A NEW TEACHER IN A RURAL AREA SCHOOL IN MALAYSIA: BLOGGING AS A REFLECTIVE TOOL FOR DEVELOPING THINKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This piece discusses the use of blogging as a reflective tool for developing thinking skills. The author uses his own experience as a new teacher in a rural area school to reflect on the challenges, strength and impacts of blogging. A blog can be used for intellectual purposes as well, engaging people to think and discuss with the author (Killeavy and Moloney, 2009). The author believes that a blog can capture and show powerful evidence of learning and thinking taking place. The challenges that he faced were the location of the school, the language of the community of the school and self-motivation. The challenges were addressed through author’s thinking (reflective thinking), pupils’ thinking (thinking about other’s thinking) and readers’ thinking (thinking community). The blog has had a big impact on the author himself and also on his pupils; the impact in the term of e-learning; the impact of the blog as a book and the impact of the blog internationally. Blogging is a reflective tool for developing thinking skills as thinking is an on-going process and can be a highly effective and powerful thinking tool.

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INTRODUCTION

I am a primary mathematics school teacher in Malaysia. The school is situated in a rural area for indigenous people called Temiar people. To help motivate and develop my teaching, I created a blog. I use the blog to reflect about my teaching and learning experiences with the children, sharing my feelings and also sharing my pupils’ reactions. The blog is called Life through my eyes: I’m not a perfect person, but I move towards it (www.apistakkisah.com). The blog was published as a book entitled Life through my eyes: A teacher’s Little Steps towards Perfection (Bin Ismail, 2011). I am a product of a teacher training degree programme based on a pedagogical approach called ARM (Action-Reflection-Modelling) (Dickerson et al. 2011, 2012). The use of Action, Reflection and Modelling has become the centre of my thinking and is my underpinning principal. Reflection using a blog has developed my thinking skills. More than that, the blog has helped other teachers to develop their thinking skills by reading the blog.

In this essay, I will synthesis and analyse how blogging has develop my thinking skills focusing on reflective thinking. This essay will start by the definition of blogging as a reflective tool for developing thinking skills. Using reflection as a framework of thinking skills, it will then elaborate a case study of how a new teacher in a rural area school in Malaysia used a blog to reflect by looking at the challenges of teaching in a rural area. Next, this essay will analyse the blog as a virtual space and tool for reflection and the impact of reflection using the blog. It will end with a conclusion extrapolated from the discussion.

BLOGGING, REFLECTION AND THINKING SKILLS

What is Blogging?

Blogging is a social network. A blog is an online log or diary. The term blog comes from web and log. It is a portmanteau word. In a blog people write their stories, upload photos and videos and post them online for others. People who are engaged with a blog are called bloggers and their activities are called blogging. The readers of a blog are called followers. Bloggers write blogs for personal purposes as a way of expressing themselves and thinking out loud in written form. A blog can be used for intellectual purposes as well, engaging people to think and discuss with the author (Killeavy and Moloney, 2009). A blog can capture and show powerful evidence of learning and thinking taking place.
What is Reflection?

Reflection is a process of thinking to analyse experiences and actions. Much literature about thinking skills mentions reflection as part of the thinking process for example Dewey (1938), Piaget (1969), Feuerstein (1980) and Moseley (2005). Schön (1983) introduced reflection in teaching where teachers can reflect in practice and on practice. By reflecting, teachers think about their actions or their pupils’ actions to develop understanding. They can make changes or maintain their practices as necessary.

How Blogging and Reflection are Connected

Blogging and reflecting can be connected and both can become thinking tools. The core element of blogging is reflection. Blogging and reflection are mutually supportive. Blogging makes the thinking process become concrete. It generates and represents private thinking of the blogger via writing for public consumption. Hodgen (2002) says that reflection is ‘an active process’ and blogging can be the representation of the process; it is not something that people ask you to do.

When a blogger starts to blog, he or she will not necessarily reflect very deeply. The entries maybe were simply descriptive at this stage. To make people understand what has happened and what has been learned, firstly, a blogger needs to think carefully by reflecting about a situation. Secondly, the blogger needs to think and decide to choose the words and sentences for the needs of the followers and readers. Schön (1983) describes this as reflection in practice and reflection on practice. Cooney and Shealey (1996: 100) add this view by saying ‘reflection is the ability of the person to decenter and view his actions as a function of the context in which he is acting’. Larkin (2002) states that reflection will involve metacognition and self-regulation learning that can increase performance. However, there is argument that reflection and decentring are complex, challenging and difficult processes. (Wood and Turner-Vorbeck, 1999 in Hodgen, 2002)

The ownership of a blog forces the blogger to update and reflect regularly and continue to take part in a reflective thinking dialogue with the followers and audience. This is similar to other social network like Facebook or Twitter. However, a blog is more detailed, expanded and in depth. Killeavy and Moloney (2009) suggest the use of blogs for beginning teachers to help develop their reflective practice. The findings of this study are particularly pertinent for this assignment:

“This [reflection on practice using blogging] is relevant to the development of professional cultures. This is particularly important for newly qualified teachers during the induction phase of their career. The use of alternative models such as narratives or dialogues for teachers to document, share and reflect on their practice are potential areas for further study” (p. 1075)

My blog is an example of such an alternative model.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the Malaysian cultural context the perception of teaching in a school in a rural area is always negative and demoralising for teachers. In 2010, I was posted as a new mathematics teacher in a rural area. The school is situated in a jungle in the north of peninsula Malaysia. The school provides primary school education for pupils from the indigenous aboriginal ‘orang asli’ people from the Temiar tribe. I was the only new teacher to be posted to such a challenging and remote school; my peers were sent to urban schools in the south and more affluent part of Malaysia.

I created a blog to help me survive the challenges of living in such an unfamiliar environment by reflecting on my practice and my life in a jungle. Naturally, I am a very humble, modest and shy person because of my Malay and Muslim culture. However, the blog, delivering my critical reflection, became extremely famous and popular. The blog changed people’s perceptions of teaching in a rural school from negative to positive. The blog challenged people’s preconceptions and made them think differently.

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN A RURAL AREA
School

Kampung Kenang Primary School is located in Kuala Kangsar district in Perak, Malaysia. The school has proper school buildings and a hostel for the pupils to stay. The school also provides the needs for the children like school uniforms, food and stationery. The location of the school in the jungle means that the school is unable to receive proper telephone and internet connection. However, there is a road to connect the school with the outside world. During my first year of teaching, I lived inside the school in the hostel with the children.

Temiar Pupils and Mathematics

Mathematics has always been a challenging subject for Temiar pupils. Their first language is Temiar. The Malay language is their second language and English is their third language. As a new teacher, I needed to use simple Malay to communicate. I started to learn a bit of Temiar to teach mathematics. The pupils’ attitude towards learning is negative as the Temiar community is not sure of the purpose of schooling. Some of the children only go to school to have proper food, new cloth and shoes and to meet new friends. Language and attitude towards learning are the barriers in teaching mathematics to the children.

Self-motivation

The perception that my peers from the same programme were posted to a normal school in an urban area demoralised me. I needed to motivate myself and find ways to overcome these social and pedagogical challenges. Writing and reflecting in the blog helped me to think critically about the challenges. It made me see clearly the positive aspects of teaching in a rural area that helped me to survive. I turned the negative feelings positively in my blog to make myself and my audience view the Temiar pupils in a positive light. In the beginning, my perception of the blog was that it was merely personal. However, after the blog gained attention and popularity, I realised that the blog has a social responsibility and a pedagogical purpose. It helped me and helped other teachers, new teachers, student teachers, teacher’s educators and lecturers and parents to think and reflect about teaching and learning.

HOW THE CHALLENGES WERE ADDRESSED

The challenges were addressed by the blog which became a place for me to develop my reflective thinking skills. The blog has similarities with Feuerstein’s cognitive map (1980) where there is input, elaboration and output written in the blog entries. The input is the description of teaching and learning activity that I wrote about; the elaboration is the discussion and analysis of what I saw; the output is the summary of what I learnt and what I can do for future pedagogy. The blog also translated Moseley Framework (2004) where the blog gather information, build understanding and then produce thinking via reflecting. The blog gathered the information about the innovative and creative activities; built my understanding about pupils’ learning; then produced my thinking to enhance my professional practice.

Here I will give examples of how the blog entries developed my thinking skills as a teacher (reflective thinking), my pupils’ thinking (thinking about others’ thinking) and the blog readers’ thinking (thinking community). Figure 1 below shows the connections of reflective thinking generated by the blog.

My Thinking Skills as a Teacher (Reflective Thinking)

The blog records that I have evaluated my strengths and weaknesses in my practice. I shared my limitations and my future realistic approaches that I should made in order to fulfil my pupils’ needs. The blog helped me to
monitor my own performance as a new teacher and see my progress. For example in the entry called ‘Up and Down’ I evaluated my practice after seven months of teaching:

“...in my seven months as a teacher, I struggled a lot as I adapted to the needs of this profession. I still learn how to teach my pupils well amidst my struggles with everyday life. It can be very difficult to juggle both...” (Bin Ismail, 2011: 82)

This is an example of how the implicit business of being a teacher became explicit; how the invisible became visible.

Blogging is an interactive professional development tool. Blogging allows me to get feedback regularly and sometimes on a daily basis from others and I can make changes for the future. It helps me to identify opportunities, set targets and goals and to communicate my learning in relevant ways for my blog audiences. This is me operating as a reflective learner as define by Leat (2012).

As a mathematics teacher, teaching the children with difficulties and challenges, the reflection from the blog helped me to reinterpret my mathematics knowledge and pedagogy in ways to suit my children. I found interactive ways to engage my pupils with mathematics, make it fun to learn, find simple words and sentences and find interesting activities that they can relate to in mathematics. Hodgen (2002) suggests that teachers’ mathematical knowledge can be transformed through reflection. This is important to meet the demands and needs of particular pupils.

My Pupils’ Thinking (Thinking about Others’ Thinking)

Blogging provides a platform to think about my pupil’s thinking. Via blogging, I reflected on what I experienced and then started to think like my pupils’ think to understand them. It motivated me to develop and see clearly what they learnt, their emotions and their understandings. My blog inspired me to create innovative activities to meet the demands of the Temiar pupils. When I reflect, I synthesis and analyse my pupils’ thinking process and metacognition. A few examples of the blog entries will now be given:

Dewey (1938, in Leat, 2012) suggests that stepping outside of normal behaviour creates change. I took my pupils to the river to find stones (www.apistakkisah.com). My pupils have a problem to connect their real life with mathematics. In order to make them relate the jungle environment with learning to count, I brought them to the river. I asked them to colour the stones and bring the stones back to the classroom to use as counters. This is in line with Piaget’s theory (1969) on using practical and concrete materials to understand better. From this activity, the children learnt from their experiences and reflected; they were to think creatively to connect the surroundings and the learning. This blog entry in line with Dewey (1938) suggestion that pupils can enhanced their learning by making a relationship between their action and consequences. I reflected on what had happened to my pupils in my blog and thought about their thinking to meet their needs.

When thinking about my pupils’ thinking, from the philosophical approach my blog has supported the idea of social interaction in learning. In one of the blog entries, I shared about the importance of group work as suggested by Vygosky (1962). The cognitive development between children requires social interaction. The pupils need to be in an ‘activity setting’ that helps to scaffold their learning (Sylva, 1997). In the blog/book I wrote:

“...The other interesting feature that I noticed during the group work activity was the communication between these pupils. I think they are quite shy to talk to me and to ask me questions, especially when they feel that their Malay language is not really good. However, when they were in a group, they felt more comfortable talking about themselves and also talk to me...” (Bin Ismail, 2011:34)

This entry documents that the children were learning in groups. The reflection helped me to be aware of the learning experiences that happened to them as well as helping the readers to get the same understanding. The experience of writing the blog and thinking about my pupils’ thinking strengthened my belief on allowing my pupils to work in groups and using talk to help them to learn mathematics in a culture where group work is not so familiar or popular with teachers.
In another blog entry, I wrote about an activity I devise to help the pupils remember how to write their names. In the activity, the children needed to draw their own face and then matched it with their name that I already prepared for them on a piece of card:

“...to help them know how to spell their name...draw their own face on a piece of paper...I prepared a name card...combine the picture and the card and pasted on the wall...recognising their names...” (Bin Ismail, 2011: 76)

This seemingly simple activity had shown that there was recognition and metacognition taking place in the learning of my pupils. The blog entry captured a moment in the development of their thinking skills and writing skills. Moreover, I photographed that moment by taking digital pictures of the faces and the name on the wall. These are also posted on the blog as evidence to strengthen the reflection.

The blog also contains examples of classroom activities which promote pupils as independent inquirers. I found that my pupils had difficulty thinking independently. They always did what they knew and did not want to try something new. To challenge their thinking, I taught addition using bowling. I used recycled plastic bottles and a ball to play the bowling. Instead of just playing, I made them add and subtract numbers:

“the pupils will throw a ball and count the bottles that fall down...I could see that the advanced pupils gained a lot of confidence in addition by helping their friends to tally the scores. The slower learners, at least can learn to count the bottles correctly...” (Bin Ismail, 2011: 84)

From this activity, I documented the learning process of pupils finding the total scores using addition. Bowling made them inquire using numerical thinking skills to find a solution for scoring a game using enquiry skills as per Bloom’s taxonomy (Jones, 2012). Motivation, interest and excitement were all very high.

These are four examples of blogging providing me with a place to think about my pupils’ thinking.

**My Readers’ Thinking (Thinking Community)**

Cochran-Smith and Lytle state that “what is missing from the knowledge base for teaching are the voices of teachers themselves” (in Day, 1999: 44). My blog is an example of a reflective tool to show how reflection can be done. It gives other teachers a way to think and express thoughts, share knowledge, discuss problems and celebrate solutions using a virtual platform.

Teachers’ motivation is always a big issue. Looking at the challenges of teaching in a rural area, I might have already given up without the blog. The study about teachers’ motivation from Thornthorn et al. (2003) and Watt et al. (2012) shows that some teachers quit after a few years of teaching because they cannot cope with the demands in the teaching profession. My blog has become a platform to motivate myself. In addition, it has motivated other new and experienced teachers to remain positive and energetic in their thinking about their professional development and life.

Teaching can be a very lonely and isolated job if the teacher does not fit in to the school or feel supported by the colleagues or the head teacher. The blog provides a virtual thinking and learning support community for them. Here are some examples of thinking discussions and opinions from the blog posted by the followers:

“Great Job Hafiz! It is so wonderful that you are using traditional game to teach Math!” Comment on Traditional game + Mathematics = fun, fun, learn, learn! entry by Gan T. Hock, February 12, 2011

“This is a really good idea which i never tot to use. I’m also teaching native school in Selangor. Basically the pupils are almost the same like yours. Can I use your special way to help my Year 1 students? thanks”. Comment on Learn to write your name entry by, Azurah Nor September 12, 2012

“I like to read Life through My Eyes simply just because it is inspiring and from which I have seen the power of sharing. The life that reflected in your eyes probably is same as ours which makes us believe that nothing is impossible. Keep moving”. Email sent to the blogger by Kong Suk Ching, January 11, 2012

(www.apistakkisah.com)
The followers read the blog. Then they relate the blog entries to their own practice, think, reflect, analyse and share with the blogger and other followers. The blog has documented the thinking discussions that developed from the blog. The blog has become a platform for professional development discussion and became an e-learning tool for new and experienced teachers. There is nothing like it. It is unique.

**BLOG AS A VIRTUAL SPACE AND TOOL FOR REFLECTION**

Blogging has helped me to think and reflect. The activities documented and shared in the blog encouraged my pupils to think mathematically. Then the blog made my readers think and apply the knowledge gained into their own practices.

The blog allowed me to be brave as a new teacher to use the teaching methods I had learnt as a part of my degree. The blog prevented me being the same as the other teachers and becoming institutionalised.

A few categories of writing in the blog are: reflecting a teacher’s life; reflecting on pupils’ learning, attitude and behaviour; reflecting on teaching methods, especially for mathematics; describing new discoveries in teaching methods; sharing problem solving approaches used in the classroom; self-motivation by adopting a positive approach to the challenges rather than perceiving problems as negative.

The power of photos and words used in the blog creates further understandings where the photos complement the words. When the readers read the blog, the words make them think intramentally and the photos connect their thinking. The photos capture the learning experience and provide the reader with concrete and powerful teaching and learning activities.

Because it is a blog, there are followers, and there are connections to other social media. People started to get in touch and the blog became known to other teachers, teacher educators, parents, the general public and trainee teachers. Then, the blog maintained its success with a particularly popular approach and style; the blog engaged in a thinking conversation with the audience. There was tangible positive feedback, for example people were inspired by the blog and were helped to solve problems and overcome challenges. Politically, it transformed people’s perceptions of teaching in a rural area from negative to positive.

**IMPACT**

When I created this blog, my intention was just to record my experience and thoughts simply and using an available free ICT blogging platform. I did not imagine its success and popularity. I could not have predicted the impact of the blog on myself, the pupils and the readers.

**The Impact on Myself and My Pupils**

The experience of blogging became a reflective tool for developing my thinking skills. It is a constructivist approach to facilitate my reflection in learning about my teaching, encourage me to think deeply and critically and encourage positive motivation and self-esteem as a new teacher in a rural area.

For my pupils, the blog developed their understanding of the world. They could understand that the world is broader than their experience of living in a jungle. As the stars of the blog, the blog connected them to people in other parts of Malaysia and all over the world. It has broadened their thinking, motivated and encouraged them to see learning as something positive and exciting. The blog has provided them with opportunities to meet people in the education field who visited their school and the pupils themselves have visited educational establishment as guest of honour in their country’s capital city, Kuala Lumpur. ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com))

The blogging as a reflective tool to develop thinking skills has impacted on the readers through e-learning, the book version and local and international recognition.

**The Impact in Terms of E-learning**
In term of e-learning, the blog has been recognised as a powerful e-learning tool and was awarded top honours at the 2011 Malaysia Super Corridor (MSC) Malaysia Asia Pacific ICT Alliance Award (APICTA). The blog was awarded the coveted Prime Minister Best of The Best MSC Malaysia Asia Pacific ICT Alliance Award 2011 in addition to winning the best for E-learning category. The blog was recognised as using ICT in creative and innovative ways as an e-learning tool for teachers and educators. It was the first time in APICTA’s 13 year history that a social entrepreneur has won the top award. Many people in diverse fields including education, business and ICT see the uniqueness, quality and richness of thinking and reflection inside the blog which can drive the innovative and creative spark of the country (www.tech-central.my). Moreover, the blogger has represented Malaysia in Bangkok Thailand at the International APICTA 2011 to share the blog with the Asia-Pacific audience.

The blog has won other awards including Merit award for NEF-AWANI ICT Award 2011 (Best young Technopreneur), Innovative Teacher for Kuala Kangsar District and recently received a certificate of appreciation from the secretariat of Human Rights Malaysia 2012 in the community (individual) category.

All of these achievements have raise the profile of the importance of developing thinking skills and reflection in teaching for the benefits of raising the standard of education for disadvantaged and excluded communities.

The Impact of the Blog as a Book

The blog was turned into a best seller book by MPH (biggest book publishing company in Malaysia) and UCSI Publishing House (a private University in Malaysia). The book has become a guide and reference in 27 Teacher Training Institutes in Malaysia.

“Although the blog is an excellent way for global dissemination of information, I remained convinced of the power of a published book to reach a wider audience, including parents, trainee teachers, experienced teachers and other educators, as well as the general public” (Bin Ismail, 2011).

The book is a compulsory reading on all teacher training courses in Malaysia, as recommended by the Teacher Education Division of Ministry of Education of Malaysia (Bahagian Pendidikan Guru Malaysia).

International Impact

The reflection in the blog has had international impact and reach. Examples include:

- Open seminar in University of Hertfordshire, UK 2011 and published in the university report (Dickerson, 2011, 2012)
- Seminars in Singapore 2010 and Thailand 2011
- Teachers TV Thailand 2012
- Use as an example of developing thinking skills by Kestrel Education, used by 10 000 schools in Malaysia
- Interviews on national television programmes and features in the national press.

Dickerson et al. (2012) has researched the impact of ARM with the particular focus on Life through my eyes, both blog and book as the example of a teacher using reflection and professional thinking skills. According to Dr. Kit Thomas the editor of the book version:

“Life through my eyes reminds me of Teacher: The Testament of an Inspired Teacher by the influential New Zealand educator Sylvia Ashton Warner that was first published in 1963. In those days, Sylvia used a written diary and black-and-white photographs in her seminal book to help us see learning and teaching through new eyes. Life through My Eyes, written and photographed in 2010 by another
dedicated writer and teacher in Malaysia is a contemporary book about learning and teaching written by a person who is striving towards perfection in his practice “ (Bin Ismail, 2011: 2)

CONCLUSION
Thinking is an on-going process. The book is a record of developing thinking over a period of time (one year) and the blog keeps going as the record of developing thinking now and into the future. Thinking skills were developed as part of developing reflective skills. Blogging can be a highly effective and powerful way to develop reflective skills and thinking skills.

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