

Chapter 9

Afterword: What is shared and learned

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The present volume brings together seven studies of classroom-based research in Malaysian universities, yet it is likely to be of considerable interest to a much wider international readership. To begin with, arguably too little classroom-based research is conducted in a tertiary context. As Hasim and Barnard note in the introduction, university lecturers are usually expected to teach as well as engage in research and publication, but the two activities are generally divorced. A lecturer's academic contributions are often exclusively targeted towards advancing knowledge in their subject discipline and seldom to advancing tertiary-level pedagogy. The contributors to this volume, however, exhibit what Taber (2007) calls 'strong professionalism': not content to merely follow established practice, they actively evaluate their "own work, and to seek to improve it – using evidence" (p. 7). In so doing, they model the types of practitioner inquiry that promote continual professional development and processes of evaluation and enhancement. It is hoped that this collection will stimulate other academics in institutions of higher learning to undertake similar studies in their own contexts.

Also appealing to a wide readership will be a general interest in the context of tertiary education in Malaysia. Against a backdrop of post-colonialism and multiculturalism, recent decades have brought a number of radical policy shifts across Malaysian education (Kamogawa, 2003; Rudner, 1977). This is perhaps most strikingly evidenced in shifts in the language(s) of instruction, with the multiple languages of earlier times giving way to Malay by the early 1980s, followed by the adoption and recent abandonment of English as the language of instruction for science and mathematics in primary schools, and the current rapid expansion of English Medium Instruction programmes for many disciplines in tertiary institutions across the country. The world has also looked on with considerable interest in – for example – the early and comparatively well-funded adoption of ICT in many institutions and an ambitious strategy

for internationalization of Malaysian higher education. Thus, this fast changing landscape would seem to be fertile territory for exploring emerging classroom-based issues, challenges and innovations from the methodologies and findings of which academics in relatable contexts can benefit.

Taking the volume as a whole, what are the lessons revealed across the seven case studies? Before considering this, it is worth making a few generalizations that might apply to nearly any such collection. Firstly, practitioner research almost invariably involves exploring practice to identify and/or solve important problems. The question that I shall return to is whether there are recurring themes among the problems explored in this collection; what is of value in collections of case studies is that they together make explicit some of the most pressing problems that practitioners were grappling with in a particular socio-cultural context at a particular period of time, in this case at tertiary institutions in Malaysia c. 2015. Recurring themes may be observed to connect seemingly diverse educational problems, thereby throwing the underlying issue into sharper relief, and shedding light on how educators can resolve similar controversies and dilemmas in other places and/or at other times. Secondly, most volumes of case studies make use of a broad range of data collection methods and analytical tools available to inquiring practitioners. These should be in keeping with the research questions and the ontological position of the researchers. In the present volume, the balance is firmly in favour of qualitative designs, reflecting increased recognition of the value of subjective experience, where previously there had been overwhelming reliance on positivistic approaches involving the control of variables and measuring the effects of an intervention. Most of the studies reported here also involve multiple sources of data collection, allowing triangulation of the data and a more nuanced interpretation of the findings.

A theme that emerges very strongly in the volume is of teachers responding to changes in their educational context. In a broad sense, each chapter deals with change; but of particular interest is that nearly all focus on changes arising from external pressures or directives. One such pressure is the evolving nature of the job market and an increasing institutional emphasis on producing graduates who are 'work ready'. Chapters 2 (Aishah Abu Bakar) and 6 (Mohd Nazir Md Zabir & Eleni Karagiannidou) represent examples of lecturers responding to such changes by leading innovation in their course content, pedagogical approach and assessment practices, and by subsequently evaluating these changes through systematic practitioner research. More specifically, Md Zabir and Karagiannidou discuss a transformation in pedagogy to foster the critical skills required of business graduates, while Abu Bakar highlights the importance of aligning course work and assessment with the real-world skills expected of graduates. A further external pressure reflected in this volume is the evolution of educational

technology, particularly information and communication technology (ICT). This has undoubtedly created welcome opportunities to enhance pedagogy, but has been accompanied by expectations from government, industry and institutional management that teachers and learners will embrace the use of technology. As Simin Ghavifekr (Chapter 4) notes, this has been enshrined in policy changes in the national education strategy. However, a high proportion of the lecturers in her study lacked the skills, knowledge and confidence to enact the policy effectively. Crucially, it also appears that ICT policies are not aligned with the beliefs and values of these reluctant users of ICT, and it is at this level of underlying beliefs and values that development must take place if educational transformation is to be effective and long-lasting (Ghavifekr, Chapter 4; Hasim and De Luca, Chapter 3). Also focusing on aspects of ICT use by Junaidah Januin and James McLellan (Chapter 8), and undoubtedly, given Malaysia's strong presence of ICT in education, this will continue to be a major theme in Malaysian educational research.

A second recurring theme in this volume involves shifting the locus of pedagogical control away from the teacher as a central, dominant figure in decision-making, and creating a more active participatory role for the learner. This theme is present in a number of the studies but arises most strongly in Chapters 3, 5, 6 and 7. In particular, Mohd Nazir Md Zabir and Eleni Karagiannidou's study (Chapter 6) evidences a strong commitment to shifting from teacher-centred, lecture-style delivery of business education, to the introduction of learner-centred, problem-based learning (PBL). This involved students working in groups to analyse, discuss and solve problems, and collaboratively learning by engaging critically in the subject matter. The authors note challenges in this move away from traditional methods of teaching and learning, but the findings from the students' questionnaire and the lecturer's reflections suggest that the students worked harder, enjoyed the classes more, and made greater progress than the control group. In Chapter 3, Zuwati Hasim and Rosemary De Luca discuss a shift to formative assessment and process writing in an English as a second language (ESL) writing class, and the ways in which students were re-positioned as active investigators in the writing process rather than merely consumers of information passed down from the teacher. They note that the classes became more student-centred and that the division of labour shifted, with students providing valuable peer feedback to one another. Parallels are found in Chapter 7, where Ainul Azmin Md Zamin discusses the development of an assessment rubric for teaching academic writing; despite challenges, learners reacted positively to the partial move away from teacher-directed instruction to learners collaboratively learning from one another. While each of these chapters describes the introduction of learner-centred activities,

Jocelyn Lee's case study (Chapter 5) tackles the issue from the opposite direction: taking a highly familiar, fundamentally learner-centred activity – reading – and finding ways to overcome learner disengagement and reluctance. Lee notes that reading is often marginalized in traditional teacher-centred classrooms, and that this contributes to low reading engagement in general. Her Comprehensive Approach to Reading Engagement (CARE) is a fine example of practitioner research producing new theory.

A third theme to emerge in these studies is that of assessment. This in itself may be wholly unsurprising, given the fundamental role of assessment in the day-to-day practice of education; what may be of interest when considering this volume within its historical context are the specific assessment issues considered. Overwhelmingly, the central issue represented here is the role of formative assessment, which is explored in the chapters by Aishah Abu Bakar (Chapter 2), Zuwati Hasim and Rosemary De Luca (Chapter 3) and Ainul Azmin Md Zamin (Chapter 7). Hasim and De Luca point out that in Malaysia, assessment and teaching have traditionally been treated as separate processes, and it seems likely that the present studies will be at the forefront of a more general movement within Malaysian education to take advantage of the learning afforded by feedback on assessed tasks.

In concluding this review, I wish to commend each of the contributors for sharing their experiences and the editors for bringing these papers to publication. Despite the obligation in many contexts for academics to engage in research, there are a number of obstacles to engaging in classroom-based studies, including a considerable investment of time and energy, perhaps a lack of institutional encouragement and support, and for some academics a diversion away from research into discipline knowledge. Furthermore, research into even one's own teaching practices can be met with resistance, with the potential for it to be perceived as a threat to norms and conventions and perhaps a challenge to peers and to authority (Burns, 1999, p. 46). This may be exacerbated when the findings bring into question the process of implementing new policy, as some of the present studies have done. However, each of these studies is a reminder that the continued progression and relevance of tertiary education requires that practitioners look beyond conventional pedagogic models and make an ongoing commitment in exploring and improving practice in their own local contexts.

References

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