Using the Objective Eye of the Camera for Continuing Professional Development: An Autoethnographic Account

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ABSTRACT

With increasing access to smart phones, it has become easy to record oneself while teaching. By using this inexpensive method, teachers can develop insights into their teaching. In this paper, I will report on an autoethnographic study that I conducted as a teacher educator. I examined twelve of my lessons over a span of one academic year. By looking at my teaching objectively through the lens of the camera, I was able to critically examine the rationale behind my pedagogic choices and also study their impact on the learners. This, in turn, helped me explore more effective teaching practices. The results of the study suggest that video recordings of their teaching can be used by teachers for the purposes of continuing professional development.

Keywords: Reflective practice, teacher education, video, autoethnography, CPD

INTRODUCTION

The National Policy on Education recognizes the criticality of education by stating: "education will amalgamate globalization with localization, enabling our children and youth to become world citizens." (NEP, 2016, p.1). Needless to say, it is only through effective teaching that these goals can be achieved. Teachers, thus play a vital role in realizing these goals. While teachers at the primary, and secondary levels of education also have a pivotal role to play, it is teachers at the tertiary level, by virtue of being in a position to influence the youth of a nation, who can be more instrumental in shaping the future world citizens. However, the NEP Committee has observed that the Gross Employability Ratio

of our graduates is less than 20 per cent (NEP, 2016, p. 125). It is therefore important for tertiary teachers to reflect on whether they are employing their instructional time optimally to intensify learning in their adult learners. Given the characteristics of adult learners (Knowles, 1970)—they are autonomous, self-directed, goal-oriented, and relevancy-oriented—it is important for tertiary level teachers to constantly upgrade their teaching techniques in order to remain relevant and useful. Continuing professional development (CPD) is therefore an unceasing attempt to seek this information with the view to improve one's ability to be agents of influence.

In this paper, I will present my case as a teacher who is self-initiated with regard to her professional development, and has taken charge of it by engaging in reflective practice, aided by data gathered from her video recordings. I am a teacher educator in a private teacher education institution where I train pre-service teachers. Since the paper reports an autoethnographic study concerning myself, the use of first person pronoun becomes necessary.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Reflective practice is an integral component of professional development. For the purpose of this paper I will use the following definition of reflection by Boud, Keogh, & Walker (1985, p. 3): "[reflection is] a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation." Professional development in case of teachers requires engaging in reflection about one's teaching and seeking ways to improve it. While attending conferences and writing papers are integral to building academic knowledge, reflecting on one's ability to teach effectively is a self-initiated activity for CPD.

Reflective practice manifests in various forms, such as writing a journal, having a dialogue with colleagues or reviewing one's lesson plans. While each of these methods of reflection is very effective, one must take cognizance of the fact that they are often based on the teachers' recollection of the lesson, and can be subjective. Moreover, these methods preclude an objective analysis of one's teaching, and therefore may potentially become defensive attempts to explain one's choice of classroom decisions. Additionally, dependence on the memory of teaching decisions may not always lead to an accurate analysis of pedagogical decisions, and may therefore lead to ineffective influences on teacher development. Eldridge, Lamming, and Flynn (1992), compare the impact of using memory to record one's experience with that of using video technology for the purpose. In their findings they state that using video technology can undoubtedly help people

better "…recall activities in their working lives. It is also useful in confirming and disconfirming what people think might have happened" (p. 268). Therefore, it is not surprising to see many professionals use video recordings of their work to deepen reflection and improve their practice. Medical practitioners (Yoo, Son, Kim & Park, 2009), athletes, sports coaches (Wilson, 2008), teacher trainees also use data from video recordings for self and professional development. According to Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen & Terpstra (2008, p. 348), "teacher change is made possible when practitioners value uncertainties and disruptions as rich sites for learning and when they make connections between their experiences and practical knowledge." Thus, scrutinizing the rich dynamics of one's own classroom and implementing ways to address learning are important for teacher development. Paley (1986, p. 123) observed that "real change comes about only through the painful recognition of one's own vulnerability." In this paper, I will investigate how studying video-recordings of my own classroom was effective in improving my ability to reflect on significant teaching-learning moments and exploit them suitably.

RELATED LITERATURE

One of the early proponents of reflective practice, Dewey describes reflection as the "sole method of escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action" (1933, p. 15). Brookfield elaborates the role of reflection as: thinking that enables recognizing the difference between "what is and what should be…"; it involves "… seeing our practice in new ways by standing outside and viewing what we do" (Brookfield 1995, p. 28).

Studies have lauded the affordances of video recordings in aiding reflection. According to Spiro, Collins & Ramachandran (2007), video recordings have the potential to capture reality in a way that is useful for reflection and thereby professional development. They provide affordances that allow teachers to "learn to notice" the impact of their teaching behaviour on their students' learning. "… because of its vividness, video can focus teachers' attention on the complex interactions between the content of learning, their learners' (re)actions and teachers' own (re)actions" (Brouwer, Besselink & Oosterheert, 2017, p. 61).

Videos can capture the complex and ever-changing contexts in which teachers make numerous on-the-spot pedagogic decisions (Hewitt, Pedretti, Bencze, Vaillancourt & Yoon, 2003). When teachers study video recordings of their classroom, they come face-to-face with the complex interplay of the social, cultural, situational, and psychological factors that form their classroom (Wong et al., 2006).

Thus videos play an important role in shaping teachers' "professional vision" (Sherin & Van Es, 2005). "Professional vision" is a term borrowed by researchers from Goodwin (1994) to refer to the type of perception that is characteristic of experts in a specific professional domain. In the context of teaching, this refers to developing the ability to notice and develop strong rationales for the chosen actions. Video viewing offers "considerable potential for developing professional vision" (Brouwer et al. 2017, p. 61).

METHODS

As a teacher educator, I have rigorously sought feedback from my learners, my colleagues and more experienced practitioners. I have also studied the manner in which my learner-teachers teach, to understand the influence of my teaching on their practice. Reflecting critically based on feedback from these sources has definitely improved my self-efficacy. However, I have realized over the years that all these sources of feedback have their limitations. Firstly, my peers or learners may withhold information from me because of politeness-related reasons. Secondly, they may not have perceptive knowledge about my learners, my lesson objectives, my long-term teacher training aims etc. These factors can potentially limit the information that I can gather from their feedback. Therefore, I decided to complement the feedback from my peers and learners with feedback from an unbiased source—video recordings of my lesson. This is what motivated the current research.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is a "form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation" (Maréchal, 2010, p. 43). Often used in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and education, it involves the researcher to critically inquire a phenomenon concerning the self; and analyse and write about the self as a researcher-practitioner. Ellis and Adams (2014, p. 271) state that this powerful qualitative research

> …is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do.

Given these inherent qualities of autoethnography, I thought it was best suited for my work. However, it is important to note that unlike certain autoethnographers whose research runs over a long duration of time, my study is situated over one academic year. Additionally, it is important to note that though my study is limited

in its scale and has limited scope with regard to broad social experiences, the results offer key insights into how video-based data-led reflection can lead to keener pedagogical awareness and CPD.

DATA COLLECTION

Since I was both practitioner and the researcher, I generated data through my observation and analysis of my video-based data. I recorded 12 routine lessons of one hour each over a period of one academic year. Since a teacher educator plays multiple roles in a teacher education class, I tried to record a range of lessons. In each one I play a different role by design. For example, the data covered classes where I was presenting an idea or concept; monitoring and scaffolding learners during collaborative lesson planning and discussion sessions; observing learner-teachers' classroom teaching skills; and giving feedback. This choice was deliberate as I wanted to gain an insight into the efficacy with which I played my various roles, and study the impact on my learners.

I used my smart phone for the purpose of recording. The phone was mounted on an inexpensive tripod stand procured for this purpose. I placed the tripod at an appropriate spot in the class at an angle where it could capture the maximum action without impeding movement in the class. I ensured that all incoming calls on the phone were blocked. Lastly, I sought permission from all my learners before recording the class. I attempted to be as natural as I could as the idea was to collect authentic data.

After each recording, I carefully transferred the footage to my computer and saved it chronologically. I mostly studied the footage at home the same evening and took notes simultaneously. I concluded each viewing of a recording with a reflective journal entry. I attempted to answer any questions that came up in my journal by reading, or watching another teaching footage, or talking to another practitioner. I remembered to always write these "answers" accompanied by attributions to source. Often, I revisited past videos and compared them with my performance in a more recent video. Such reviews helped me to study the progress in my teaching practice. I used three key questions repeatedly as I watched each video:

- What role am I playing at this point?
- Why am I playing this role at this point? Is it appropriate?
- What is the impact of my action on my learners' learning?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I collected data largely for the four prominent roles that I played in the classroom. These are discussed as follows:

Role 1: Presenter

Of the 12 lessons recorded, I prominently played the role of a presenter in 5 lessons. In my first two lessons, I noticed that my 70 learner-teachers were seated in a theatre arrangement in the mini auditorium facility in the institution, and I was standing in front of them. The white board and the projector screen were behind me. I was introducing the concept of assessment for learning (AfL). As I watched my video, I asked myself a question that I had never asked before: it was related to the role of a teacher in facilitating active learning in the classroom. How can a teacher-to-be best learn AfL? If I present to them what AfL is using a PowerPoint presentation and chalk-and-talk, will they become better users of AfL? Will they learn the skill of offering effective feedback to their learners as a way of effectively scaffolding learning? Will they learn to build criterion-based assessment simply because I had shown them a few such assessments? I realized I was not very efficient with regard to developing their skills. My adult learners could have learnt all that I had taught in these two sessions simply by going through the PowerPoint presentation and the necessary readings at home, had I sent them before the class. The difficult skill of constructing a benchmark for a criterion-based assessment, or the skill of writing/giving relevant feedback based on a child's work should be built in the class. Wasn't that the purpose of teacher education?

Working on the realization that had dawned on me after watching my video footage, I changed my lesson methodology. Not only did I bring case study based worksheets for the learners to work on, I even changed my position so that I was among the learners, working with them, rather than in front of them.

As I viewed more recent videos where I had to present information to my learners, I noticed that I chose this approach only when it was absolutely essential. I increasingly only presented information to my learners that required them to debate, evaluate or create further information. I had started using my presentation classes to challenge higher order thinking. I noticed that my learner-teachers were more involved in the learning, as compared to my initial presentation lessons. In the latter lessons, I noticed that all the learners were working in groups and developing products (like assessment tasks, and criteria for marking) – through which they could make their learning visible.

Role 2: Monitor

In 3 out of the 12 recordings, I prominently played the role of a monitor. I noticed that to monitor the group activities, I either stood around watching the learners work, or moved about in the class to check if everyone was doing their task.

Watching these recordings gave me a new perspective. By closely watching the physical response of the learners, I noticed that the group I was standing closest to was very conscious of my presence, and their actions seemed contrived. I wondered why. On the other hand, the groups that were farthest from me seemed to have a confident pattern of behaviour and this was reflected in their level of engagement with the task.

As I watched the video again, I asked myself what purpose I was serving by walking around. While I had learnt in my own teacher training days that the purpose of monitoring (as I interpreted that as walking about the class) was to ensure that everyone was on task, I questioned it now. It looked more like policing to me. I realized that by policing the learners, I could not ensure a deeper engagement with the task. This review of the video made me question the whole pertinence of the task itself. Was the task meaningful and comprehensible, and did it have the right challenge? Were the groups I had planned aiding learning in any way? This reflective questioning fed into my next lesson.

The influence of these reflections was strong: I reviewed and reworked the tasks carefully. I also reviewed the group composition. Most importantly, I realized that by walking about, I was conveying a negative message to my adult learners. They did not want supervision, they wanted to be scaffolded. In my latter monitoring-prominent lessons, I made sure I was seated with the groups, and working with them. I noticed that more careful planning of the tasks and placement of group members in each group led to keener participation and improved learning.

Role 3: Observer

In 3 of my recorded lessons, I played the role of an observer. In my first recording, as my learner-teachers taught, I sat as usual at the back of the class to write down my observations. When I carefully looked at the video, I noticed that what I could see from my position at the back of the room was limited. The camera, due to its position at eye level with the person, captured far more action. The children in my learner- teacher's class actually showed much more evidence of learning (or not-learning) than I had captured in my notes. So then why was I always seated at the back of the room? I wondered how the children would be impacted if I took up a position somewhere close to the wall in middle of the room. In the next two recorded sessions, I made sure I was in the classroom well before the children arrived; I greeted them if they noticed me, but otherwise I continued to do some work on my laptop. As the children settled down for the learner-teacher's lessons, they increasingly forgot about my existence—I became a fly-on-the-wall observer! This way I could gather very rich data about the children's learning, and in turn offer a richer feedback to the learner-teacher.

Role 4: Giving Feedback

In almost all of my video lessons I was offering feedback to my learner-teachers, either during a presentation, or during a group task, or after the learner-teacher's lessons. It was very important for me to study how my feedback was perceived and used.

I noticed that I tended to usually look at the person who I was giving the feedback to even when the discussion involved the whole class. The video allowed me to view the impact of this action on some learner-teachers seated at the far end of the room. Often, they seemed uninvolved in the discussion. I wondered how I could involve them. While I believed that the feedback I was offering to one person was relevant to the entire class, why did they not share this belief? As I reviewed the videos, I tried out newer strategies. One of the methods that seemed to bear better results was this: as a learner asked a question or created an opportunity for me to offer feedback, I checked my distance from the learner. If I was standing too close, I started inconspicuously stepping away from the learner while at the same time engaging the learner in a preliminary conversation. With each step away from the learner, I improved my vantage of the class. I moved to a position from where I could get a good view of my entire class and then engaged the whole class in the discussion by throwing back the question or situation at them, or by offering a possible solution and seeking their views on it. I noticed that this created greater engagement with the learners.

Observing videos of myself giving feedback to my learners after their teaching episode revealed that I always offered them an opportunity to first comment on what worked well in their lesson. This enabled the learners to explore the positive moments in the class when learning occurred. This approach motivated the learners and prepared them to explore opportunities where they could have maximized learning. Using feedback sessions as a dialogic reflection enabled learner-teachers to see the experience as a learning opportunity rather than a ritual where judgments were passed. They were therefore more open to learning and less defensive about the feedback. Thus the review of the videos showed not only areas that needed further attention, but also pointed to certain actions that were aiding learning and could be further strengthened.

CONCLUSIONS

On three occasions, I managed to get my colleagues to comment on the observations I had made on the basis my recordings. This feedback from my colleagues also helped me in my professional development. However, it is not always possible to seek the assistance of busy peers and this can be a limitation. Unless this method of CPD is formally scheduled in an institution's calendar, it is easy to lose oneself in the daily routine of teaching.

Another limitation of this study is that the realizations and improvements that occurred as a result of critically viewing my own lessons possibly happened because I am an experienced teacher-educator myself—I could "see" what was ineffective. Will a less experienced tertiary level teacher with no formal introduction to education and principles of learning, be able to reflect as effectively? This reinforces my previous suggestion that such CPD activities need to become more formal. When institutions put aside resources for teachers to become reflective practitioners who constantly strive to discover effective ways to make learning more meaningful for the future world citizens, they will always be able to come up with ways to address any possible issues. In the meanwhile, I will continue with my research on how to impact the scholarship of my tertiary learners. CPD can begin small—with oneself.

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