Pedagogical Awakenings and Self-Discovery in the light of imperatives, constraints and opportunities of teaching Social Studies in Singapore

Reflection Piece

Kamaludin Bahadin
June 2013

Keywords: Teacher Identity; High Stakes National Assessment; Social Studies; Singapore; Classroom Practices; Professional Practice

Abstract

In this paper, Kamaludin Bahadin invites audiences to journey with him in a unique pedagogical space as he theorises himself as a teaching subject caught within a range of discourses, each vying for supremacy. In a culture where classroom practice and pedagogy assume a single, all consuming purpose, i.e. of preparing students to solely pass the tests, he seeks to challenge the primacy of such a commonly held belief among Singaporean pedagogues by asking what should be the driver(s) of classroom instruction? This paper attempts a reflexive turn towards interrogating his own pedagogical premises with the aim of reimagining his future pedagogy despite dominant “educational” discourses. Central to reimagining pedagogy is the notion of teacher identity. Through his own lived-in experience he attempts to show how educational governance, one that instrumentalises assessment and test scores, play a leading role in subjectifying teachers like himself and in the process also shaping their professional and personal identities. He argues that when teachers subscribe to identities that draw on extrinsic factors at the cost of ignoring the inner voices or personal convictions that led them to pursue a teaching career in the first place, the result could lead to emotional and professional dissonance. To facilitate documenting how his ‘coming to know pedagogy’ has changed, he will reference personal journals kept during a six-month Management and Leadership in Schools course completed in 2011 and the write ups on his philosophy of pedagogical practice, which was a requirement for competing for the “Most Outstanding History Teacher of Singapore in 2009” award. Written over a period of four years, these assignments, which express his person...
Introduction

On the 14th March 2013, in a response to the Budget debate, Singapore’s Education Minister, Heng Swee Kiat was quoted as saying that “We must get back to fundamentals…. [and]re-affirm the basic goals of education” (Straits Times, 2013). In his parliamentary reply he noted that there was “excessive stress brought about by the overemphasis on high stakes examinations, at the expense of the development of well-rounded individuals” (ibid). Though Minister Heng was trying his best to address this problem, he subsequently clarified his earlier statements by asserting that exams provide “a standardised measure of progression and achievement, and ensure accountability across the system by upholding rigorous standards” (ibid). The use of standardized tests however comes at a high cost: classroom practice and pedagogy assume a single, all consuming purpose, i.e. of preparing students solely to pass the tests. What are the underlying assumptions about the relationship between standardized tests and learning? What then should be the driver(s) of classroom instruction? I too am caught in the great divide between the two pedagogical positions: one that subscribes to the importance of a testing culture and another that opposes it, emphasizing instead the primacy of learning as the principal driver of education. Drawing on my teaching experiences, theoretical understandings of pedagogy and graduate work, I shall address the above questions here.

Context & Framework

Having taught for fifteen years in secondary schools throughout Singapore, I am all too aware that the ‘testing culture’ has come to dominate my thinking. Like Minister Heng, I often wonder what a return to fundamentals would mean for my teaching practice? Such thoughts have prompted me to examine a number of assumptions regarding education that I have long taken for granted; it has also led me to question my instrumental view of pedagogy against its life empowering possibilities for both teachers and students. It is undeniable that preparing students for national examinations is professionally rewarding, yet one is also keen to investigate alternatives. In this paper, I draw upon various theories of pedagogy that emphasize ethical relations (Smith, 2006; Dion, 2008). Smith’s study, focussing on how educational ideals and market forces can co-exist in a rapidly globalising world, is particularly useful for reimagining pedagogy, especially in the context of Singapore. I also examine the notion of “pedagogy as spirit” delineated by Cole and Riley (2003) and Swanson (2007) as well as other schools of pedagogy (Aoki, 1992; Pinar, 2004; and Pitt, 2003) with a view to re-thinking some of my views regarding the transmission, production and reproduction of knowledge in the classroom. Lastly, this paper explores the notion of teacher identity and how professional practice shapes the person and vice versa. Critical to such an enquiry is the relation of ‘Self’ to ‘Other’ as delineated by Taylor (1994) and Fuss (1989).

Method

To facilitate documenting how my ‘coming to know pedagogy’ has changed, I shall reference personal journals kept during a six-month Management and Leadership in Schools course completed in 2011 and the write ups for my philosophy of pedagogical practice, which was a requirement for competing for the ‘Most Outstanding History Teacher of Singapore in 2009’ award. Written over a period of four years, these assignments, which express my personal views, offer insight into my thinking on pedagogy and on how I perceive myself as a teacher. The opinions expressed therein were used as reference points for a conversation with various theorists, the aim being to develop new ways of imagining pedagogy and envision what a
return to the teaching fundamentals referred to by Minister Heng would mean to me personally. I have always viewed pedagogy as something unique, akin to one’s signature, because it is a manifestation of the teacher’s interiority when he or she is in the classroom.

Teacher Self versus Bureaucratic Other

At the end of a long day, most teachers try to reclaim their personal selves from their classroom persona. At times, they question their self-identity. The core of my professional being lies in my identity as a teacher. It is also one that is similarly expressed by many other educators teaching in secondary schools across Singapore. However, there are times when I feel that the demands imposed by Others—students, parents, school leaders, the education ministry—exceed my capacity to deliver, in which case such introspection becomes a source of discomfort. According to Charles Taylor (1994), identity “is a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being” (p. 75). Drawing upon Aristotelian logic, Diane Fuss asserts, “essence and identity are related but by no means synonymous; a person or object possesses an essence which determines its identity, but identity rather than operating as a substitute for sense, functions as its effect” (Fuss, 1989, p. 99). In other words, as a heterosexual male, father, and member of both the middle class and of a racialized and religious minority, I can lay claim to an identity comprising multiple sub-identities and essences that are fundamental to my being. However as Fuss argues, “Self implies Other”; moreover, drawing on Derrida, she is able to argue further that identity “always contains the spectre of non-identity within it, the subject is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the other, repressing or repudiating its non-identity” (Fuss, 1989, p. 100). How I negotiate self-identity also determines how I view Others and how I want Others to view me and the identity or non-identity that I project. What this means is that a teacher’s identity lies at the intersection of how she interiorises her personal self against how Others view that self. It is important to understand that the expectations of such Others is largely beyond the control of the teacher.

However much we wish to believe that teachers should have a monopoly over owning and controlling their identities, this is often not the case as they do not operate in a vacuum, but exist within large bureaucracies while providing an essential public service. Hence, their identities are fluid. These shifting identities also drive teacher’s behaviour in directions that purport to reward or punish them for their compliance or non-compliances. The identity of a public educator in a secondary school is a valued cultural resource, especially in Asia, where teachers are highly regarded and viewed as elites and members of the intellectual class. Often, I can sense the respect that parents and children accord me upon discovering that I am not only a teacher but also the head of the humanities department at one of Singapore’s elite secondary schools. However, as much as my identity confers privileges, it also poses challenges. As Karl Recevskis (1998) rightly points out, “identity is what is naturally given and is therefore considered a possession, yet it is also that which possesses the individual” (in Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 21). Taylor shares this view, noting that identity often requires “recognition” or “misrecognition”, the latter having the potential to “inflict harm, be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (p.75). Cognitive dissonance is invariably experienced when teachers subscribe to identities that draw on extrinsic factors at the cost of ignoring the inner voices or personal convictions that led them to pursue a teaching career in the first place. Allow me to illustrate this point.

Below is an excerpt from the journal entry of January 27, 2011. At the time, I was participating in the Management Leadership in Schools program, a six-month supervisory
and leadership-training program for Heads of Departments, organised by the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

“Prior to assuming a Management Leadership role, I was burned out, not physically but professionally.

I felt that the education system as a whole had ignored me as one who is capable of thinking at a much higher level and who needs to be nourished intellectually. Having worked at three different schools and as a department head at two of them over a span of eight years, I believe I have learned to manage the educational process. My superiors determined the outcomes, direction and scope of my work with minimum input from me. I can easily sum up my sense of helplessness by invoking three memorable lines from Tennyson’s Charge of the Light Brigade:

Their not to make reply;
Their not to reason why,
Their but to do and die:

Though when applied to my case, the final line seems overly dramatic, it nonetheless reflects my frustration with a system that does not allow middle managers to think professionally or to bring their values and beliefs to bear when reflecting upon the educational policies they are expected to carry out.”

(Kamaludin Bahadin. “Reflections Journal MLS, No. 1”, Feb 2011)

This journal entry does not reflect the views of all educators in Singapore; it does reveal, however, how at the time I had interiorised myself and defined my identity. It is unfortunate that in early 2011, I had defined my identity as that of an ‘operator’, a manager of educational policies. One can also detect here a note of resentment directed at the bureaucratic Other. Also evident is a partial collapse of the Self, especially during those moments when Others are perceived to be threatening to what it truly believes to be inviolable self interests. Interestingly, I do not blame Others, for a careful reading of the entry reveals that I, too, am complicit in my own subjectification and reconstitution. In fact this paper is in the nature of a personal testimonial that has allowed me to “own up to my own implication of oppressive formations and power relations” (Ellsworth, 1988, p. 308). It is critical, moreover, not to underestimate how a small country like Singapore instrumentalises education as a means of economic survival or how the interplay of a high stakes examination culture with a Confucius culture that prides itself on hard work fosters various forms of oppression. In this kind of context, the great majority of teachers, I would argue, view as an imperative the need to ‘raise standards’ and help ‘average’ students excel academically, thereby, or so it is assumed, helping Singapore compete economically in a globalised world. It is further assumed that success in this regard requires some means of evaluating objectively how well they have been taught and how much students have learned—hence the popularity of the standardized examination. Often this leads to a heavy reliance on worksheets and other assessment tools, particularly when these are fetishized by parents and school authorities alike and hailed by the Ministry as a precise and objective measure of accountability. Such thinking dominates to the extent that precious classroom time that could have been allocated to developing students’ innate curiosity and problem solving skills, fostering their creativity or nurturing their capacity to be good citizens is instead devoted to preparing students for these tests. This raises a number of key questions. Is the fear of losing the Self to the bureaucratic Other a particular or a general one? Is this merely my personal fear or is it one shared by other
Singapore educators? Is it also possible that the genuine Self might be seduced by the Other? Is it true, then, that some teachers place the rewards of compliance above their own personal values and Self-beliefs when seeking to resolve educational dilemmas? If so, how can I (re)imagine my way out of such a binary opposition? Drawing upon the course readings, I will endeavour to all these questions. Part of the reason I defined my identity as that of an ‘operator’ and my career reached a nadir in 2011 has to do with my own experience of teaching history and social studies and how teaching these subjects brings the systemic tensions into the classroom and shaped my identity as a teacher. Teaching social studies and history differs essentially from teaching Mathematics or one of the sciences as the former require one to be highly attuned to the limits of the permissible discourse ‘allowed’ in the context of public schools. What are described as ‘out of bounds markers’ effectively discourage public discussion of issues the government considers too sensitive or potentially destabilizing (Ho, 2000, p.439 in Baildon & Sim, 2009). They are deliberately left vague and their “existence is only made known, retrospectively, after a trespass has been committed” (George, 2000 in Baildon & Sim 2009), the purpose being to identify and weed out dissent, however mild. The markers are a source of continuing anxiety for teachers, especially when treading issues that cast the government in a negative light. The ‘out of bounds markers’ function very much like Foucault’s “bio power” (disciplinary power), which aids and abets the continuing subjectification of its national subjects. Using state institutions such as schools, prisons and clinics that regulate forms of knowledge that are permitted and the continuing surveillance of its subjects, result in the emergence of a particular “field of possibilities” in which several ways of behaving and diverse comportments are to be realised. The efficacy of bio power lies in “seducing the subject into subjectifying herself without having the state to be physically present” (Thobani, 2007, p. 8). In such a political context, heavy bureaucratic demands, lack of press freedom and expression and the possibility of being openly censured for transgressing ‘out of bounds markers’ have often caught Social Studies teachers in a dilemma: whether to foster in students the capacity to think critically or to play it safe by regurgitating official narratives that portray Singapore as a land of consensus, peace and prosperity. In addition to navigating this political minefield of permissible discourses, teachers must demonstrate accountability, their own and that of the education system, by, for example, meeting national examination targets.

The rewards for excelling in national examinations, along with the penalties for substandard performance, represent a form of self-regulation for both students and teachers. For students, the stakes are high: grades determine educational pathways and future access to scarce educational resources. These factors play a major role in determining how individual students pursue career paths and goals. The results from the national examinations are, moreover, made public, adding to the pressure to excel and the ignominy of failure. The graduating cohort’s achievements are often tabled and compared with those of students from comparable schools. Such comparisons serve as rational indicators for assessing how each school, the teaching staff and the curriculum have ‘value-added’ or benefitted the students.

---

1 A survey released by Reporters Without Borders in 2004 ranked Singapore 147th out of 167 countries in terms of press freedom, the lowest ranking among developed nations. For more information, see http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=550.

2 Mortimore (1991) defines an effective school as one that is ‘value-added’. The latter describes the boost given by schools to student achievement over and above what they bring in terms of prior attainments and background factors. It so happens that it is more difficult to value-add the performance of schools that take in academically more advanced students than those that admit less advanced students, as the indicator measures differentials in
As much as these examinations aim at ensuring accountability, i.e., that minimum standards have been met, they also play a significant role in evaluating the ability and commitment of the individual teacher. Student grades are often factored into teacher evaluations and thus play a role in determining performance bonuses for teachers.

This high stakes national examination culture often creates a stressful school environment for both students and teachers. It limits innovative pedagogical risk taking on the part of teachers while ensuring that “safe, tried and tested” pedagogy remains the mainstay of classroom instruction. Sim and Baildon (2009), who often report on the Singapore education system, have concluded that “formulaic teaching”, covering the syllabus, teaching to the test, and spending extra curriculum time on brushing up on examination techniques and skills has become standard procedure owing to the imperative to prepare students for the national examinations (Baildon & Sim, 2009, pp. 414-415). This not only “weakens professionalism but also teacher agency and decision-making” (p.418). It also manifests itself as a conflict between the professional and individual selves and at times as guilt stemming from having to self regulate one’s own expectations and conform to bureaucratic and examination cultures.

The end result is helplessness and despair, as what gets measured and rewarded may not be in the best interest of either students or teachers, at least not in the long term. Over time, the innovative teacher may burn out and lose the passion that led her to enter the profession in the first place. Commitment to preparing students for the test of life rather than a life of tests exacts a heavy price on both teachers and students. (Kamaludin B., “Reflections Journal MLS, No. 6”, 2nd May, 2011)

A qualifying note is warranted at this juncture. My troubled and conflicted sense of Self is not the product of any inability on my part to meet educational targets set by superiors; rather, quite the opposite is true: I have over the past decade exceeded many of the targets, and in some years even broken national records, for academic achievement on the part of my students. It is personally gratifying that I can take some credit for these achievements; moreover, I am grateful for the financial and psychological remuneration I have received. At the same time, however, I have always harboured troubling doubts as to whether I have prepared them adequately to meet future life challenges. Am I performing pedagogy? Is my career a performance rather than a manifestation of what I hold to be important in education? Such questions beg answers, which if unsatisfactory, weaken and violate the authenticity of the righteous Self and everything for which it purports to stand.

Pedagogy as Meeting National Imperatives in a Rapidly Globalising World

Can we as teachers ‘strike the sweet-spot’ in terms of promoting a pedagogy that allows ‘truth seeking, truth discovering and truth sharing’ as well as preparing students for gainful employment in the future economy? Or is it a zero-sum proposition to begin with? (Kamaludin Bahadin, blog posting, Feb. 25, 2013 on Theorizing Pedagogy, supporting EDCP501, UBC website)

progress attained. For further discussion, see Kamaludin Bahadin’s (2011) Reflection Journal MLS no. 2, School Visits on Feb-Mar 2011
The above posting illustrates my concerns regarding the nexus between pedagogy and meeting national economic imperatives in the context of a globalised world. Gopinathan (2007) explains how Singapore operationalizes an education system that serves “to boost stocks of human capital”;

“… greater emphasis on science and technology in the curriculum and expansion of vocational and polytechnic education, … [are combined with a] tight coupling of education and training systems with state-determined economic policies. These developmental states created centrally planned, universally available, standardised, and state driven education systems, which created the national subjectivities necessary for affiliation to the states’ modernisation project. The return of investment on education was such that the states could justify the expansion and diversification of education as a high priority; wealth generated by economic growth justified further investment in education” (Gopinathan, 2007, p. 57).

In contrast, scholars of a liberal bent like John Dewey, often point to the weaknesses of such a ‘functionalist’ view of education, wherein the learner is often unfairly judged, using universal rather than particularistic standards that honour his self and being. These scholars posit that schooling should encourage individuals to develop their full potential as human beings by fostering their physical, emotional and spiritual capacities as well as their intellectual abilities so that they will be prepared to fulfil their responsibilities as citizens of a democracy (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008; Dewey, 1902/1956). Both the functionalist and the liberal (John Dewey) school of thought offer different narratives on how education should be structured; and both have their own fair share of advocates and critics. Interestingly, the recent changes in education policies in Singapore, e.g., creating more post secondary educational pathways and subject-based bandings (Gopinathan, 2012), can be seen as efforts to blunt the sharp edges of the functionalist school, which ignores the differences in learning abilities among students. Critics further argue that these policy adjustments represent mere variations on a main theme rather than any substantive departure from past policies—nothing more than a “retooling [of] the productive capacity of the economic system” (Afandi & Baildon, 2010, p. 233). They also lament at how education is often instrumentalised to meet larger national economic goals vis-à-vis serving as means of meeting individual needs and aspirations.

Changing the trajectory of education in Singapore is fraught with difficulty, largely because the nation state has been so successful in its education governance. Student achievement is broad based; moreover, in international Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMSS) , Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Singapore students rank high in mathematics, the sciences and literacy (Gopinathan, Fourth Way in action? The evolution of Singapore's education system, 2012). In a 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study that compared the educational achievement of students of similar grade levels, Singapore eighth graders ranked 2nd in Mathematics and 1st in Science (Statistics, National Centre for Education, 2013). One can argue, of course, that this kind of international success works against a culture of innovative change, particularly one that poses inherent risks to the status quo. The pressure to maintain Singapore’s international ranking, what Minister Heng refers to as the “achievement” of the system often translates into an imperative to ensure that pedagogical choices are safe, low risks, incremental in nature and have a high probability of producing outcomes that can be measured by standardized tests. Excelling internationally provides the education system with a kind of brand recognition that boosts students’
employment prospects, especially in a global job market where competition for talent is intense. So how, then, can the education system be reformed with a view not only to meeting international standards but also to satisfying local aspirations and maximizing the learner’s potentiality while honouring the teacher’s self-identity?

Reimagining Pedagogy as a Means of Meeting National Imperatives in a Rapidly Globalising World

David Smith (2006) suggests that local and state governments rarely develop educational policies that draw on the experiences of teachers (p.8) but rather shape them with a view to commercializing the educational enterprise and to meeting the demands of a rapidly globalising world, chiefly by turning teachers into technicians. When I identified myself as an ‘operator’, I was alluding to what Smith sees as a fundamental threat to the identity of teachers, i.e., the technicisation of the profession, whereby “thinking is removed from implementation” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 220). Smith asks, “If the job of teaching comes from constructing citizens into a capital resource and education is nothing more than job-training, where is the moral authority that has anchored the teaching profession in the past?” He goes on to argue that such authority has been displaced by the mantra of “global competitiveness” (Smith, 2006, p. 12). It is often reduced to “simply managing the educational space, without any special personal qualities being required of teachers other than organizational and planning skills” (p.14). With the proliferation of information communications technology (ICT) providing students easy access to advanced computing tools, we often hear the refrain ‘teachers are facilitators of learning’. This is consonant with the technicised and de-skilled image of the teacher. Pinar challenges this view of the teacher, arguing that “Information is not knowledge, … and without ethical and intellectual judgement—which cannot be programmed into a machine—the Age of Information is an Age of Ignorance” (Pinar, 2004, p. 110). Often, the rhetoric aimed at reducing teaching to a commodity, and the accompanying failure to acknowledge the teacher’s agency, creativity, sense of self and what he or she can bring to the classroom often leads to a diminished sense of achievement and self-confidence.

In reimagining pedagogy, and arresting it from plunging into the depths of such despair, Smith points to a “pedagogical hermeneutic that honours the complexity of globalization while also honouring that pedagogical integrity without which teaching as a form of life-practice can neither survive nor be called teaching” as a way for teachers to move forward (p.16). What he proposes is that teachers live in the Now. Teaching, he argues, has often been oriented towards some frozen future that never arrives, thus freezing teaching in a futurist orientation (p.17). Advocating living Now is not to reject the logic of the Market but to embrace “new forms of cultural interfacing” brought about by globalisation, while at the same time “reclaiming ownership of the local space” (p.19). Thus he suggests that teachers should claim and own their pedagogical practices rather than allow others to subjectify them and to dictate what they already know in their hearts.

I take Smith’s words to be an invitation to sieve out those moments when I perceived teaching to be a “liveable experience” or discovered life to be worth “living through teaching”. Such moments were created often out of necessity (i.e., the imperative to preserve my sanity), as a kind of refuge from the frantic rush to prepare students for the national exams. In these moments, I felt able to connect the subject I was teaching, i.e., either history or social studies, to something larger in the lives of my students. I recalled those moments when, in 2009, I first learned that the school principal had nominated me for the Most
Outstanding History Teacher Award. The application form required that I state my teaching philosophy and delineate the scope of my work; I was also required to provide references from my students and superiors attesting to my efficacy as a teacher. I recalled those ‘moments’ of pedagogical clarity again when reading Smith’s Living Now as the following journal entry attests:

“By emphasizing the mundane and weaving in everyday experiences, I am able to make students appreciate history and understand it on their own terms. They do appreciate the efforts made and enjoy learning thoroughly. In conclusion, I see history as a richly constructed learning platform in which logic, understanding, empathy, character education, human values, notions of leadership, an understanding of human nature and society could be firmly embedded within.”

(Personal Writeup by Kamaludin Bahadin, in the nomination form for Singapore Outstanding History Teacher Award 2009, p.10)

Living in the Now means making truth seeking and truth sharing a focus of classroom instruction above all else. For my discipline, it also means that I refuse to fall into the trap of reducing complex historical knowledge to simplistic narratives so that my students can excel in their final examinations; instead, I chose to teach in a way that honours the subject and its various subtleties and nuances, my identity as an intellectual and my students as individuals who have the potential to accomplish much more than is expected of them in the national examinations. Like Smith during moments of truth seeking, truth discovering and truth sharing, I too feel “enlivened, unblocked and ready for life in a new way” when I undertake not to look at teaching as an act of implementation (of a settled conversation) but rather as something that can point the way to a brighter future for both my students and me (Smith, 2006, p. 19). Hence in the high stakes examination culture that is the hallmark of the Singapore education system, pedagogy must not only move beyond utilitarian conceptions of ends-means as espoused by Ralph Tyler (Null, 2004) but must also aim for something higher. This requires certain courage in putting aside momentarily predefined standards of achievement with a view to developing a pedagogy that is open and truth seeking and that honours the identities and potentialities of both students and teachers.

The sweet spot alluded to earlier is not simply a middle way, poised between instrumentalising education and achieving libertarian notions of self. It does not involve discarding one for the other but realizing both simultaneously in the Now—and in the process of reclaiming teachers’ self-image and self worth. During the course of my teaching career, I have found such ‘moments’, e.g., when my class and I ‘created time’ to watch Thirteen Days, a 2000 docudrama directed by Roger Donaldson, that focused on the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Later, on the class blog I posed questions pertaining to President Kennedy’s role in resolving the greatest crisis of the Cold War period. Another example that springs to mind occurred when, as part of a truth seeking exercise in social studies, my students walked across the school compound to a block of high-rise apartments where they set about investigating for themselves whether ‘ethnic bonding’ was really transpiring in the context of a public housing project. I could have, in the interest of saving time, instructed the students by pointing them to constructed versions of the ‘truth’ laid out in the course textbook. The pedagogical sweet spot does not reside, however, in how the teacher makes sense of his or her hard-won understanding of the subject matter; rather, it must be worked out in relation to the understandings of others. This is also in line with Hannah Arendt’s call for us to “humanize the truth” as often as we can (Schutz, A., 2001). This requires negotiation, which
is all about discovering the needs of teachers and students through truth seeking activities, retaining the initiative and advancing one’s pedagogical agenda and avoiding the seductive calls of those who would dictate what teachers ought to be doing in the classroom. It also means avoiding siren calls, for such loud voices could never compete with the silent inner voices of caring teachers. For the teacher, this goal is realised when he feels that he is no longer performing in class, but that his true self has been set free to follow, in the company of his students, the path leading to intellectual discovery. This demands of him or her the requisite skills and knowledge, along with a wide pedagogical repertoire.

The image of the performing teacher that sometimes clouds my mind is one dimension of a self-inflicted identity crisis. It first began to disturb my equanimity after I had received the Outstanding History Teacher Award in 2009. This image gives rise to yet another that of the super teacher who knows the syllabus, knows his students’ needs, knows everything there is to know about pedagogy and also appears confident and all knowing with regard to what he is trying to achieve in the classroom. In addition, as a father of four children, I am often tempted to offer students ready answers and quick solutions to every problem, regardless of whether I understand its true nature. Such impulses are mediated by my pedagogical understanding, a kind of performing wisdom dispensed with the good intention of saving students from the uncertainties of a big bad world. And yet theory troubles this messianic complex, given that “personal truth arises out of experience that I can never know completely, but only live within the threshold of human possibility defined by the limits of what I know and what I have yet to know” (Smith, 2006, p. 22). There needs be on my part a realisation that I can never know it all and that for every new batch of new students, there needs be a pedagogy attuned to the way in which they are developing and how classroom instructions can unfold a classroom in various ways. All this suggests a number of possibilities: letting go as well as embracing, concealment and hide and seek (Pitt, 2010), none of which predispose me to believe I have all the answers students seek. If teachers could not have all the answers and should not pretend that they could, what then should be the true North that leads teachers in a classroom, especially one where many conversations are starting to unfold?

Teaching according to Ted Aoki, is “truly pedagogic if it is attuned to the place where care dwells, a place of indwelling of teachers and students made possible by the presence of care that each has for the other” (Aoki, 1992, p. 191). If I truly care and, in doing so, tend to my student needs, then there should be no shame in admitting that “I really don’t know what the answers are” and in seeking help from others as opposed to feeling inadequate for failing to provide an “imagined teacher response” in the first place. If I could have lived up to the pedagogical ideal Smith, Pitt and Aoki offer up, my acceptance statement for the nomination for the Outstanding History Teacher Award would have more closely resembled the following:

*By being ever wary of the seductive hold of understandings that claim to be correct or popular, by refraining from dazzling students with his impressive pedagogical repertoire and by not posing as a saviour of students desperate to excel academically, Kamaludin has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to care for students. This he achieves by listening to their silent calls to which he responds by developing teaching approaches and seeking out knowledge attuned to their needs, all in the hope that this will provide both students and teacher a deeper felt meaning of their humanity and be of service to them in the years to come.*
(Alternative acceptance statement by Kamaludin Bahadin for the Singapore Outstanding History Teacher Award, March 2013)

The above text offers a way to dispel my fears, insecurities and lack of confidence; it also suggests that truth seeking, more than performativity or good intentions, has to be the chief end of pedagogy. It further suggests that a commitment to meeting our ethical obligations with regard to knowledge construction, its dissemination and positioning ourselves in relation to the knowledge we are dispensing does, indeed, have a bearing on our identity as educators. Susan Dion has shown that “passive teaching often lulls educators into believing that what is being taught and the value that lies therein can be separated from the person and the place of the knower” (2006, pp. 15-16). Such disembodied knowledge often casts students in the role of “perfect stranger”. Just as for me, it is easy to engage in the performance of teaching, it is also easy for students to be estranged from what they are learning. The challenge, then, lies in getting students to see that what they are studying has value beyond the utilitarian one of excelling in examinations. This, in turn, raises two questions: How can subjects like Social Studies lead to the mindfulness and sensitivity that active citizenship requires? What kind of pedagogy would realize such outcomes, one in which we relate the subject matter to the lived experience of the student or one focused on demonstrating academic competence.

It is often the case that by failing to ask deep and pertinent questions, we lull ourselves into accepting stock answers to pedagogical dilemmas. The following example, provided not by teachers this time but by educational planners, illustrates how easily one can fall into such a trap. The 2001 Social Studies syllabus states that its aim is to “prepare [students] to play a participative role in shaping Singapore’s destiny in the 21st century. Preparation entails enhancing…. [their] awareness of both national and international issues so that they will be more informed about Singapore’s achievements and limitations and have confidence in her future” (MOE, 2001). The document locates students as outsiders and claims that through the unproblematic ‘knowing’ of the Singapore story future citizens can be moulded. But as Sim argues, “while the acquisition of knowledge can enhance awareness, awareness itself does not necessarily lead to effectiveness or a more participative role in shaping Singapore’s destiny” (Sim, 2003, p. 76). In a case like this, Dion would challenge us to probe deeper into how anyone could accept such “knowings’ unproblematically and be transformed by such knowledge”. What other pedagogical spaces need to be opened up if we are truly to create active citizens in the Now? As Michael Apple (2004) would argue, instead of “seeing students as recipients of values and institutions, could we not see them as potential men and women, as creators and re-creators of values and institutions”? (p. 85). If we are serious about creating active citizens, what would students need to know to challenge, for example, injustice? Only by using truth as a guide to answering such questions, can we help teachers transition from procedural implementers to a space that honours their agency and intellect?

I too had once seen myself as a procedural implementer, as one who believes that knowledge can be disembodied, transferred and acquired unproblematically by students.

As they say, the student does not experience policies or a curriculum, but the teacher. With this in mind, as an instructional gatekeeper, I need to be able to see the bottlenecks beforehand and to address the limitations and issues faced by my teachers in delivering the intended curriculum. To achieve this objective, I will have to help my teachers see from a design perspective how the curriculum is being assembled and how the model that MOE has chosen is intended to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and acquisition of skills. I do know now that every model has certain strengths and
limitations, and I will highlight to my teachers what these are and work with them to ensure that our students receive the best instruction possible.

(Kamaludin B., “Reflections Journal MLS, Synthesis No. 8”, 2nd May, 2011)

The above journal entry was written under the assumption that my role was that of clearing traffic in the classroom so that the flow of knowledge between students and teachers could proceed with minimum friction. But little thought was given to how problematic such an approach could be, especially if the learning objectives were geared toward the personal development of students and fostering within them a capacity for critical thought. Knowledge acquisition, as Pinar asserted earlier, is just a step toward ethical reasoning and the ability to make appropriate judgements; it is contingent, moreover, upon the pedagogical interaction between student and teacher (Pinar, 2004; Pinar, 2008). Oftentimes, while trying to achieve ambitious curriculum goals, teachers like myself resort to pedagogical magic. As Ranciere would attest with regard to Jacotot’s experience in the Ignorant Schoolmaster (Ranciere, 2010), it takes very little for teachers to pass themselves off to students as the knowledgeable Other. The challenge then is for teachers to be prepared and to teach to the best of their abilities, while avoiding the trap of teaching to the lowest common denominator and blaming the syllabus, the text, the system or their students for their own pedagogical failings. Reading the above journal entry written in 2011, I can’t avoid the feeling that I was being asked to perform magic; for translating curriculum goals into deliverable action, in this case moulding students into active citizens during social studies classes, surely requires magical powers. Could it also be that when I identified myself as an ‘instructional gatekeeper’, I was trying to convince myself there was nothing wrong with focussing on the ‘how’ instead of the ‘what’ that we were teaching? In the process I had unwittingly given up my autonomy and powers of self-determination and had become ‘sandwiched’ between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the teachers in my department—ouch! How I now cringe upon revisiting those reflections written but three years ago. So how and where do I position myself today? What if instead of continuing on as an ‘instructional gatekeeper’, I set about cultivating a deeper connectedness with, and understanding of, both my students and the system of which I am a part, and in the process choose to honour myself and realise my identity/ies while at the same time trusting that in the work I do, I am helping others and myself to fulfil our human potential?

In my blog posting on spirituality in pedagogy, I comment on how teachers often make flawed pedagogical assumptions about students and their ways of knowing and about how they, i.e., teachers, privilege their ways of knowing over those of students. Why do they assume that alternative ways of knowing, or even living a good life, have little value vis-à-vis the official goals of the curriculum? In “Much rez adieux about (Dewey’s) goats in the curriculum: Looking back on tomorrow yesterday” by Cole and O’Reiley, the protagonist’s maternal grandfather, August Jacob, is saddened when, despite the best efforts on the part of his Irish teacher, one Otis Dewey Esquire, and his own best efforts to learn, he remains uneducated (2003, p. 141). This serves as a reminder to Singaporean educators who tend not to question their own pedagogical assumptions but dogmatically cling to their self-serving views on education. What is it that educators fear so much about opening their eyes wide? Do they not see the ‘spirit’ that is intrinsic in other ways of knowing, seeing and feeling? Or are they purposefully blind? Is it the case that they wish to see, not what exists before their very eyes, but what is easy to execute? Don’t educators realise that students may have something more important to teach them than the history or social studies they purport to teach? Or are they strategically choosing to be blind? Do they purposely hide behind official policies and
cower at the thought of transgressing out-of-bounds markers, which serve as an excuse for not helping students arrive at their own self-understanding and sense of purpose in life? Perhaps they fear being exposed as cowards for refusing to take on life’s higher challenges—something demanded of us if we are to achieve personal growth—and for choosing instead to spend a lifetime feigning expertise and dwelling on trivial issues. The end result is that our inner fears prevent us from creating pedagogical spaces that could liberate us. We take comfort in the belief that our teaching diplomas and certifications separate us from them.

Upon reflection, I have come to understand that the stress associated with teaching is often the consequence of casting students and myself as opposing binaries: ignorant versus knowledgeable, pragmatic versus idealist or the sophisticated gentleman or lady versus the immature youth. I regard my pedagogical expertise simply as a means to educate students. Consider the following write-up:

“Mr Kamaludin’s philosophy with regard to teaching history has always remained simple. It is, for him, the art of engaging students by making complex historical events appear simple to the learner (but not simplistic) via the innovative linking of everyday events and students’ experiences to developments in world affairs, and in a way that the learner understands the underlying forces that shape history.

(Personal Write-up by Kamaludin Bahadin, in the nomination form for Singapore Outstanding History Teacher Award 2009, p.6)

Such personal reflections reveal how I have taught myself in the past; being able to “simplify complex knowledge in the hope that my students will comprehend it” is what I understand the term “excellence in teaching” to mean. Call it a manifestation of the hero complex or call it anything else for that matter, I believe a superhero pedagogy that aims to simplify difficult concepts to be the driver of my classroom instruction. How I self-identify through such a pedagogy could also explain why I suffer anxiety attacks when grappling with subject matter that is too complex to be subjected to my pedagogical approach within the span of a forty-minute lesson.

Consider also how I have changed my position after the passage of four years and after reading many of the insightful articles, I have this to say regarding this point:

As educators trying our level best to make students understand the course material, we often, through our pedagogical practices, end up reducing complex, sophisticated concepts to simplified explanations. As a history teacher, I must confess to being guilty at times of beating such explanations into the heads of students, hoping that they will ‘get it’!

(in Kamaludin Bahadin, blog posting of March 11, 2013 on Theorizing Pedagogy, supporting EDCP501, UBC website)

It is interesting that in 2009, I viewed the ability to simplify the complex as a hallmark of pedagogical prowess; now, however, I view “beating such simplified (sic, useless or reductionist) explanations” into the heads of students as a deeply flawed, even violent, approach to pedagogy. Swanson offers a way out for the Singaporean teacher in me. According to her, “[i]t is between the horns of a dilemma that identities are constantly becoming reinscribed and negotiated in terms of choices, delimited or enabled, within a
dialogue between ethics and activism…. we come to understand choice, moral commitment, ethical action and above all the freedom to come to explore the nature of freedom itself” (Swanson, 2007, pp. 180-182). There will be moments, when, presumabley, I can use what Swanson calls “interstitial places between the bifurcations of dilemma or contradiction” to open up a 3rd space in my classroom.

Such moments would transpire during the course of honouring the profundity of what I am trying to teach, especially when attempting to connect what is in the text to an increasingly complex and rapidly globalising world. It may mean I have to allow students adequate space to challenge me, their Social Studies or History texts or the way their government and society is structured and normalised. It may transpire that I have no coherent answers to their questions but only questions of my own, thus further complicating the conversation. And rather than synthesise complex knowledge, I would take a leaf from Hannah Arendt and challenge students to interrogate knowledge and the origins of its discourses by “preserving an atmosphere of openness… [indeed], her students often noted how, as a teacher, Arendt often undermined her own declarations, presenting alternatives to her own opinions with such passion and clarity that they could seldom entirely be dismissed” (Schutz, A., 2001, p. 19). As Alice Pitt suggests, the personal could undergo an illusionment, disillusion and re-illusionment in the hope that meaningful knowledge could potentially be created and disseminated in class. This requires a kind of balance between “being too prescriptive and too flexible or wishy-washy” as Schutz (2001) has suggested.

In concluding, as an educator who is caught between a society that instrumentalises testing culture and another that opposes it, emphasizing instead the primacy of learning as the principal driver of education, trying to (re)imagine pedagogy can be a mentally and spiritually difficult exercise. Being a product of the education system itself, one can start by asking critical questions: What would truth seeking and truth dwelling look like in the classroom? What does living Now mean to the Singaporean pedagogue in me? These questions resist being boxed-in and having an all-encompassing conclusion. They invite all of us to renegotiate what education means on a daily basis and to examine critically the roles we all play in our own oppression or in its liberation. I choose to let these questions linger further in my mind, simply for the various hopeful possibilities that it offers. These questions also call for a personal response to what I do in my classroom everyday, as the world around me changes. However allow me then to articulate how my third space in pedagogy or where my present pedagogical orientation stands, in the space of a formal conclusion that often marks the end of an academic paper:

Pedagogy should ultimately lead to understanding—understanding our ethical obligations to care for others, our planet and ourselves. It enables us to act with sensitivity, intelligence and courage in both the private and public spheres. Through understanding various knowledge forms we hope better to understand ourselves and, in the process, come to know who we are and who we can become, along with the patterns of thoughts that govern our lives. It is also critical that pedagogy allow us to live in the Now and to honour the historical moment of which we are a part. Through pedagogy, we hope to know who are allowed to be and become, and to be aware of the hidden fears and constraints that prevent us from believing in life empowering possibilities for ourselves and others. The hope is, of course, that our minds, hearts and souls will cojoin in the process of self-formation. This would create the kind of life that brings honour to one’s personhood and can sustain itself, a life that liberates itself as well as many other lives. Ultimately, the true test of the success of my pedagogy is when my
students turn to me and say, “[h]ey you weren’t teaching me history or social studies; you were teaching me to be critical of history and social studies, to identify who knowledge serves, to be aware of how knowledge can corrupt, to advance my own thinking, to apply knowledge to meeting pressing problems in the future and to discern how acts performed today can lead to future problems for me and for society as a whole”.

References


