploring their own tacit beliefs and their ‘taken-for-

granted' when working and supporting beginning and experienced teachers confronting their own difficulties and challenges in a non- Australian context.

One of the teacher educators would lead the discussion whilst the other took notes of the key issues and concerns raised. Later we shared their perceptions and understandings, clarified issues raised and identified any follow- up actions needed. The reflective journal entries, personal discussions and later the anecdotes and critical reflections confirmed the accuracy of our perceptions.

When the journals, anecdotes and reflections were collated, we focussed on selecting data which clearly demonstrated 'change' and the expression of a sense of the need of re-framing previously held beliefs. These reflections tended to come from the experienced teachers, though in one case an experienced teacher expressed that she did not believe she needed to change her way of teaching even though the context had changed. Interestingly she taught using a didactic transmission approach! The interpretation was checked with the initial writers that we had interpreted their intent clearly and permission sought for inclusion in the writing up of the research.

Stepping Out and Reconciving

Only a small selection of the reflections has been included for this paper. They have been chosen on the basis of demonstrating responding to challenges of pre-conceived frames, of stepping beyond the immediate physical context and a willingness to acknowledge and explore one's own tacit pedagogical beliefs – to 'step out'. The two writers of this paper were very much a part of this process and we have included an excerpt from each person's reflective journal.

Teacher reflections

Here an experienced, mature aged teacher assesses, re-assesses and evaluates her growing understandings of pedagogy, curriculum and classrooms:

So many things immediately assaulted the senses!

The gaping holes in the ceilings; the dusty, pitted concrete floors; the grotty walls on which the occasional ancient map of Indonesia or a charts depicting people in advanced stages of berri-berri; the single locked cupboard in each classroom; the single ancient pitted chalkboard, never entirely cleaned of the soft white-only chalk that crumbled at the touch; the formality of classroom layout in columns with the well used teacher's chair, teetering on its final legs, placed precisely in the centre facing the students' desks. The 35-40 students per class perched on the edges of their chairs to accommodate the backpacks hanging on their chair backs. Classrooms devoid of displays of children's work art materials, paper, scissors, glue, dictionaries.

The overpowering smell of urine in the W.C.; the difficulty in squatting over the perpetually wet floor in the long dress expected for school wear; washing hands with water dipped from a trough that looked as though it had never been emptied.

Experienced in teaching over many years in a variety of contexts, I suffered angst and frustration at being unable to draw on my repertoire because the carpet of security, in the

form of shared language, had been removed from beneath my feet.
(Teacher 2, journal entry)

This experienced teacher felt unable to draw on her experience to illuminate the problems of the immediate context. Her frames – the models, schemas, or paradigms of “knowing” — a clustered set of standard expectations through which knowledge and behaviour are organised — do not match the context in which she found herself in Indonesia. Her sense of inadequacy in this new context is clear.

In this anecdote an experienced primary teacher explains about how she was caught off-balance.

We were working as a team on an English class on points of the compass. The lesson had been prepared following the formula observed in every classroom I had entered: regardless of lesson duration: the first 50% oral, the last 50% written, using the student workbook. After one hour I am satisfied that all students have translated timur, barat etc into the English east, west etc. They have demonstrated their understanding. I walk them through their workbooks, pp. 63-65, drawing their attention to an inaccuracy in one exercise. I then instructed them to do the exercises.

The Indonesian teacher intervenes. “Maybe not now. You have something else you can do with the class?” she asks hopefully.

I am in a dilemma. My team partner has nothing prepared as she has been unwell. I have exhausted my repertoire. There is only so much one can do on the points of the compass, with no resources, in this context and with limited fluency in Indonesian. I am off-balance and we muddle through the final hour.

We had wanted guidance from our Indonesian teacher, but none had been forthcoming. Was it language or the power of the set curriculum that made her unable to step outside the set framework? Was it the error in the text I had drawn attention to?

As we hand the class back to the teacher, she announces “pages 63-65 is your homework tonight”.

(Teacher 1, journal entry)

The experienced teacher, who believes herself flexible and adaptable, finds she feels disempowered and experiences considerable disquiet. Her “taken for granted” – a common language, resources, support, a repertoire of teaching strategies and activities and a flexibility in interpreting the curriculum had been taken away in two sentences

“Maybe not now. You have something else you can do with the class?”

As the teacher tried to make sense of her reactions, she asked herself these questions: ‘Was it because I was upgrading my qualifications when my contemporaries were planning retirement? Was this a “cultural mismatch’ (Atmazaki & Harbon, 1999)?; Why was the work set for homework? Was it because I had suggested that the text could have some imperfections? Was the power of the curriculum above reproach? Did I undermine the teacher by bringing this imperfection to the learners’ attention? Was I sending the message that I thought my knowledge was superior? Was I being quietly overruled? Had I simply,

when caught off-balance in a system similar to that in which I received my early formal learning, reverted to the same feelings of disempowerment?

This teacher's frames, built over years of experience, and her strategies to cope with the classroom press of her own culture, could potentially run ahead of the immediate experience by defining and guiding it. For example, the way the teacher conceptualised the problems affected what she noticed; which features she recorded and valued; the solution she developed, the level of cognitive and affective investment she expended to achieve the pre-specified outcomes (Barnes, 1992; Boud & Walker, 1991). Her over-dependence on unquestioned, fluent, well-entrenched framed practices based on her assumptions and experience were no longer valid in the current context. Changing the context brought about angst and frustration and a sense of de-professionalisation.

Another reflection is sourced from one of the writers of this paper

I had to present a seminar to a group of technical lecturers on the competency debate. One day's warning, no resources, just me. I guessed they would be similar to our TAFE teachers. That assumption was quickly blown away - at least three had PhDs from overseas and the rest had Masters or were working on PhDs. I was having to work in English and yet make complex ideas accessible to learners whose English language skills were far superior to my rudimentary Indonesian. All my tried and tested resources were back in Australia. How could I cope and maintain my dignity. I was so hot - was it the weather, stress or that durian I had eaten yesterday? How could I work on the board, interact with the group, draw out questions and ideas. I knew by now that using the left hand was No No in a Muslim country. How was I going to control this wayward hand which was determined to be used to encourage learners to participate whilst using the right to write on the board? I am feeling totally hamstrung.

*I have been so successful for so long I had forgotten how it must feel for the beginning teachers with whom I work.
(Researcher 1, journal entry)*

The researcher, the writer of this diary entry and a very experienced teacher working in a new situated cognitive context (Putnam & Borko, 2002), re-identifies with beginning teachers in this re-framing process through her sense of the inadequacy of coping with that new context. This "wake-up call" was the stimulus to "re-frame" the "taken for granted" built up through years of working with preservice teachers.

Yet for her colleague, new frames were having to be overlaid on the experience too, despite her many years experience switching between the Indonesian and Australian school contexts. Her colleague reflected:

*I am constantly needing to slow down, to pause, to remember that I know things here that the others don't know. I've obviously forgotten how confronting things like simple aspects of Indonesian classroom management are when all your experience has been in a non-Indonesian classroom for so long. I need reminding - and luckily they're doing that for me - I don't know any more what they don't know...
(Researcher 2, journal entry)*

A similar “wake-up” occurred in her case and she needed to “re-frame” – but at another level again, with her realisation that she was taking things for granted. What was comfortable for her, was uncomfortable for them.

There were, in these excerpts above, new “ways of knowing” occurring at three levels: with the classroom teachers stepping out of Australia for the first time; with one lecturer, well-versed in stepping out, but for the first time in Indonesia; and with the other lecturer, well-versed in stepping out in Indonesia being prompted to remember how she must consider the shock, anxiety and discomfort associated in reframing.

Some of the teachers participating in the Teach_Indo programme re-assessed and changed and made changes to their practice on their return home. Other teachers recognised the issues, but chose not to change. Not all teachers were prepared or able to step out from the security of the known and safe coconut shell at that time. For example, one of the young, beginning teachers has since moved to teach in a remote Indigenous school. Prior to going to Indonesia, she had never been outside of Tasmania and always attended ‘safe’ middle class schools. Her ‘re-framing’ required more time and experience in the school contexts she had known and experienced as a learner and beginning teacher.

Teaching reconceived

Carson (1995, p. 151) states “teaching is always an uncertain enterprise in which teachers are called upon to respond pedagogically to unanticipated events”. Becoming a proficient craftsman has an inherent danger: it is easy to stop growing. Learning, and continuing to learn, from experience are essential, but the disposition and attitudes necessary to replace unsubstantiated opinions with theoretical, moral, ethical and empirical principles based on grounded belief (Dewey, 1933; La Boskey, 1993) need to be continually developed and reinforced.

The researchers have seen it important to have the three impacting factors woven together in conceptualising the issues at the heart of our concern: the in-country aspect; the critical incident; and teacher reflective practice. The placing of teachers outside the country, outside their regular comfort zone, sets the context. The activity of teaching provides at least one critical incident. The use of reflection and reframing can assist teachers to question those “stable states” (Schön, 1971) to re-assess those assumptions and even add new teaching skills to their repertoire. The development of a new frame does not mean an end to puzzles and problems. Teachers need to continue the scrutiny and reflective judgement of their own practices in order to move to even more elaborated views of practice: “new actions and new frames for practice go hand in hand” (Russell & Munby, 1991, p. 185).

However, the irony is that it is not until we begin to learn to be teachers and to practise our skills and knowledge (or are placed in contexts well outside our usual “coconut shells”) are we forced to assess and evaluate our tacit beliefs about teaching, learning and curriculum. The challenge for these teachers (beginners and experienced) and their teacher educators was to confront strongly held beliefs, usually tacit, about teaching and how they were acquired and evaluated in the first place (LaBoskey, 1993). The Teach_Indo experience provided a new context to encourage the teachers to re-frame their beliefs and values associated with teaching and learning and about themselves as proficient practitioners.

Teachers who remain under their coconut shell are safe and “learned” (Barth, 2001), but are educators at risk. If the habit of reflection can become established during the preservice teacher education phase, then there is a chance that the practitioner may rise above their personal and institutional history and begin to participate in a re-framing process as their contexts of teaching and learning change.

The beginning and experienced teachers were placed in a very different overseas context which ‘forced’ them to examine and evaluate their tacit beliefs about their pedagogical practices and understandings. This opportunity is not an option for all teacher educators and teachers. Though we have not been able to replicate it in Indonesia (safety issues for travellers) the program has begun in Korea (Harbon, 2006).

The process of using reflective journals, critical incidents and in particular the writing of anecdotes of experience (McGill, 2006) are tools which can be used to access the ‘baggage of experience’ we all carry as educators. All teaching contexts present challenges of their own. The value of an in-country experience is that the ‘differences’ can be so pronounced that it is impossible to ignore them.

One Teach_Indo participant concluded:

*I had examined at close quarters another educational system which on first examination had appeared deficient, but which on closer examination highlighted deficiencies in my own. For three weeks I had lived life to the full and was not ready to return to the predictability of my life in Australia. I had discovered strengths and weaknesses in myself that I previously I had only glimpsed.
(Teacher 2, journal entry).*

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