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Grassroots Teacher Education Initiatives in Malaysia: An Intercultural Self-Study

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Abstract: This article describes and analyses one example of a successful grassroots-based collaborative introduction to teacher education class that was based at a small education program in a private Malaysian university. This class formed the beginning of government-sponsored program in English language primary education; developed and implemented at extremely short notice it led to an accidental but extremely informative 'shake up' of ordinary teaching practices. This in fact may offer some promise as an alternative to the heavy central planning typically found in the current Malaysian education system. Because this particular class needed to be developed over the space of a weekend and then be taught over a three-week trimester break it was organised and taught in a highly collaborative fashion. This opened up a grassroots-based and entirely non-threatening experimental space in which lecturers drifted in and out. For example an entirely impromptu session ran by this author at five minutes' notice (because there was confusion about who was to teach) led the author to realise that his academically focussed and carefully structured approach to teaching served to alienate himself from his students. It also revealed that the students in this particular class characterised their 'ideal teacher' as rather stricter and much less intellectually demanding than this author had previously presumed. The article argues that although there are challenges associated with implementing critical reflection within a Malay-Islamic context this does not necessarily preclude either some challenging discussions or interesting experiments from taking place within Malaysian teacher education classrooms.

Introduction

Anecdotal concerns about Malaysia's education system have been exacerbated by results from large-scale international education tests. While the Minister of Education has claimed that the Malaysian secondary education system outcompetes the American, British and German systems (Aminuddin, 2012) data suggests that only two percent of fifteen-year-old Malaysian participants achieved either the highest or second highest categories on the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) six-point scale of problem solving. This compares to over twenty percent of Singaporean, Korean and Japanese students (P. Lee, 2014). And while it is important to take into account social context when reading such data (Grek, 2009, p. 25) many Malaysians specifically wonder why their country ranked poorly (39th out of 44 participating countries) compared to Singapore, Malaysia's immediate neighbour and former territory (ranked first).

Critics of high-stakes testing note that the tests are often used to justify dramatic education reforms that ignore the local cultural context. Australia's recent 'declining performance' did not lead policymakers to emulate the systems of West Australia or the Australian National Territory, which averaged "very close to that of some of the 'top five' systems" (Gorur & Wu, 2014, p. 7). They instead modelled their changes on the Shanghai, Singapore, Korea and Hong Kong systems even though there was no causal evidence linking these models to the higher test scores (Gorur & Wu, 2014, pp. 3-4) and despite evidence linking those models to economic inequality and negative psychological and educational outcomes (Gorur & Wu, 2014, p. 15). Conversely, Turkey rapidly implemented a student-centred curriculum based on the success of an actually "very traditional" or teacher-centred Finnish model. This was also despite experience suggesting that the Finnish model would not work within the Turkish context (Gür, Çelik & Özoğlu, 2012, p. 9). Little attention was paid to structural problems such as the teacher education and promotion processes or issues around social inequality (Gür, Çelik & Özoğlu, 2012, p. 9) and there was a heavy emphasis on "bureaucratic rules and regulations" over actual educational experience (p. 15). While PISA results are not meaningless, they can be interpreted within the context of each education system and each local culture.

Because phenomenological criticisms of the Malaysian education system are often partisan and/or sectarian, issues surrounding freedom of speech could be stifling an open education culture. While transparency is an antidote to corruption, Malaysians must also feel safe describing the education system as they see it, i.e. without fear of persecution. Member of Parliament Zairil Khir Johari argues that Malaysian universities will continue to be weak "until fundamental problems are addressed, such as the lack of academic freedom, autonomy and the quality of the faculty" (Zachariah, 2014). Conversely, influential former Prime Minister Mahathir argues "Freedom of speech, a free press, the democratic rights to demonstrate and strike must be circumscribed to protect the country as a democracy" ("Dr M: Restrict freedom", 2014). It is not surprising, then, that Malaysia recently ranked 147th out of 180 countries for press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2014). Weiss (2009, p. 520) argues that "Malaysian students are asked to be mute and uncritical, and are structurally conditioned to accede. Alas, the nation looks bad on the global stage and graduates are unemployable when academic approaches and institutions are so stifling."

This article approaches Malaysia's education system in the place where students learn to become teachers, i.e. where much of what students have learned implicitly about the education system is consolidated and made explicit. The article focuses on how the rigid teacher education system emphasises indoctrination and rhetoric over critical thinking. M. Bakri Musa (2003, p. 236), for example, wrote that the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Malaysia:

> like the rest of the Government of Malaysia, is highly centralized, with strict hierarchal top-down command and a penchant for total control. Nothing happens in the schools, universities, or anywhere else in the vast education land without the ministry and its bureaucrats knowing and approving of it. In character and ambience the ministry resembles the old Soviet system.

Based on research conducted in a class of Malaysian government-sponsored English language specialist primary school education students, this article highlights an alternative approach to the overwhelmingly top-down educational approach as typically favoured within the Malaysian education system. The intention was to counteract the implicit assumption that proclamations and rigid performance standards can be as effective for education reform; in

fact teachers can become as alienated from their work as assembly line workers (Sarason, 1990, p. 123).

Understanding this broader authoritarianism and the prevalence of processes of indoctrination over critical discourses requires thinking about the historical development of the Malaysian education and teacher education system. The remainder of this article is divided into eight sections. The next section introduces the historical and social context in which the Malaysian education system has developed, with an emphasis on both possible ideas for organising higher education and the influence of Malay-Islamic values. The third section further discusses the idea of grassroots education initiatives as an alternative to the top-down process of education reform. The fourth and fifth sections outline the narrative-based research design for the present study and provide some reflections on ethics. The sixth section considers both critical reflective practice and the creative possibilities presented by a little unintentional chaos and unstructured and non-judgemental peer observation. The seventh section presents some data that emerged from conversations, observations and activities with the students. This is followed by some tentative conclusions.

Historical and Social Context

A pivotal moment in Malaysia's postcolonial history was May 13 1969, when race riots led to the 1970 New Economic Policy. According to Morshidi (2010) this policy led to the rise of state-centrism across the social, economic and political spheres, and "particularly so with respect to higher education" (p. 466). While from the late 1970s through the 1980s Malaysian government universities gradually became a branch of the government, only in the 1990s did the state "began to intervene in matters at the core of academic and institutional autonomy" (Morshidi, 2010, p. 463).

Lee (1996, p. 77) argues that the extension of state control also applies to teacher education, since in Malaysia teacher-training colleges share a common curriculum based around a policy of cultural integration with the Malay culture as the dominant culture. This he contrasts to policies of cultural pluralism that have been adopted by many Western nations and which lend themselves to a more decentralised education system (Lee, 1996, p. 79). Lee also notes that while many Malaysian teacher educators apparently prefer a system where pre-service teachers are trained concurrently with their undergraduate degree studies, human resource forecasters tend to prefer the flexibility of a one-year postgraduate teacher education program. Therefore when Malaysia faced an economic recession in the mid-1980s one-year postgraduate diploma teaching programs became very popular (Lee, 1996, p. 78). The research presented in this paper involves data collected during the first few weeks of a five and half year long program that encapsulated both a foundation (upper secondary school) program and a four year long degree program.

The establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2004 marks a high point in the bureaucratisation of Malaysian higher education. Although from 1996 private higher education was liberalised, policy changes have "effectively eroded [government] university autonomy" (Morshidi, 2010, pp. 465, 467). The University and University Colleges Act 1971 was recently amended to lift the ban "from forming an alliance, supporting, empathising with or opposing any political party, labour union or any organisation or group without prior permission from the university vice-chancellor" (Zurairi, 2013). However, university students still face detention for engaging in peaceful protests (S. Lee, 2014). Malaysia's commendable Commonwealth Youth Development Index ranking (17th out of 51 countries) is held down by youth political participation (47th of 52 countries) (The Commonwealth, 2013, pp. 8, 78).

Morshidi (2010) frames the issue of academic freedom within ideological debates about state-centric and neoliberal models of university development (see Hood, 1991). While the move from the former to the latter involves placing a greater emphasis on "issues such as efficiency, effectiveness, delivery, flexibility, measurement, and outputs" it neglects "the normative ideals of equality, common good, and justice" (Morshidi, 2010, p. 468). While neoliberal universities are often ethically compromised, state-centred models are not *always* necessarily better. And while affirmative action can be justified as a correction of socio-economic inequalities resulting from colonialism, Malaysia's implementation neglects the growing inequality between the Malay elite and the general Malay population (Kenayathulla, 2014, p. 6). John Rawls' Theory of Justice, which allocates welfare based on income rather than ethnicity, might provide a better model for social policy within the Malaysian context (Kenayathulla, 2014, p. 1). Even Mahathir argues that the beneficiaries of affirmative action "seemed to take their preferential treatment for granted and that low grades were sufficient for university admission under the quota system" (Kenayathulla, 2014, p. 3).

Morshidi (2010) argues that the 'idea of a university' is in crisis "because it is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state, which is declining in importance in a globalised world" (p. 468). But in Malaysia it is precisely the use (and abuse) of the state that threatens the 'idea of a university', at least as understood by Oakeshott (2004). Ann Rosnida, Zainor & Malakolunthu (2013) argue that while the Malaysian Qualifications Authority monitors and evaluates the administrative aspects of academic programs it is unclear whether it can ascertain the quality of actual classroom teaching (p. 3). The Authority's very rationale of promoting standardisation in teaching may also inhibit creativity and a sense of ownership over the learning process (Sohail et al., cited in Ann Rosnida et al., 2013, p. 5).

While there are limitations associated with employing state-centred approaches to develop the Malaysian education and higher education systems, the same is true of employing more neoliberal models. Instead, we may also want to explore aspects of 'grassroots' methods that allow ordinary citizens (in this case myself and my colleagues working alongside teacher education students) to actively engage in dialogues (see Winton & Evans, 2014) although these should be distinguished from fake grassroots education reform groups (see Daniel Katz' blog post reproduced in Strauss, 2014). This argument is based on the distinction between learner-centred education and learn*ing*-centred education, which involves "using what works to help pupils to learn" (see Schweisfurth, 2011, pp. 430). The former is often misunderstood as variously a 'policy panacea' and a symbol of modern Western education. With often-hurried implementation there is little consideration about practical and technical issues or the role of cultural expectations about learning generally and in relation to discipline and teacher-student power relations specifically (Schweisfurth, 2011, pp. 427-428).

Returning to the particular context of teacher education, Minnis (1999, p. 173) advises caution when promoting Western ideas of reflective practice within a Malay-Muslim context, arguing "teaching methods and assumptions about learning must be filtered through the local culture if they are to be successfully adapted." He argues that while technical reflection simply involves selecting one of several available approaches to meet predetermined objectives, situational reflection requires making an informed choice of action based on a theoretically informed understanding of the alternatives and their implications. Critical reflection however is typically the most challenging because it incorporates a broader moral element and therefore often problematises "both expected outcomes and alternatives as well as organisational context and more societal, global concerns" (Minnis, 1999, p. 175). While Western understandings of critical reflection presuppose that teachers possess or strive towards professional autonomy and freedom, this is not necessarily the case within a Malay-Muslim context.

Minnis (1999) argues that while some Malay-Muslim values are shared with many other Southeast Asian cultures – including moderation, communitarianism, consensus building, deference to authority and support for strong forms of punishment – other values are less obviously shared (pp. 177-178). The Brunei Malay values he discusses are however broadly similar to Malaysian Malay cultural values. Therefore given the limited research on cultural values and educational reform within the Malaysian context, Minnis' (1999) work is of some use here. Indeed the relationships between Malay people in Malaysia and minority group members in Malaysia share similar characteristics to the relationships between Brunei Malay people and minority group members in Brunei. For example the following description of Brunei very roughly describes the situation in Malaysia:

> The Chinese … have considerable economic influence and expertise but play a negligible role in running the country. Indigenous groups tend to remain on the margins of … society unless individuals convert to Islam and/or intermarry with Malays. Only qualified Malays and a handful of ethnic Chinese are allowed into the [government] *Universiti*. Hence virtually all pre-service and active [government school] teachers are of Malay origin (Minnis, 1999, pp. 178).

Blunt (1998) characterises Brunei people as featuring high power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance, low individualism, and medium masculinity. High power distance involves considering unequal power levels normal and in his study was marked by the close supervision of employees, low implicit trust, little open disagreement with employers and centralised decision-making (Blunt, 1998, p. 236). High uncertainty avoidance refers to discomfort with unstructured, unpredictable, and unclear situations and support for both strict codes of conduct and the idea of absolute truth. This is represented by resistance to change, low risk-taking, preference for clear rules, conflict avoidance, low individual initiative, reluctance to compromise, distrust of outsiders, ritual behaviour, and micromanagement (Blunt, 1998, p. 236). Low individualism, a general feature of collectivist societies, relates to the development of close 'in-groups' based on duty, loyalty, seniority and personal relationships, and the rejection of modern management practices. Rules were often strictly enforced in the presence of poor personal relationships but freely circumvented based on a sense of reciprocity (Blunt, 1998, p. 237). Finally, masculinity refers to the enforcement of hegemonic masculinity among men and emphasised femininity among women. Medium masculinity was reflected by the predominance of men in senior positions and the assertiveness of those women holding senior positions (Blunt, 1998, p. 237).

The characterisation of Brunei Malay values presented in the previous paragraph reveals potential points of difference from my own values and my own views on teaching and learning. Identifying primarily as a sociologist, critical theory features centrally in my worldview and ethics, as do humanism and reason. I prefer low power distance; feeling pleased when Malaysian students mistakenly address me by my title and given name rather than my title and surname. I also prefer low uncertainty avoidance; sometimes confusing Malaysian students by prefacing answers with 'well, it depends what you mean by…' and ending my answers with a counterargument. I also tend to towards high individualism, and in particular adhere strongly to the ideas of meritocracy and fairness; I see teaching as a craft in which people must find their own voice and not just follow general technocratic prescriptions. And I also tend towards low masculinity; my doctorate examined the experiences of men who play 'a girls' game' (Tagg, 2012). Finally, my view of education is as an implicitly political activity in practice but also, at its best, as a never-ending journey of discovery and not just a process of social reproduction. At its best, I see education (like science) as primarily not about answers, but as about *questions*.

Grassroots Education Initiatives

Ann Rosnida et al. (2013) note that common forms of staff development in Malaysia include in-service workshops, courses and training such as the Basic Teaching Methodology Course. But while working to increase pedagogical knowledge, they rarely affect actual practice (Ann Rosnida et al., 2013, p. 5). Furthermore, because the facilitators tend to be 'detached' from the participants they can actually undermine effective teaching (Azam & Zainurin, 2011, pp. 5-6). Finally because even passive resistance to educational change can form in settings "where there is high respect for authority and a top-down approach to implementation" policy changes do not necessarily translate into changes in practice (Jarvis, Dickerson, Thomas & Graham, 2014, p. 110).

Grassroots education initiatives may provide a culturally appropriate way to help resolve these issues. Given that some degree of globalisation and multiculturalism is taking place in Malaysia, such an approach could allow Malaysians to articulate their views on teaching practice in a non-confrontational manner. Hughes, Jewson & Unwin (2007, pp. 2-4) describe the idea of communities of practice as a potentially powerful alternative to the 'standard paradigm' of learning as an individual process in which information is transmitted from expert to learner. From the point of view of communities of practice "active social participation was not so much an adjunct to learning, or a context to frame them, as … the vehicle for learning itself" (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin, 2007, p. 3). They could provide an alternative to the transmission-oriented strategy that is based on a deficit model of learning and the idea of teaching as merely a technocratic skill that requires little critical thinking (see Grossman, 1992, p. 174). It also keeps open the possibility of asking more critical questions about power and authority and the fundamental goals of schooling (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 9). Challenges associated with this transition include the time that collaborative work requires, the limited emphasis on quality teaching within Malaysian universities and the absence of a culture of sharing (Ann Rosnida et al., 2013, p. 9; see also Mohayiden, Azirawani, Kamaruddin & Margono, 2007). Furthermore, any new approach may be perceived as a 'foreign' model of education.

Grassroots education initiatives will most likely flourish if they emerge organically and will most likely fail if imposed uncritically from above without teachers feeling a sense of ownership (Haynes, cited in Jarvis et al. 2014, p. 93). If teachers are apathetic about or hostile towards innovative teaching it is hardly surprising that these initiatives rarely emerge. Ann Rosnida et al. (2013) argue that while communities of practice can form at the faculty or departmental level, the MOHE should monitor such initiatives "to ensure that adequate balance is set towards improving teaching" and to "reward and provide ample recognition to public and private universities that strive hard to upgrade the quality of teaching" (pp. 13-14). But this may prove counterproductive, as Malaysian reforms are already very top-down (Jarvis et al., 2014, p. 92) and therefore not responsive to local differences and grassroots concerns. Even when conceived at the faculty level, reforms may exacerbate power differentials between senior management and individual faculty. Similarly, modifying one's teaching, let alone preparing external documentation, can only be sustainable if it increases efficiency and not just paperwork.

Dinkelmann (2003, p. 8) advocates teacher education self-study because unlike dialogue journals or ethnographic studies it is not a 'stand-alone technique' but a whole scale approach to teacher education. Samaras & Freese's (2006, p. 16) characterisation of self-study includes the process by which teachers' research is aimed at improving practice in a way that both involves their colleagues and brings in 'critical friends' who can provide constructive feedback. However, as with Minnis' (1999, p. 173) analysis of three levels of reflection within the Brunei Malay context, some caution is needed when extending this to

Malaysia. For example Samaras & Freese (2006, p. 16) note how "self-study teacher educators question educational practices in their own classrooms and introduce alternative research methods at institutions of higher learning." Similarly, Loughran (2007) points out that self-study research must move beyond a description of the personal so that it does not simply become a rationalisation for existing practices. An important limitation of this approach to research is the temptation "not through any overt form of pretense or intentional deception, but rather because the term itself invites interpretations that unwittingly favor private over public theory" (Loughran, 2007, p. 13). To help align theory and practice the research should locate the practices within the context of wider philosophical roots (Loughran, 2007, p. 14), which in this case is quite explicit given the large differences between my own and the students' cultural values.

Dinkelmann (2003, p. 9) employs Dewey's (1933) theory of reflective thinking to argue that reflection is central to effective education much like a systematised form of 'reflection on action' (see Craft & Paige-Smith, p. 15). And while we need to be cautious about the validity and quality of self-study research (Feldman, 2003) it can produce knowledge about both specific reflective techniques and help refine theoretical understandings of effective reflection (Dinkelmann, 2003, pp. 9-10). The importance of modelling reflective practice in teacher education also stems from the 'hidden curriculum' (see Cornbleth, 1984) because teacher education self-study "sends a message that reflective teaching is more than a hollow slogan" (Dinkelmann, 2003, p. 11). Furthermore, self-study involving students can be a powerful form of teacher education as it folds together students' and teacher educators' reflective practice (Dinkelmann, 2003, p. 13).

Importantly given the arguments in the preceding section, self-study can contribute to programmatic change. In a sense, a "radical but quiet kind of school reform" happens whenever teacher educators perform self-study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, cited in Dinkelmann, 2003, p. 13). However, self-study research can also lead to more widespread change that while custom-made for that setting also informs broader issues. A range of factors shape this potential for change, including the nature and use of participants' communication channels and the institutional support (Dinkelmann, 2003, p. 14). Self-study is therefore most powerful when completed not in isolation but collaboratively, because this raises opportunities for recognising alternative possibilities. This parallels broader trends in educational research such as the shift from a process-product model of teacher education research towards more interpretive and critical approaches.

This article does not however advocate an *entirely* grassroots-based approach to education. As Fullan (1994, p. 13) argues, because both top-down and bottom-up approaches to educational have critical flaws, perhaps a careful blend of the two may work better; where those in central planning can be providing a general direction, supporting local actions, resourcing and directing human resources policy, those at the local level can focus on taking action, developing an appropriate vision and shared collaborative culture, developing a 'learning organisation' and becoming proactive in relation to external agencies and events. Specifically, Fullan (1994) argues that compared to the reverse situation, which often creates confusion and resentment, "it is much more powerful when teachers and administers [*sic*] begin working in new ways only to discover that school structures must be altered" (p. 14). In this sense this article argues that changes in teacher education that are driven more substantially at the grassroots level can benefit both trainee teachers and their future students. In this case, it consists of a dialogue between me and my colleagues and the primary school English education students. The students began their studies in 2012, at around the same time that the MOE reverted back to the policy of teaching mathematics in science in the national language rather than in English.

The more grassroots-oriented approach adopted here is one that moves beyond a focus on leadership held by powerful individuals in positions of authority and includes "the role of individuals outside authority in leadership and consider leadership a collective process that is working to create change" (Kezar & Lester, 2011, p. 4). In this case, the grassroots approach involved both my own and my colleagues' initiatives to encourage the students to reflect on their own approaches to learning and teaching, and well as the students' examination of their own assumptions about learning and teaching. For the purposes of this article the higher officials in the Teacher Education Division of the Ministry of Education were defined as the powerful individuals in positions of authority. This was because from a distance they were, in principle, empowered to dictate many aspects of the program. And although of course as academic staff we were in relative position of power over the students, it was our express intention to try to exert this power as gently as possible. While there are good reasons to proceed with caution when engaging within unfamiliar cultural contexts, there are also encouraging signs that many urbanised Malaysian youth are becoming more outward looking and media-savvy (Lim, 2013). Furthermore, the degree program discussed here was explicitly promoted to the Teacher Education Division as an experiment involving teacher education within an 'international' Malaysian university campus.

Research Design

The remainder of this article examines a three-week period of instruction at a small private Malaysian university education program located in a semi-rural and conservative part of Malaysia. The participants consisted of half a dozen full time and part time education lecturers (four ethnic Malay females and two expatriate White males, including myself) and twenty-four government-sponsored pre-university education students (twenty-three ethnic Malay and one ethnic Indian; twenty females and four males). All the lecturers held teaching qualifications except for myself, whose background is in the sociology of sport and the sociology of gender. The other expatriate lecturer also held a doctoral degree, in education.

The project began when I was asked by my Head of Department to document the three-week unit beginning the five and a half year English language specialist primary school teacher qualification. At the time, however, I had already been reflecting on my recent teaching experiences, and had noticed two seemingly separate problems that here function as informal 'research questions'. First, when employing a linear approach to teaching I had noticed a slide towards what Kinchin (2012, p. E46) calls 'non-learning', or learning "characterised by an acquisition of information without any parallel development in understanding." Second, given my heavy teaching load and the wide range of assigned units (during my three and a half years in this position I taught twenty-two *different* units) there was little time to prepare highly structured lectures. Essentially, I was interested in exploring different ways to address these problems.

Although not initially conceptualised as a self-study, this research meets many of the criteria for this form of research. Specifically self-study research is typically used to reframe practice to improve pedagogy, to help challenge my own tacit understandings through interaction with others, to promote discussion within a professional community, and typically uses multiple, mainly qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004, pp. 859-860). I have already commented on how this study emerged from reflections on my own experiences working within the Malaysian education system and my own recognition that my own approaches to teaching was not optimal in this context. As described below, the study also employs a wide range of largely qualitative methods to capture the some of the characteristics of the small

professional community that emerged involving both myself and my colleagues as well as the students themselves.

The context for this study was particularly interesting because notification about the contract to deliver the full diploma and degree program and the students' acceptance into the program was given only a few days before these classes commenced. Also, because it needed to run in line with the government teachers' college academic calendar, it took place during an end of trimester break. Finally, prior to these students' arrival the whole department had only been in operation for four months, and with just two privately funded students enrolled in an early childhood education degree. The arrival of the government-sponsored students therefore represented both an exciting academic challenge and some financial relief. My tasks included coordinating the initial intensive three-week program, constructing a model primary school classroom, and documenting the three-week program; an interesting challenge for someone without a teaching qualification.

Due to the limited time, the unit was developed hastily through a collaborative brainstorming session in which different faculty members including myself suggested a range of topics to which they could contribute (see appendix). While normally it would have been taught by one faculty member and been structured around a standard textbook, no one was willing to teach the entire unit themselves at such short notice and during the trimester break. The unit was therefore much more varied and experimental; space even opened for students to informally contribute to the curriculum and recognise their "unique social identities, not as problems, but as profound sources of knowledge that could help us illuminate aspects of our shared world and inform the ways we conceptualise our pedagogies" (Campano in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 17-18). While one session involved discussing a popular education blog and meeting the author, another involved a workshop on basic first aid with a medical lecturer. A further session was based around academic referencing and another was an open session with visiting retired Australian primary school teacher. The emphasis was not on teaching a set quota of content but rather to get the students thinking about their own background and assumptions as a way to improve their ability to communicate to a range of people in a variety of settings.

The data for this study involves narrative-based accounts. Such an approach includes reflection of humanist and poststructuralist traditions in contemporary social research as "modes of resistance to existing structures of power [or] try to change people's relations to their social circumstances" (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou 2013, p. 4). Narrative-based social research first emerged out of these two parallel movements; holistic person-centred humanist approaches which tend to focus on individual case studies and life histories, and post-structuralist and associated traditions that unlike the former emphasise "narrative fluidity and contradiction, with unconscious as well as conscious meanings, and with the power relations within which narratives become possible" (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2013, p. 4). The research was strengthened by moving beyond a straightforward description of the finding and also explaining what counts as evidence.

The present study employed both macro- and micro-level data, so as to connect history and biography (Mills, 2000 [1959], p. 3). At the *macro*-level evidence included: 1. Critical academic and popular literature, as discussed in this article; 2. Informal discussions with Malaysian academics including my colleagues in the education program discussed here, but also social scientists (including my former colleagues) and physical scientists (including my wife's colleagues) in a range of Malaysian government universities; 3. My five years of 'participant-observation' as a Malaysian-based academic at two government universities and this private university; 4. Informal discussions with Malaysian students over the five years and at the same universities. At the *micro*-level evidence included: 1. My 23 000-word reflective diary from the three weeks, which included basic descriptions of the daily events,

my feelings about what went well and what did not, and my subsequent reflections about how I and everyone else was responding to the events; 2. The students' work relating to their expectations about and experiences of the three-week program, which included both essays they wrote based on their reflective diaries as well as in-class activities, some of which are described in this article; 3. Informal conversations with both staff and students involved in the program, some of which were recorded in my reflective diary; 4. A review of 508 photographs and short videos taken over the three weeks, which involved a similar reflective process as described above; 5. Critical reflection on my own experiences as a student in New Zealand. Due to the limitations of space, however, not all this material is presented here.

Others strategies include describing how we construct our representations, by using triangulation (in this case of both multiple data sources and multiple representations of the self-study itself) and by demonstrating the pedagogical value of subsequent changes, as discussed later (Feldman 2003, pp. 27-28). These suggestions match broader qualitative research guidelines. Mason (2002, p. 109) for example notes that data can be read not just literally but also interpretatively (considering what can be inferred from the data) and reflexively (to "locate you as part of the data that you have generated"). Lincoln & Guba (cited in Maykut & Morehouse 1994, pp. 146-147) emphasise the usefulness of an audit trail, working as a research team, and member checks for qualitative research. So although a self-study with a single author, the argument here is precisely that radical transparency can work within the Malaysian teacher education system. Member checks were carried out with both selected students and faculty during and after the research period and this included presenting the main argument of this article at a workshop at the university campus. So while the Malaysian education system is instinctively authoritarian, the experience of an open and collaborative classroom setting provided important learning opportunities for my colleagues, the students, and me. They also relate to the earlier comments about critical reflective practice and Malay-Islamic values (Blunt, 1998, pp. 236-237; Minnis, 1999, pp. 177-178).

Ethics

Before continuing we need to address some ethical issues. The university in which the study was conducted only formed a research ethics committee some time after the research was completed. While it was therefore impossible to gain formal ethical clearance, I do have previous experience conducting ethics committee-approved research involving highly marginalised participants (see Tagg, 2012). The following steps were taken to ensure ethical compliance (see Blaikie, 2000, p. 20): 1. Students were informed at the beginning that I would be in every session for the three-week program and would document the activities. 2. The students were informed during their first day on campus that while class attendance was required (by the Teacher Education Division) they were free to leave the classroom at any time if they 'needed to go to the bathroom.' 3. The students were informed that they had a right to privacy, that they could have data removed from the study should they wish, and that no published data would identify them as individuals. 4. The students were continuously involved with the 'meaning making' of the data. 5. This article was presented as a paper at a workshop in the faculty, and some of the students attended. So although it is possible that the students felt some pressure to cooperate, effort was made to provide the students control over their participation.

It is also important to comment on Malaysia as a post-colonial society, especially since this article describes the experiences of a Westerner working in a conservative state. This raised some interesting questions. How should I approach students whose experiences and beliefs are very different from my own? In what way can the aspects of critical thinking

that relate to reflective practice, for example, be ethically taught in a state where freedom of expression is often curtailed? In a more practical sense, how should I interact with students with widely disparate experiences of speaking to native English speakers? These are difficult questions within a private 'international' university but even more challenging within a government-sponsored program (given the restrictions on freedom of expression; see Weiss, 2005).

Critical Reflective Practice

Certain paradoxes form the foundation of this article. While neither the early organisation of this program nor the state of the Malaysian education system is in my view ideal, the combination provided an opportunity for staff to experience a range of different teaching styles and philosophies in a non-threatening way. For example I was surprised to learn that I was the only staff member who regularly used PowerPoint. In this case the collaboration was forged by the sheer intensity of the program planning. As I helped plan the program literally as the students were en route to the campus, I felt it necessary to re-evaluate my teaching philosophy. The stress associated with preparing both the classroom and the curriculum caused me to reconsider exactly how much class preparation is really necessary. The content of my teaching in the previous trimester was also perhaps significant: While I had successfully used direct instruction for a developmental psychology unit, I had quickly abandoned this approach when teaching units on reflective practice and basic academic skills because they seemed better suited to discussion-based classes. This was not previously obvious to me, perhaps because I have no formal training in education. In addition to thinking about my own primary school education, the process of designing the model classroom drove home the issues associated with my teaching philosophy.

Only some time later did it become obvious that these intensive three weeks were so interesting from a self-study perspective. My previous attempt to understand the issues associated with improving education involved securing a research grant to examine the experiences of returning overseas-based Malaysian doctoral students (see Tagg, 2014). While this helped clarify some broader issues, it offered few immediate solutions. Some general issues with my teaching were, however, already apparent. The government university-based students that I had taught social theory and International Relations to in a previous position had found my teaching difficult, mainly it seems because I found the idea of merely giving the students basic facts to memorise misguided (see "Remove Moral Studies", 2014). But my desire to provoke deeper thinking was also sometimes problematic because my generally liberal ideas were occasionally antithetical to some of the students' core beliefs. Finally, the language barriers were substantial. Not only can I not speak the Malay language but also my Malaysian students tended to be defined as 'modest' users of the English language (band three on the Malaysian University English Test; see Rusilah, 2012, p. 95). Indeed, many Malaysian English *teachers* do not have a strong command of the language ("Study: 37%", 2014). It was through these observations that the 'research questions' emerged.

This initial reflection phase ended with the announcement that the students were arriving. Through the program documentation I observed every session during the three-week period; and indeed many of my colleagues also visited each other's classes both out of curiosity and to provide practical and emotional support. The Head of Department's simple suggestion that our model classroom should have large round tables started me thinking about my own primary school experiences. Interestingly, the Teacher Education Division officer supervising the start of the program expressed surprise at this idea. Furthermore, when the students first entered the classroom I noticed their anxious expressions quickly evaporate;

they also seemed surprised. Later they explained that while they initially expected to be taught in a lecture theatre they were in fact very happy with the model classroom and recognised that it would support more collaborative learning. Jarvis et al. (2014, pp. 91-92) note that exams are widely considered the most important assessment method in Malaysian teacher education programs and point out that some teachers resist social constructivist models because "subject knowledge has prime importance." Here constructivism can be understood as the idea "that learning is constructed from experience when the learner, in collaboration with others engages in activities which are realistically situated and incorporate the opportunity to test the new-found knowledge" (Edward, 2001, p. 431).

While social constructivists do value both subject knowledge and exams as a legitimate measurement tool, they argue that some important aspects of learning are harder to measure in this way. Certainly, some teachers may argue: How can students learn if they are talking? However, a more pertinent question might be: How can they learn if they are sleeping? If the first important lesson involves learning to enjoy learning then it seems appropriate to leave some space open for students' contributions even if evidence suggests novice learners find fully guided instruction most effective even if they enjoy it less (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark 2006). While the fully guided approach may make sense when the lesson objective is something discrete like a math problem it seems less relevant in cases where it is the students and not the teacher that know the 'solution' – such as here where an expatriate lecturer needed to blend the best of his own and local approaches to education. Indeed some practices that are already well-accepted elsewhere may be considered innovative in the Malaysian context: consider the recent proposal "to regularly paste students' work on the classroom walls and to change them on a regular basis" (Mahavera 2014). While inappropriate to blindly adopt policies from disparate social contexts, ideas developed elsewhere will not *necessarily* be problematic; the question, often, involves listening carefully and figuring out how to best match these ideas to local contexts.

Results and Discussion

The *ad hoc* planning and iterative approach to teaching led to some interesting developments that seemed to serve the students well; in other words there appeared be potential for more collaborative grassroots action at least within this local context. Because the program was designed as an open collaboration though a faculty brainstorming session, there was 'fluidity' within each session. Specifically, on several occasions the nominated lecturer arrived late, left early or even failed to turn up at all. While Rosnani (2012, p. 481) laments that private university faculty also are increasingly "adopting the civil service and not the private company attitude" this fluidity and uncertainty actually provided valuable opportunities for staff to both experiment and observe others' teaching.

This sort of informal collaboration was less threatening than an OFSTED-style review process (see Cullingford, 1999) and also promoted transparency. In fact I was often surprised by the simplicity of others' lessons: Typically a small activity followed by as much discussion as possible. One session for example was based around the theme of English and music because that colleague found songs a fun and effective way to learn English (see Cheung, 2001) and specifically for refining pronunciation of the *s* sound. While apparently not the most efficient way to teach (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark 2006) it helped develop the students' confidence to express their opinions in a still unfamiliar context. In contrast my teaching sessions seemed over-planned. While partly reflecting a desire to keep a 'tighter rein' over my session, as I was teaching more theoretical topics, my micromanagement was clearly counterproductive. While I aimed to teach a lot, this intensity alienated myself from

my students and solidified their perceptions of me as both culturally different and slightly intimidating. This also made it harder for the students to approach me personally.

This collaboration also gave me a context to contrast my heavily planned classes to my improvised sessions 'thrown together' due to my colleagues' unexpected absences. One such activity simply involved asking the students to respond to the question: What is an ideal teacher? The students drew a picture, labelled it with words, and then described a classmate's picture to the group, i.e. as a modified 'think, pair, share' activity (see Kagan 1989). When a colleague wandered in near the end of the session (another case of non-threatening transparency) a natural opportunity arose for us all to revise and present our work together. We made a list of key words on the whiteboard and then discussed why they seemed important. In this activity the students' ideas were considered as valuable as the teachers': While heavily scripted PowerPoint presentations are implicitly teacher-centred, a blank whiteboard signifies unbounded possibilities (Elliot, 1991, p. 10). In addition to promoting more learner-centred active learning it was also learn*ing*-centred because the parameters of the activity were negotiated with the students. This presented the possibility of open and transparent communication.

The students' drawing and associated notes also provided me valuable information. They emphasised teachers' physical appearance and personality as well as order and respectability much more than I had expected (for example see Figure 1 and Figure 2). In the figures, an ideal female teacher is 'fashionable' and 'strict and friendly' and an ideal male teacher as 'neat and tidy' and 'not gonna [*sic*] use to cane the student.' In fact, physical appearance featured in 21 of 22 descriptions, although reflexively speaking this also matched the Head of Department's earlier emphasis on embodied professionalism. The first relevant word each student selected was: Neat (n=6), well dressed (n=5), tidy (n=5), appropriate clothes (n=1), fashionable (n=1), looks professional (n=1), good appearance (n=1) and wearing a name tag (n=1). One student specifically described the ideal male teacher as wearing a tie, tucking in their shirt and without long hair while another said a bad teacher "is not wearing tie, or sock!" and "Have a very long-hair." All ideal male teachers were shown wearing a tie (n=9) and several wore a nametag (n=5). All but one ideal female teacher wore traditional Malay clothing like *baju kurung* (n=12) and all but two wore a headscarf that covered all the hair (n=11). The only exception was a female teacher wearing a tracksuit (emphasising active learning and "active in sports"), pigtails, and a tiara ("to attract student").

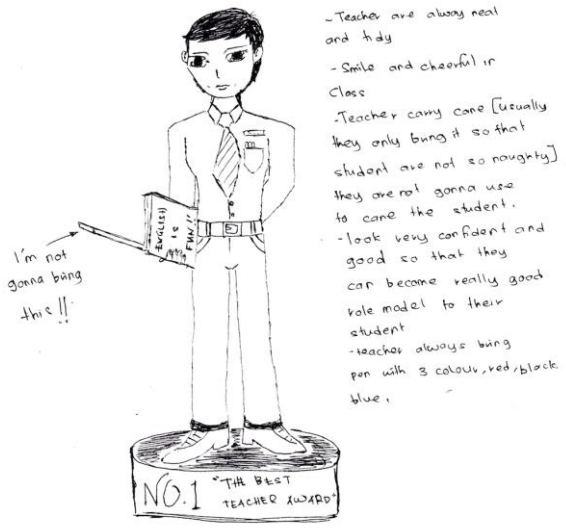

Figure 1: An 'ideal teacher' (male)

Figure 2: An 'ideal teacher' (female)

The results above show how inverting the focus of the classroom can both help form connections and provide valuable information. These students' representations seemed significantly more conservative than my own generally subversive views. This may reflect what Weiss (2009, p. 502) defines as intellectual containment within Malaysian universities, at least compared to my own tendencies. Weiss (2009, p. 501) argues that while in general the identity 'student' "commonly bears a presumption of activism" this is now rarely the case in Malaysia (interestingly a similar argument has been made about my own *alma mater*; see Green, 2015). Indeed, if teachers "read the campus as isolated and protected from things political, and know little of the repertoires and past experience of student activism … the mobilizational advantages of their setting are diminished" (Weiss, 2009, pp. 504-505). Of course these students' comments may not simply reflect their own values; they could consist of a (mis)perception of the lecturers' values. Indeed given the context it may not even be possible to draw a meaningful distinction between the two.

While the students connected good teaching to professionalism and that to formal clothing they were also often receptive towards the Socratic ideal of a university "as a place for public discourse" (Kwok, cited in Weiss, 2009, p. 502). At the end of three weeks the students each submitted a short (≈1000 words) piece of writing based on their reflective diaries. Presented here are examples from each of the first five essays on my pile. The first described initial fear followed by pleasure in leaving behind a "surrounding where there are only Malay people" and learning to speak English to international students. The second compared "the boarding school that I have been locked up for the last five years" to the freedom of "dress[ing] up in whatever fashion that we want" and "be able to express ourselves in the public." The third said "learning is not just going to school and listen to what the teachers are going to teach" and the fourth was proud to have in three weeks "overcome the feeling of anxiety and shyness … and I have become a very independent person." The fifth compared the concept of ARM (see Jarvis et al. 2014) with having "never experience a cute kindergarten decoration of a classroom." Even if this sort of open discussion is a less efficient way to learn than direct instruction (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark 2006) such discovery either inside or outside the classroom can be valuable for the simple pleasure it can bring.

The deeper we delve into the students' writing the more nuance becomes evident. Many students emphasised the ideal of teachers being nice and not *too* strict; perhaps students' cultural frameworks were on occasion somewhat transitional and contested. Or

alternatively perhaps this just reflects a tension between the Malay values of moderation and respect for authority. Figure 1 shows a teacher with a cane modified by the statements "I'm not going to bring this!!" and "usually they only bring it so that student are not so naughty." Figure 2 is accompanied by the phrases "Strict and friendly" and "A funny person. Likes to tell jokes to her students." Figure 2 is perhaps more representative of the drawings overall, although interestingly neither figure depicts the teacher smiling. The 22 drawings were evenly split between beaming smiles (n=8), a medium or meek smile (n=7) and serious expressions (n=7). However, 21 of 22 students emphasised that ideal teachers have a supportive emotional disposition: Smile (n=9), friendly (n=7), humour (n=4) and caring (n=1). Only six chose words such as fierce (n=2), cane (n=1), strict (n=1), punish (n=1) and firm (n=1). This suggests that in this instance the students were in fact not fully 'contained' intellectually.

Of all the pictures depicting a cane, pointer, or paddle (n=3), only Figure 1 looks even slightly inclined to use it (and, as noted above, is explicitly qualified by "I'm not going to bring this!!"). Indeed, the few disciplinary-themed words were softened, for example: "Should have fierce personality *a bit* so students will respect to the teacher" and "Fierce face *but kind heart*" (emphases added). One said that teachers should *not* "show any bad attitudes" and another that teachers should not "scold us if we answer it wrong or said do [not] know." A further student said "a religious teacher do not punish their students with a few stokes of rattan [cane], so the students love songkok-weared teacher [*sic*]." (A *songkok* is a hat worn by Southeast Asian Muslims). Many students seemed to recognise external discipline such as "sanctions and punishment such as office referrals, corporal punishment, suspensions, and expulsions" (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle 2010, p. 48) as central to the Malaysian education system. They appeared, however, to have mixed feelings about corporal punishment specifically. There may have been some tension between their cultural and religious beliefs (all but one of the students was Muslim) and their recognition that corporal punishment is rarely practiced in Western education systems.

The ideal teacher was rarely described as an intellectual leader, and certainly nothing close to what Weiss (2009) might describe as a teacher-activist. While several (n=9) identified speaking in a loud voice as important the sum total of intellectual skills identified were: A lot of knowledge (n=3) teaching in many and/or creative ways (n=2), smart (n=1), thinking skills (n=1) and managing the classroom environment (n=1). These were typically at the bottom of a list of six or seven items and so may have been included as an afterthought. Of these, only creativity, being smart and thinking skills emphasises higher-order thinking skills. While one student identified both 'lots of knowledge' and 'creativity', the latter was justified as "so that the students will enjoy the class." The student added that teachers "have to be attractive so that the students will [be] happy with them." Of the two remaining students who emphasised higher-order or critical thinking skills, one identified both thinking skills and voice projection and the other being "able to teach in many ways" and being "creative during learning lessons." Interestingly, none identified English proficiency as a key attribute. This is perhaps because the Malay language, religion, and royalty constitute constitutionally protected "pillars of Malayness" (Mauzy, 2006, p. 53). This exercise provided information that I had missed when teaching public speaking at another Malaysian university and this relates to possible discrepancies between ideal Malaysian teachers (clean, kind and supportive) and my own ideals (provocative and intellectually demanding). It would be interesting to carry out this activity with students in other settings and compare the results.

This radically transparent collaborative program disintegrated as quickly as it was formed. With a new trimester beginning immediately after this program everyone returned to their individual teaching responsibilities and had little time for further collaboration or peer observation. The model classroom was converted into a storeroom and administrative office

and the students were pushed into the combination of a much smaller classroom and a lecture theatre. The Teacher Education Division officer who had supported the early efforts of classroom teaching was reassigned elsewhere and the replacement officer seemed to favour direct instruction (although later the 'tide' turned again). When both the Head of Department and his replacement resigned there was little continuity. After one full trimester teaching these students I was switched to teaching the more senior full fee paying students, and two years later I moved to another university. While all these reversals and setbacks were disappointing they are also a reminder that reflective practice is not a search for a perfect teaching method but is rather an on-going process. Some of the approaches described above would need to evolve as these students progress through their studies and face higher academic expectations. Also what worked for these students will be inappropriate for others, even in the Malaysian context. But this observation strengthens not weakens the value of grassroots-based approaches, self-study and radical transparency.

Conclusion

This article describes one instance in which more critical, collaborative and grassroots approaches to teacher education formed organically and seemed to work within the Malaysian context. The process of opening up the classroom as a space for all the faculty to engage with the students collaboratively in their own varied ways allowed both the students and the faculty members to feel as if they were stakeholders in shaping the program of study. The article also supports the use of multiple macro- and micro-level forms of evidence, including in this instance observations, a reflective diary, student reflective diaries, informal interviews, photographs, videos and the material products of open-ended classroom activities. While this article does not support the idea of an entirely grassroots-based approach to education, it suggests that in this particular and perhaps unusual instance a more grassroots approach was appropriate. This may have been the case precisely because it was limited to certain types of activities such as deploying specific actions and developing a vision and collaborative 'learning' culture that accommodated both local needs and aspects that could be planned centrally.

Part of the success of the program appears have been because the impetus was on the need to work collaboratively to quickly develop and implement a three-week intensive program of study – this necessarily demanded greater flexibility. The time pressures meant that those of us at the grassroots level felt empowered with activities we felt comfortable with but were also happy to defer to the Teacher Education Division on other issues (see Fullan, 1994, p. 13). A relatively collaborative and experimental culture, characterised by people feeling comfortable both giving and receiving constructive feedback, may also have emerged because the program was allocated to a newly formed and lightly staffed department with few existing students. In other words it seemed to help that the faculty had quite disparate backgrounds and few preconceptions about how the program should run. In turn, the Teacher Education Division representatives were supportive and, from their offices in Kuala Lumpur, rarely interfered with our actual implementation. While this idea of teachers as skilled professionals and of students as 'knowers' would mark a break from the established approach, the limited evidence presented here is encouraging, provided the results are approached with caution.

Given the concerns about the top-down approach to education as currently employed in Malaysia it may be worth promoting further open and transparent grassroots initiatives. These need to be sensitive to local context and accommodate Malaysians' concerns about Western educational models as a form of neo-colonialism. Also, such grassroots educational

initiatives can be rather risky compared to simply maintaining the status quo: If a change is implemented at the grassroots level and fails to deliver immediate outcomes then those responsible may face criticism. In this particular case, while it was useful to know how the students' perceptions differed from my own assumptions, such differences needed to be carefully negotiated. Also, while the events analysed in this article may have depended on some of the core staff members being partially Western-educated, most Malaysian schools do not have such diverse faculty. It may therefore be more difficult to extend this approach to in-service teachers. Nonetheless, this three-week program of student-centred learning activities was well received by both the Teacher Education Division representative and the government-sponsored students who participated in the class. The combination of two expatriate and several foreign-educated lecturers seemed generally well received by the students even in this conservative part of Malaysia.

Appendix: Program Overview

Week	**Day**	**Morning session**	**Afternoon session**
I	Monday	Registration	Briefing: Campus manager and Teacher Education Division
	Tuesday	Introduction to A.R.M.	Ice breaking (ideal teacher, about clubs)
	Wednesday	Map activity; library tour	Talk with a guest teacher
	Thursday	Making a society	Recap on week I
II	Sunday	Field trip: Tour of nearby city	
	Monday	Hafiz's blog; blog making	Effective pronunciation
	Tuesday	English and music	Working on blog; diary; Hafiz's story
	Wednesday	[Public holiday]	
	Thursday	Report on field trip	CPR / first aid
III	Sunday	Introduction to education	Introduction to effective referencing
	Monday	Green earth activity	Mind mapping
	Tuesday	Invent an educational game	Storytelling
	Wednesday	Movie day	Presentation on movie
	Thursday	Recap on week II and III	Final assessment

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