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Scaffolding adult learners’ learning through their diversity: an action research

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Abstract

This paper explores the capitalization of one of the adult learners’ unique characteristics; experiences, in scaffolding their learning process. As a trainer to groups of adult learners in a pre-service teacher education programme for several semesters, I had identified some issues which were caused by my adult learners’ different level of exposure to teaching and education background. As I needed to know how I could improve what I was doing with my adult learners, I attempted an action research. Guided by relevant theories and literature, some activities were identified and planned. The activities capitalized on the learners’ experiences were carried out during the 14 weeks I had with my students. I collected my data through series of observations, my students’ 2-minute paper, and informal chats with selected students. Observations and reflections on the outcomes of the activities and analysis of the data were done which led to major findings. Conclusions which emphasize on the potential of capitalizing on the adult learners’ different experiences as a means to scaffold their learning process were drawn.

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1. Introduction

As one of the efforts to cater to the growing needs of having graduates teachers in specific content subjects, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has enrolled graduates in a special education programme known as Post-graduate Teaching Diploma (‘Diploma Pendidikan Lepasan Ijazah’). The programme which is also known as ‘DPLI’ is offered in Faculty of Education in selected public universities. ‘DPLI’ is an intensive pre-service programme which consists of 10 months of classes and 12 weeks of teaching practicum. There are various ‘DPLI’ programmes such as TESL, Visual Art Education, Sports Science and Health Education, Mathematics Education, and Science Education to name a few. To be selected into one of the ‘DPLI’ programmes, each candidate who already has a first degree in a related course from a recognized university will have to pass strict entry requirements and procedures set by the Ministry. The Faculty of Education in each public university developed their respective curriculum which had to be approved by the university’s senate and accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) as part of the

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preparation before running the ‘DPLI’ programmes. As a qualified teacher educator, I was given the responsibility to teach the ‘DPLI’ students for a number of semesters. It is from my observations while teaching the adult learners in my ‘DPLI’ classes that I noticed some challenges in their learning process.

It was already known from the start that the adult learners were graduates of various disciplines and from various universities; local and foreign universities. Hence, besides having different education background, the way the adult learners were trained and how they were assessed vary from student to student. Most importantly, as teaching experiences were not compulsory, the adult learners in the ‘DPLI’ programmes also differed in their ability to relate to and reflect on their teaching experiences. These differences were obvious during classes especially when they were required to respond to the topics discussed. The following are the common issues I observed in my classes due to the differences mentioned; a) while the adult learners with teaching experiences were able to relate and reflect on their experiences, those without were often left to make their own assumptions of the contexts discussed; b) while those who graduated from the Social Science disciplines were able to conduct group and class discussions and oral presentations quite smoothly, those from the Pure Sciences disciplines preferred written assignments and demonstrations, and c) while those who obtained their first degree from foreign universities were quite fluent to use English which is the medium of instruction in the university where I teach, those who were locally trained often shied away from speaking up. Hence, these differences led me to conduct an action research which aimed at scaffolding the adult learners’ learning process. I planned to do so by making use of their diversity as a means of scaffolding, rather than as a reason for a greater divide amongst them. Bandura’s Social-Cognitive theory and Vygotsky’s Social-Constructivism guided my initial reflection on the issues and how to tackle the issues best.

1.1 Action research

Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) in Dong (2005) define Action Research as “…teacher-initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices…” (p. 40). This definition is supported by Halim, Buang and Meerah (2010) when they claim, “Action research also known as ‘teacher-research’ is a form of research that aims to improve practice and consequently students’ learning” (p. 2869). There are several steps in conducting Action Research namely; Reflection, Planning, Action, and Observation (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988 in Burns, 1999). All the four steps form a spiral or a circle indicating a developmental progress of one step leading to the other in the attempt of the teacher trying to combine theories with practice and filling up the gap between teaching and researching.

2. Methodology

Reflection stage: As mentioned earlier, I noticed some issues of concern after teaching the adult learners in my ‘DPLI’ classes. The most worrying was their diverse experiences. Hence, upon reflecting, I intended to scaffold my adult learners’ learning process by capitalizing on their diversity in terms of their experiences following the Social-cognitive and Social-constructivism theories by Bandura and Vygotsky respectively. According to Knowles (1990), adult learners’ experiences are those that cover their education, work, and training. These experiences are usually important since they have “implications on the learners’ interests and abilities” (Faizah, 2004, p. 24). For the purpose of the action research and to ensure a focus in my action research, the diversity in their experiences would only cover their different exposure to teaching experiences, education background and the use of English as the medium of classroom communication.

Planning stage: As a consequence from my reflection, I had identified three classroom activities which were actually my proposed strategies in making use of my adult learners’ diverse experiences. The three activities are; a) forming a number of community of practice (CoP) (McNiff, 2002) that comprised those with teaching experiences and those without, b) providing various learning tasks which catered to the adult learners’ different preferred learning style (Willing, 1988), and c) negotiating with the adult learners on some assessments procedures (Rogers, 2002). According to Hedge (2008), negotiation “…has become popular in contexts in which the cultural and educational ethos is conducive to self-determination and in which the age of the learners is considered to be appropriate” (p. 364). In planning for the three activities however, I had kept in mind the following rules; a)
encourage the use of English at all time, b) be flexible with the adult learners within the accepted norm, and c) allow changes to take place regardless of the initial plans.

Action stage: According to the syllabus, I would meet the adult learners once a week for three hours straight. In the first week when I met with the adult learners for the first time I introduced myself, my house rules and the course. It was during the course introduction that I highlighted my three activities and how the activities would be carried out for the next 12 weeks. At the end of the lesson, I already studied their background and what their ‘experiences’ were. With that information, I started identifying each adult learner and placing them in the respective groups for the CoP to take effect. My students were informed of who are in their CoP the following day. By the time I met them next, they would already be in their respective CoP group, ready to follow the class. My next action was to prepare a variety of classroom activities to suit my students’ different learning styles. I hunted for ideas by reading books on learning styles and classroom activities. The books included those written by Lawrence (1984), Willing (1988), Oxford (1990) and Embi (2000). I ensured that I would cater to the different learning styles throughout the semester by keeping a teaching log that detailed my classroom materials and activities. My final action was to negotiate with my students on how they wanted to be assessed (Rogers, 2002). At this point, I trusted my students’ wise judgment and to avoid trivial issues and irrelevancy, I requested that their suggestions are based on the consensus of their CoP and that they would refer to the syllabus and scheme of work as reference.

Observation stage: I observed my students’ performance and progress as soon as I started my first strategy; CoP. I kept my observation notes in a logbook for easy reference and retrieval. I also requested my students to write a 2-minute paper at the end of the respective lessons in which I conducted activities that I thought could cater to their different learning styles. To triangulate my data, I also called a few students and had an informal chats with them about the classes they had with me. In particular, during the informal chats I wanted to know their opinions on the classes and what they thought of their classmates during the classes. Maykut and Morehouse (2002) and Yin (1988) guided my data collection and procedures. The three sources of data helped me in identifying salient findings of my action research.

3. Findings

CoP: McNiff (2002) posits that CoP could provide opportunities for professional growth of the members through discussions in which each of the member would be critically questioning and caring for each others’ needs. My observation notes detailed out what I saw and heard from the students as they worked on the activities I gave them during the classes in their respective CoP. My observations were done at least three times on separate occasion on each CoP. Hence, my observations notes were quite descriptive of how the students communicated among them within their CoP and of how they behaved. I noticed the gradual growth of collegiality among the members of each CoP. Most evident is the ability of the better able peers to facilitate their friends’ understanding of the new education concepts the class was introduced to. Interestingly, as most of the activities I gave them required creativity based on teaching experiences, those with the teaching experiences volunteered to share their experiences and allowed their stories to be the main reference in completing the activities. I also realized that those with the teaching experiences became the main speaker when the group needed to present their work. To confirm my observations, I studied my students’ 2-minute papers. There are instances when some students commented how grateful they were to be working with those who could provide quick reference and suggestions based on their experiences. However, there are also comments which suggested domination by the same persons during their group discussions. Most of the time, these comments were written by the same students. I called two of them for an informal chat in order to seek for their clarification. From the discussion I realized that some adult learners in my class wanted to feel that they were also able to contribute ideas even though they did not have teaching experiences. They wanted to share what they had read. At this point of time, I realized that while students with teaching experiences could be the ‘key players’ in my class, the ‘avid readers’ among my students could also perform the activities regardless of their lack of teaching experiences.

Catering to the different learning styles through a variety of learning activities: My students seemed to enjoy the various learning activities which I had prepared in my attempt to cater to my students’ different learning styles. However, I had several challenges when organizing the activities. As I needed to work within constraints such as the lack of time, inappropriate classroom facilities as well as problems with relevant technology availability, I could
only cater to two types of learning styles most of the time throughout the semester. The two types of learning styles were Visual-auditory learners and Communicative learners. I observed that though they were only the minority in the class, the Teacher-oriented learners tended to over-rely on their friends. When I called a few of them for an informal chat which I did as a group, I learnt that the Teacher-oriented students preferred to be scaffolded. This was due to the fact that they were already quite comfortable with their friends in their respective CoP. Being teacher-oriented learners, it was only understandable why they needed someone ‘better’ to turn to for assistance. According to Willing (1988), teacher-oriented learners tend to seek for confirmation of their learning progress from their teacher or peers who they consider better than them. At this point, I realized the necessity to have the various learning activities for the students which they could work on individually besides working together in their CoP. I suppose by doing so I could really cater to the teacher-oriented learners by minimizing the unwanted ‘distraction’ to the others as they try to complete their own learning activities which were prepared based on their individual learning style.

Negotiation on assessment procedures: Due to their different exposure to formal training and assessment during their bachelor’s programme, I decided to provide rooms for negotiation with the assessments. However, having said that I needed to ensure that the negotiation on assessments could only be on the date of assignment submission and their choice of group members for the group projects they had to do. Additionally, I also allowed the students to decide what they wanted to do in their group projects as long as the tasks’ objectives remained. For example, there was a group project which required them to conduct a mini case study on an English Language Teaching (ELT) issue. I allowed them to decide on their research focus and how they wanted to work their way around finishing the project. I also required them to make decisions based on consensus. From my observations, the students liked the idea. They even negotiated among them since working as a group the students needed to make decisions together. However, from some informal chats I had with a few students, I discovered that they were conflicts during the initial stage as the students had different views and values. Nonetheless, as adult learners they gradually came to a consensus the moment everybody was given a chance to contribute their ideas and state their opinions. The students also acknowledged that the differences in their views and values were actually the unique attribute of their mini case study. Hedge (2008) concurs that “…It (negotiation) fits with the progressivist view that learners will learn more effectively if it is clear that their experiences and perceptions are valued, and if they are involved in developing the course through a process of consultation” (p. 364). When reporting their mini case study, the students combined different perspectives to form a new understanding. I discovered this as very interesting since their report was different from a typical report I had seen over the semesters teaching the same course and most importantly it was original.

4. Conclusion

There are many major findings which I discovered during the first cycle of my Action Research. Each step in the first cycle; Reflection, Planning, Action, and Observation led me into thinking more critically about every decisions I made and how those decisions had affected what I did in the subsequent steps. The first step made me think critically about the issues of concern about the adult learners in my ‘DPLI’ class. The identified issues consequently led me into thinking of the possible plans of action. Relevant literature supported my decisions on the proposed plans. How I needed to collect my data and the procedures I needed to follow were also driven by the plans which I had thought of. They were also supported by relevant literature. This actually guided by next step; Action. My final step which is Observation depended on what I had carried out and what I could conclude from the findings I had gathered from the previous step. Again, this called for critical thinking and self-reflections.

All the critical thinking and self-reflections I did let me realize the potentials of capitalizing my ‘DPLI’ students’ diversity in terms of their experiences. For example, their diversity had proven to be an asset in scaffolding their learning through CoP and negotiation on assessment. These major finding coincide with Knowles’ (1990) theories on adult learners. In particular, he posits that one of the unique characteristics of the adult learners is their experiences. It is only wise for every trainer to know how to maximize the potential of their adult learners through capitalizing on the adult learners’ experiences which is their “reservoir of knowledge” (Knowles, 1990, p. 237). However, there are still other issues which have yet to be resolved on top of new emerging issues. For example, I needed to reconsider about the variety of learning activities I had prepared. At first I thought the plan of providing a
variety of learning activities would be best to cater to the different learning styles. However, I overlooked the fact that the students already had their CoP. There were times when the intended learning activities conflicted with the nature of CoP. In attempting to cater to the Teacher-oriented learners, I had accidentally added extra tasks for the other types of learners within the same CoP. I take this as my Reflection for the next cycle of the Action Research.

In conclusion, conducting Action Research to scaffold my ‘DPLI’ students’ learning through their diversity had proven to be beneficial to me. I realized the potentials of some of my proposed plans as well as I noticed rooms for improvement in my plan and action. Needless to say, these in turn had provided me with ideas for the next cycle in the Action Research.

References


