MY TRANSFORMATIONAL AND REFLECTIVE JOURNEY THROUGH THE GDTE (ILP) – A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss how the Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education – Independent Learning Pathway (GDTE ILP) has transformed me as an educator. I completed the ILP pathway, which involved gathering evidence of practice experiences and developing case studies, to show that I had achieved the following goals:

1. Analyse and employ effective learning and teaching strategies using applied, authentic and learner-centred practices informed by relevant educational theories and research.

2. Design and deliver inclusive curriculum to address the diverse needs of learners within the cultural context in which graduates will be practicing.

3. Construct and implement effective assessment practices for assessing learner progress and achievement in a range of contexts.

4. Employ reflective processes to improve practice and maintain professional currency and capability.

5. Evaluate and respond to relevant trends within the tertiary education context – locally, nationally and globally.

It is the skills and knowledge I have gained through experience, supported by my existing qualifications and training and teaching experience, that formed the basis for achieving this qualification.

The article analyses the background to my professional experience as a teacher and presents the evidence of my transformational and reflective learning journey. During this process, theories of behaviourism, Piaget's theories of education, and the ARCS model of motivation (Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction) were key to underpinning my strengths as a passionate, empathetic and supportive teacher who is able to influence others' learning and development. My transformation from a teacher-centred pedagogy to my current learner-centred approach was influenced by many educational theories. These include Social Learning Theory, experiential learning theories and media and technology theories. Through completing this qualification, I have become a more confident practitioner. I hope that what I have to say in this paper will motivate teachers to undertake appropriate teaching qualifications and improve their effective learning and teaching strategies.

EARLY LEARNING ATTRIBUTES

As a young learner from the ages of 11 to 16, I was a multitasking, innovative and relaxed person. I did not particularly focus on my school studies; rather, I wanted to participate in sporting and drama activities. I remember that my parents (particularly my father) always encouraged us children to be independent and responsible for our

daily tasks. I started to be proud of accomplishing little things in my life. Reflecting on this experience, I think the key driver behind my self-initiating and driven nature was the influence of my parents. I learnt to multitask by performing in the school's Western band as an accordion player. I improved my creative thinking ability by making fish tanks and aquariums in my spare time. Also, I learnt to tolerate and accept difficult situations that helped strengthen my empathetic personality as a teenager. I would say I was an avid learner, creative, curious and competitive as a child, and sought opportunities to learn.

A significant portion of my childhood was spent in the local Catholic church, where I learnt to be kind, empathetic, giving, cooperative and authentic. Father Rohan played a key role in my life, allowing me to realise that I am a people person. I liked learning from my peers at the church in this way. As I grew up, I continued to be involved in church activities. I believe that the church community provided me with some essential qualities that I would not have otherwise obtained. The educational environment in the school was teacher-centered, systematic, repetitive and not as interesting as what I learnt from church. Church activities by contrast were people-oriented, vibrant, skill-based and very interesting. I loved being part of the church community groups and learnt by doing things rather than taking notes.

Figure 1. Early learning attributes.

My current capabilities in education – such as being able to be cooperative with my colleagues and students, respecting and listening to other people, and being patient with challenging students – have been greatly affected by the church. Thinking back, I feel the reason why I love education is my mother's influence. I was part of her journey since I was little. I supported my mother to prepare her teaching materials, such as posters and game cards. This helped me learn faster at school and be passionate about education.

WHY I BECAME A TEACHER

I found that talking to close friends about my discoveries in my studies was a knowledge-gaining exercise. It helped me enjoy sharing my research and opinions with others. I eventually became a private tutor. I taught Advanced Level (A/L) mathematics papers to high school students. The constructive feedback I received from my students' parents

pushed me to do better and think about becoming a teacher or lecturer in the future. After qualifying to study for a Bachelor of Engineering degree at the University of Moratuwa in Sri Lanka, I started helping a few high school students to prepare for their General Certificate of Education (GCE) A/L examination.

The tuition classes were generally teacher-centered, which means that I conducted the class activities centered on myself. In my classes, students exclusively listened to me, rather than interacting with other students and me. Students were given opportunities to ask questions at any time if they needed more clarity in my explanations. The classes were very focused and disciplined. I believe the way I conducted these tuition classes was greatly influenced by the way I studied in school (teacher-centred classes), where teacher presented the information to the whole class and we were not given many opportunities contribute our ideas to the class (Yuen & Hau, 2006). I found this approach helped me to easily manage the classes. However, I felt that this approach made my class less interesting. The teacher-centred character of my early career has encouraged me to maintain a study-focused environment in my current classes.

Figure 2. My career timeline.

After completing a degree in civil engineering, I was appointed as a temporary lecturer in the department of civil engineering, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. During my time in this role, I learnt to facilitate students in groups. This helped me to develop the skills required to pay attention to individual students' needs and the group's needs at the same time. I sat down with students and discussed the aims, methodology and data collection process required for a given task. This was a group discussion in which students were given opportunities to interact with the instructor and other students so as to clearly understand what they were going to do. As discussed by Yuen & Hau (2006), in building surveying class, my teaching practice was aligned with the constructivist teaching model that allowed a creative process to take place during the interaction through group discussions.

Conducting building surveying fieldwork classes was my favourite task that I performed as a temporary instructor. In contrast to the less interesting and teacher-centred approach I used in my tuition classes, I enjoyed the highly experiential nature of the surveying demonstrations at the university. Thinking back, I enjoyed the way in which open study environments allowed students to work with others, make group decisions, discover opportunities for problem-solving and make meanings out of learnings collaboratively (Cobos & Lewallen, 2009).

Moving to New Zealand to pursue my PhD was the best decision I have ever made. Right away, it allowed me to access a bundle of teaching and consulting opportunities in education. I started to work as a private tutor, teaching NCEA physics and chemistry to a high school student. Through this experience, I gained strong face-to-face communication skills by interacting with the student. These interactions were mainly based on question-and-answer and brainstorming sessions. Gradually I acquired other students to tutor. The regular feedback I received showed that I was playing the dominant role in the class, where students had little opportunity to contribute their own

thoughts. I felt my students were nervous about asking questions or clarifying the questions I put to them during my tutorials. I believe that if I had shown more personal warmth during these private tutorials, it would have helped my students to achieve more freedom to expand their learning (Englehart, 2009).

In 2010, I started work as a part-time lecturer at the UUNZ Institute of Business in Auckland. This was my first formal teaching role in New Zealand. I am still grateful for this work opportunity that exposed me to students of different age groups and cultural backgrounds. This experience helped me to learn how to facilitate my classes, using students' experiences drawn from their respective cultures as a strategy to conduct highly engaged classes (Hagay & Tsabari, 2015). In the beginning, I was nervous and my classes were mainly based on pre-designed lecture notes and tutorials. The students' engagement in the classes was poor. Students mainly studied individually. Only a few students were comfortable enough to ask questions and participate in class discussions. Thus it proved very difficult to practice reflection in this environment (Brookfield, 2017; Brookfield, 1995). This experience taught me how to create assessments to meet the appropriate course level, aim, learning outcomes and graduate outcomes (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, & Colbert, 2014).

After the completion of my PhD research project, I started work as a lecturer in supply chain management and research methodology at the New Zealand Institute of Studies in Auckland. The key skill I developed during this role was the ability to design and facilitate research-based classes. As these classes were for professional students, student engagement was strong as they studied in small groups, making meaning out of their experiences with others. I visited each of the small groups after setting them a task. However, as suggested by Brookfield (1995), I was very careful to show the students that I trusted them. I took care to communicate my respect and intention to maintain the student-centered teaching environment. Overall, I think this was the point where I started moving towards an experiential learning approach (Brookfield, 1995).

Looking back at my past teaching roles, I would say that my main strengths lay in my ability to be passionate and positive. I mobilised my empathetic and supportive nature to help my students. I was an influential teacher who acknowledged students' capabilities. The attributes I demonstrated during my previous teaching roles were aligned with the ARCS model of motivation, behaviourism learning theory and cognitivism theory (Byram & Dube, 2008; Fitch & Semb, 1993; Tennant, 2006). Usually, my own ideas were the dominant views presented in my classes. I used a conventional teaching approach. In my classes, the student engagement level was poor, with few interactive in-class activities. Students showed a lack of interest in their studies. Often, I failed to effectively communicate with my students. As identified by Brookfield (1995) and Elen, Clarebout, Leonard, & Lowyck (2004), my earlier teaching practice was dominated by a teacher-centered paradigm.

THE TEACHER I AM TODAY

In 2016, I joined Otago Polytechnic's Auckland International Campus as a full-time lecturer in construction management and quantity surveying. The campus includes both international and domestic students. The primary pedagogical aim of my current role is to develop and deliver a learning experience known as "experiential learning" that engages students and fosters the best possible learning outcomes (Brookfield, 1995). I believe that this opportunity has reinforced the student-centred approach and reflective practices evident in my early career and transformed them into reflective experiential learning practices. Thus, I was eventually able to transform my classroom environment into a more student-centered environment (Elen, Clarebout, Leonard, & Lowyck, 2014).

MY VALUES AND SKILLS

The values and beliefs held by a teacher determine their pedagogical philosophy (Schönell et al., 2016). As discussed above, the values I hold have been influenced by the church and by the community-based activities that I have experienced. I have developed good relationships with my students, which have been nurtured over time and have

resulted in an environment conducive to learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). The organisational and planning skills I have developed help me to plan my classes carefully so as to maximise learning. I plan class activities aligned to the learning outcomes for the course and the lesson objectives for the session.

Over the past ten years of teaching experience, together with the various roles in the Toastmasters organisation that I have performed, I have become an effective communicator. I use my communication skills to identify and convey the right information to my students. In my teaching role, I am passionate about what I do because the success of my students brings me great satisfaction (Rashidi & Moghadam, 2014). I keep myself up-to-date through professional development activities such as learning about construction-related tools and producing research outputs. Moreover, I acknowledge and respect the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the multicultural educational environment in New Zealand.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

Construction management courses can be delivered either online or in a physical environment. It is essential to have a wide range of delivery methods personalised to meet the needs of a diverse learning environment (Su, Tseng, Lin, & Chen, 2011). The course content should be designed to include contextualised, work-ready learning activities to help students to become employable (Litchfield, Frawley, & Nettleton, 2010). At the same time, course content should be exciting and challenging, so as to promote a sustainable learning culture. Following Robert's (2006) model, the construction curriculum delivery strategies I use are based on advanced technologies such as Auto CAD, BIM, CostX and other technologies. The use of advanced technologies in teaching enables students to maintain up-to-date technical knowledge (Shanbari, Blinn, & Issa, 2015).

My primary delivery strategy is continuous use of visual learning, both as a useful tool for lesson contextualisation and for effective teaching activities (Bligh, Wiesemes, & Murphy, 2010). Using my whiteboard, I provide the class with a 'hit list,' which consists of the topics to be covered for the day, so that students can see a visual breakdown of the intended learning. The visual tools used in learning activities include students' recording their work on the whiteboard, to be seen and discussed by their peers.

Students are made aware of the relevant learning outcomes, and these are referred to at key points in the session, with the aim of helping the students to contextualise the lesson. I believe that the visual course content in my classes increases student engagement (Yousuf & Conlan, 2018). It helps them contextualise the materials and assists those students who have language issues. Also, the variety of class activities I use helps my students to stay active and curious in their learning journey. In addition, I have promoted active student engagement in construction studies with the use of VR models. This VR-based teaching and learning experience is based on a VR project exhibited at the Auckland Build Expo 2018. Working together on this project allowed the students to develop broader transferable skills and to evaluate their learning process relating to sustainable building features.

ASSESSMENTS

The assessment methods used in construction management classes include reports, oral presentations, computer software-based projects and exams. Having a variety of clear and transparent assessments encourages all students to utilise their specific strengths in different assessment options (Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2014). In my classes, a portion of the lesson is devoted to looking at draft submissions by the students. My feedback on these drafts guides students towards improving their final submissions. The marking and feedback provided by the lecturer should be fair, consistent and transparent. Following Sulton (1995), I provide prompt feedback on students' assessments, and this is used as a teaching tool for the class. This process provides many opportunities for students to ask questions and gain clarity about marking and feedback. Their assessments are subjected to frequent quality checks, including pre- and post-moderation, to ensure their alignment with the learning outcomes.

For example, I conducted an innovative summative assessment for the construction technology small buildings paper. In the assessment process, I created videos based on a construction site visit. My process included the building of teams with group activities, and preparing students by demonstrating linkages between the assessment questions and the site visit. I encouraged an active learning style from students who were more used to passive learning, with the video process assisting in their communication and their engagement in their learning following the site visit. Reflection was a learning tool I used with the students throughout the assessment process.

FRAMEWORK OF PRACTICE

Through completing the GDTE (ILP), I was able to reflect on my early life and past career roles in order to better understand my values, influences, strengths and weaknesses. With this in mind, I have developed my teaching framework to suit my teaching role. I believe that experiential learning combined with reflective practices is the most appropriate way to deliver an effective curriculum to students. Following Brookfield's four-lens reflective model (Brookfield, 1995), I have included self-reflection, literature reviews and students' and colleagues' views in developing my framework of teaching practice. I will consider using the pedagogical model of critically reflective practice introduced by Kamardeen (2015) to ensure that my teaching produces quality student learning. In line with this, I am keen to continually improve my teaching practice, combined with using the experiential learning model introduced by Roberts (2015), to deliver an effective curriculum for students.
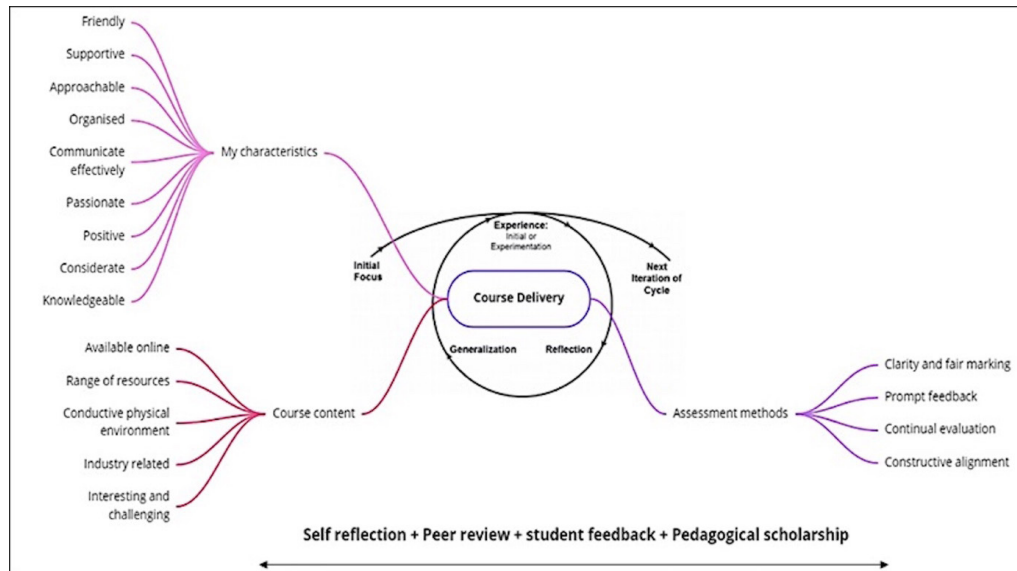

Figure 3. My model of practice. Source: Kamardeen, 2015; Roberts, 2006.

My new framework of practice has been developed based on critical reflective practice and experiential learning models. This new model of practice reflects my current values, beliefs, assumptions, teaching philosophy and vision for education.

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?

I discovered that I have been transformed into a class facilitator who is very different from the educator I was before completing the GDTE (ILP). I think that my presence in the class is now warmer and much more relaxed.

I acknowledge each student and they, in turn, support my teaching. I use experiential learning activities that are integrated into my teaching style to bring greater levels of student engagement. Students are given greater opportunities to ask questions and to clarify their understanding. In my current teaching role, I have become a person who regularly reflects on feedback received from my students. I believe that making students feel comfortable, safe and inclusive promotes more effective learning (Moon, 2004). I am confident that students learn better through experiential learning. Through this qualification, I am now confident of providing better quality service to my students and OPAIC.

ENLARGING MY FRAMEWORK OF PRACTICE

My vision of the way forward in teaching incorporates a focus on experiential learning, reflective practice, sustainable practices, inclusiveness, twenty-first-century assessment practices and community and social learning – all of which I believe are effective learning and teaching practices.

In my future teaching practice, I would like to include the experiential learning model introduced by Roberts (2006) into the pedagogical model discussed above and use it as my teaching framework (see Figure 3). I believe that the pedagogical model of reflective practice for construction educators developed by Kamardeen (2015) can be modified using experiential learning and contemplative exercises to suit my teaching approach. Thus, the course delivery pillar of the pedagogical model will be based on the experiential learning model. As a natural model, experiential learning mimics what happens to us unconsciously and makes that process conscious to us (Moon, 2004).

In my future teaching practice, I want the students to be even more at the centre of the learning experience. I will facilitate the classes to achieve the prescribed outcomes. I hope that the course delivery strategies and the reflection process utilised in my classes will help solidify the new knowledge gained and new skills learned. This approach will also help students to measure themselves. The newly acquired insights gained through the reflection process will then help students to use their learning in similar situations and to apply the principles they have learned to new or similar situations. However, I foresee that teaching the effective reflection process could be a major challenge, as reflection may be a new practice for some students.

My vision in my teaching career is to become an educator who is knowledge-driven, research-active, creative, personable and supportive. I hope to incorporate current industry practices into the curriculum by becoming a construction industry consultant in the near future.

GDTE (ILP) FACILITATOR'S REFLECTIONS (JEREMY TAYLOR)

The following analysis represents some of my reflections on Don's development as an educator and on my privileged position as his facilitator on a learning journey that lasted ten months.

Brookfield (2017) mentions that the purpose of critical reflection is to challenge our assumptions and to be open to adapting our beliefs through ongoing evaluation. This was an approach that Don seized on early on when completing the GDTE (ILP). In addition, having seen Don adapt his approach, it is clear that critical reflection has the power to help educators and to provide powerful new insights to assist with transformational learning. As Don's facilitator on his learning journey, it has been pleasing to see Don develop a highly reflective approach; as a result, the changes in his approach have been profound. For example, Don now places the student at the heart of his classroom, and the class materials he uses are constructed with the intent of allowing students to take greater ownership of their learning.

I do not doubt that Don's teaching approach has improved through completing the GDTE (ILP) and will only continue to evolve through the measurable actions he is taking with his ongoing professional development. Larrivee

(2000) discusses the need for educators to evaluate their assumptions in order to deliver a more meaningful learning experience. Through seeing Don complete the requirements for the GDTE (ILP) and through the subsequent discussions we regularly share, it is clear to me that Don's students have benefited from these changes and his classes now embody a greater sense of energy and independent learning. It has also been especially pleasing to note that Don has continued to challenge himself, as he has pursued a process of reviewing how his teaching approach can adapt to the changing conditions in which all educators find themselves in the post-Covid learning environment.

Reflecting on the beginnings of Don's learning journey with Capable NZ, it was clear how accomplished he was at the outset, with his industry experience and academic record. What was missing from Don's skill set, however, was a more analytical approach to self-evaluation. Schön (1983) argues that reflective practitioners need to review the limits of their expertise through some type of reflective discussion with the client. In this context, the client should be viewed as Don's students; through his efforts to share control and to garner the student voice it has become evident to me that Don will continue to develop his practice and deliver a richer learning environment as a result of being open to having these ongoing discussions.

In an ever-changing education environment, the power of reflection to transform should never be underestimated and, wherever possible, should be further encouraged. Keep up the good work, Don, and be mindful of the need to disseminate your successful approach with your colleagues.

Don Samarasinghe is very excited and passionate about teaching and researching in the built environment, with a strong desire for developing tertiary students and unleashing their potential. He has ten years of experiential learning and reflective practice based teaching experience in New Zealand tertiary education. His qualifications include a PhD in construction management, a graduate diploma in tertiary education, and a bachelor of civil engineering degree with first class honours.

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