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On the Tenterhooks of Classroom Assessment:

A Case Study of ‘High-Performing’ Singaporean Teacher

A tenter is a wooden frame used in old England for hanging woollen or linen cloth to prevent it from shrinking as it dries in the sun. The tenterhooks used to hold the cloth in place. It is used now to suggest a state of uncomfortable tension, as if one is being stretched in different directions.

(Adapted from: http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/on-tenterhooks.html)

Gaining its independence only in 1965 from Britain and Malaya, Singapore’s nationhood journey from a small economy with limited primary industry and few natural resources, to the current financial, information, service and digital economy powerhouse in South-East Asia, has been driven largely by substantial educational development (Goh, 2005). Its consistent and powerful ideological and cultural consensus on the national significance of education and examinations are prime engines of economy growth shared by the public and many parents, politicians and the corporate sector (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2003). The country’s education system and consistently stellar student performance in international comparative measures of educational achievement have been widely reported (McKinsey, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2009; OECD, 2013). Recently, the five-yearly Teaching and Learning International Survey (Talis) that saw 34 countries taking part (OECD, 2014) found Singapore teachers to be among the youngest - 36 years old compared with 43 on average worldwide – and they worked typically 10 hours more than the Talis average of 38 hours. These reports testify to the significant emphasis the country has placed on education. This paper contextualises how a ‘high-performing’ Singaporean teacher conceptualises and enacts classroom assessment, after many years whereby assessment has been understood as examinations and tests as a legacy from colonial rule and accepted cultural practice in an Asian country. It is against, and amidst such contexts, that the notion and discourse of formative assessment and Assessment for Learning (AfL) are widely introduced, after announcement of new ‘Holistic and Balanced Assessment’ policies (PERI, 2009; Heng, 2011).
If new policies purporting to genuinely support teaching and learning are to be taken up within Singaporean classrooms, one needs first to look critically ‘within’, to understand how a possibly deeply entrenched conception and practice of classroom assessment has existed according to past values and priorities; whether the very institutional authority of successful high-stake examination results, which served as critical standards of performativity of teaching and learning in the classroom, can be changed. A critical purpose of this paper is to illustrate classroom assessment from a ‘high-performing’ Singaporean teacher’s ‘knowing and doing’; how a reconceptualization of classroom assessment can begin by studying the conceptions and practices of such a teacher.

**Conceptual Framework: Knowing Teachers’ Conceptions and Practices**

The word ‘conception’ is used as a most inclusive starting point that takes into consideration ways of knowing teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, values and any other possible constructs that they deem useful to describe their classroom practices. Such an all-encompassing way of defining conception is based in part on a larger body of psychological research on the theory of action, intentions, agency and its extension to the philosophy of the mind (Davidson, 1980; Bratman, 1987; Pacherie, 2008). This suggests that what teachers believe and intend, the amount of control they have or perceive they have, and the norms of their social environment, interact to shape the types of thinking and subsequent actions they carry out in the classroom. Alexander (1992) proposed that any ‘good’ classroom practices actually lie within a complex decision-making space of intersection of localised considerations for a teacher (see Text Box 1):

Alexander (1992) proposed that these questions discriminate the ‘good’ in what constitutes ‘practices’ for different teachers. The fact that there are several categories of question about what classroom assessment practice entails can cause teachers to be confronted by numerous, often conflicting goals. The diagram (see Figure 1) illustrates the conceptual framework used in this research for studying what teachers are conceptualising and practising in terms of ‘good’ classroom assessment:
Figure 1: Conceptual framework of research of knowing teachers’ conceptions and practices of classroom assessment

Such a bifocal framework provides a metaphorical lens for knowing through seeing and hearing possibly evolving teachers’ conceptions and practices of classroom assessment. Such a lens of research does not attempt to capture everything a teacher does and think in the classroom. Rather it attempts to bring about an understanding of a teacher’s practical reasoning or intention of conception and practice.

**Methodology: A Way of Knowing**

The findings reported in this paper form a critical part of the results of a three-year research that investigated a group of six Singaporean case-study teachers’ different experiences of ‘knowing’ classroom assessment. The case studies were qualitatively driven using phenomenography (P), with an inclusion of Q-Methodology (Q). Both P and Q focus on the various ways people approach experiencing a phenomenon, their ideas and the various ways of thinking and acting, with the aim of presenting relationships of one another. Fundamental to an understanding of using both methods within the case-study methodology is their subscription to a pragmatic approach of knowing an experience (Dewey, 1938). This embodies a non-dualistic view of
human cognition insofar as it depicts experience as a dialectical transaction of human beings and the world (Dewey, 1938; 1939).

In the main study, six case-study teachers were selected from a pool of ‘high-performing’ Singaporean teachers. These teachers had a good, if not exemplary, teaching track record and were also likely to be holding leadership roles in their schools. The teachers were interviewed for at least four to five hours and observed for at least twelve lessons for a period of seven months in order to ensure that lessons prior to both the examination and non-examination season of the school terms were observed. The findings from the phenomenographical phase of research for one case-study teacher, Pei Pei, is discussed in this paper to illustrate how the research involved the case-study teacher in some form of ‘practical reasoning’, verbalising and enacting espoused conceptions and practices of classroom assessment. This paper focused on this particular case-study teacher to demonstrate that, while she was a relatively young (but experienced) teacher, her very contrasting conceptions and practices of classroom assessment were very revealing of the tensions and dilemmas faced by a ‘high-performing’ Singaporean teacher. Pei Pei was therefore, according to Stake (2005), an instrumental case to provide special insights into particular issues, interrogate generalisations or build theory. Various informational items, including her values, beliefs, and actual activities of classroom assessment, were ‘pieced together’ as her argument for a common ‘good’ of classroom assessment.

**Pei Pei**

Pei Pei was a lower-secondary Music and English teacher in a government-aided all-boys’ school. She was posted to this school after graduating from university seven years ago. As the only Music teacher in the school, her main responsibility was to teach Music to all the 700 secondary one and two students and to oversee the performing arts groups in the school. Pei Pei earned her Bachelor of Music degree at a well-known English university, with the support of an overseas scholarship provided by the Singaporean government. She was quickly promoted to subject head (Music) in the fourth year of her teaching career and was allowed to go on sabbatical in her fifth year of service in 2009, where she completed her Masters in Music at a well-known music education college in Hungary. At the time of interviewing and observing her lesson in 2011, she was invited to go for her deputy-head teacher’s interview at the Ministry of Education. She was also invited by Ministry officials to conduct Music training for Music
teachers. As a Music teacher, she was held in high regard by her school colleagues, superintendent and MOE officials. Outside school, she was an active member of a professional choral group in Singapore and often travelled overseas for public performances.

**Brief Findings**

The overview of Pei Pei’s conceptions and practices of classroom assessment is summarised in Figure 2. Pei Pei’s conceptions of classroom assessment, centred on the presence (or absence) of expectations and tests and examinations for the subjects. Therefore, whatever she did for English lessons (homework, tests, classwork), it was to prepare the students for the examinations. In the total absence of expectations on students to be examined and tested in Music, Pei Pei could explore new ways of teaching that focused on student mastery of learning of musical concepts, singing and understanding. She was also seen to be more nurturing and to encourage good efforts (rather than perpetually reprimanding unacceptable ones).

![Figure 2: Overview of Pei Pei's conception and practice of classroom assessment](image)

The difference between Pei Pei’s English and Music classes was particularly stark – Pei Pei’s comments, as she reflected on her music classroom assessment practice, about how she could attend to her students ‘there and then’, and the ‘layering of musical skills’ contrasted sharply
with her heavy-handed approach in English class. Within Singaporean schools, subjects such as Music, which are typically devoid of national examination requirements, may result in teachers not being so closely monitored in terms of ‘clear deliverables’ for these subjects. Yet, Pei Pei clearly appreciated the freedom of being able to decide what classroom assessment would be in her Music classroom. In her English class, the secondary students were constantly scolded for their lack of effort and failure to meet her expectations about work. For instance, they were also told explicitly that their work was highly unsatisfactory (not even at the level of kindergarten students), and in several lessons were asked to leave the classroom to complete their homework outside. At the end of the research, Pei Pei did concede that her English class could be more like her Music class.

**Significance**

As a whole, the case study has pointed out many mediating influences (e.g. subject expertise, beliefs of learning, professional agency) when considering the relationships of conceptions and practices. For researchers of classroom assessment, findings from such case study suggests that the socio-cultural dimension matters; that it may be futile to expect any consistent and global theory of classroom assessment to be practised uniformly across contexts. According to McMillan (2013), there is much to be done to establish a body of knowledge of classroom assessment which is currently very fragmented. Perhaps, we have to accept and live with certain contradictions and see dilemmas not as impediments of understanding but rather as opportunities for re-creating new ways of knowing particularly in terms of local sense-making. What should be pointed out is that when assessment is highly regulated, paced, content-driven, tightly defined and prescribed, the opportunities for teachers to exercise more professional autonomy could be much more limited, regardless of subject and context. Elliot (2007) has highlighted that teachers are consequently pulled in different directions by conflicting priorities and that such dilemmas cannot be resolved by a particular aim on which all teachers and other stakeholders can agree. Each teacher is in a unique position to access knowledge from research, policy and professional development while assessing how the new knowledge can be suitably negotiated and applied in different classroom contexts. Further research could suggest:

i. a particular conception and practice of classroom assessment that is sophisticated enough to blend multiple goals of teaching and learning. Such an implication of
further research work on classroom assessment in a specific Singaporean classroom context and beyond is consistent with James and Lewis’ (2012) conclusion that assessment needs to be harmonised with the understanding of learning and teaching within a prevailing social–cultural theory (James, 2008). This could lead to further exploration into why certain teacher’s orientation towards dissonance and dilemma can be more positive than the others.

ii. ways of knowing that can help us see more clearly how teachers can pass beyond the restricted worlds of socially–culturally defined ‘past’, and to be able to develop creative imaginations for the possibilities of classroom assessment in the present and future. Conceiving knowing as embodied reminds us that professional learning is not just an epistemological concern about what the teacher knows and acts on (or not knows or is unable to do) based on their current conceptions and practices, but also an ontological one that prompts reflection of professional lives of teachers in Singaporean classrooms on and beyond the tenterhooks.

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