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Implementing Narrative-Pedagogical Approaches in a Teacher Education Classroom

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Abstract

Preservice teachers can no longer be prepared using conventional teaching approaches as these are inadequate to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills they require to perform the tasks of teaching effectively. Teacher educators need to use new pedagogies, and narrative pedagogy is seen as a teaching method which can better prepare preservice teachers for the challenging classrooms of today. My study explored nine preservice teachers' experiences after the enactment of a narrative pedagogical approach in one of their courses within their teacher education program. I used Ricoeur's framework of the prefigured and configured arena of education to analyse the rich interview and reflective data which emerged. Three themes for the prefigured arena emerged: (a) feeling the sense of responsibility, (b) feeling anxious, and (c) feeling the lack of experience and confidence. Similarly, three themes were found for the configured arena: (a) learning through emotions, (b) learning through insights, and (c) learning through discussion. The preservice teachers have interpreted and discussed "lived" stories and this has shifted the way they think about teaching. The results do offer teacher educators and educational stakeholders a stepping-stone to further pedagogical insight into using narrative pedagogy in teacher education.

Keywords

Narrative Pedagogy, Narrative, "Lived" Experience, Teacher Education

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Implementing Narrative-Pedagogical Approaches in a Teacher Education Classroom

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Preservice teachers can no longer be prepared using conventional teaching approaches as these are inadequate to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills they require to perform the tasks of teaching effectively. Teacher educators need to use new pedagogies, and narrative pedagogy is seen as a teaching method which can better prepare preservice teachers for the challenging classrooms of today. My study explored nine preservice teachers' experiences after the enactment of a narrative pedagogical approach in one of their courses within their teacher education program. I used Ricoeur's framework of the prefigured and configured arena of education to analyse the rich interview and reflective data which emerged. Three themes for the prefigured arena emerged: (a) feeling the sense of responsibility, (b) feeling anxious, and (c) feeling the lack of experience and confidence. Similarly, three themes were found for the configured arena: (a) learning through emotions, (b) learning through insights, and (c) learning through discussion. The preservice teachers have interpreted and discussed "lived" stories and this has shifted the way they think about teaching. The results do offer teacher educators and educational stakeholders a stepping-stone to further pedagogical insight into using narrative pedagogy in teacher education. Keywords: Narrative Pedagogy, Narrative, "Lived" Experience, Teacher Education

Introduction

Teacher education still uses conventional methods to prepare preservice teachers (Hammerness & Klette, 2015). Darling-Hammond (2014) laments that it is inadequate to address the new challenges beginning teachers will face in the 21st century. Worldwide, beginning teachers are inundated with the same workload and responsibilities as the more experienced teachers. They also have to struggle with difficult students. Questions have been raised regarding whether conventional ways of preparing preservice teacher are sufficient to meet the needs of preservice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2014). It is no different in Malaysia. To overcome any shortcomings, the Ministry of Education Malaysia, through the Education Blueprint 2013-2025, has advocated immediate development and implementation of new teacher education pedagogies to prepare preservice teachers for the complex teaching environment.

Preservice teachers will enter the classroom that is now complex and unpredictable. Preservice teachers will also be "thrust" into a fast-paced teaching environment that is continuously changing and evolving (Goh & Blake, 2015; Naylor, Campbell-Evans, & Maloney, 2015). If preservice teachers are continuously being prepared using conventional pedagogies that are more outcome-based, with a focus on teaching versus learning, there is a possibility it will give rise to a theory to practice gap (Hammerness & Klette, 2015; Strangeways & Papatraianou, 2016).

Teaching is a profession that involves practice, but more often than not, educational theory is viewed as a concept that has little relevance in the “real world” of classroom teaching (Goh & Blake, 2015). Theories and knowledge of teaching are valued for their capability to enable preservice teachers to be effective teachers in their own classroom (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012). However, if educational theories are viewed as separate from practice, then preservice teachers will perceive a misalignment from the theory to practice connection and be ignorant about how the existing theories affect their everyday teaching tasks. There is a tendency for teacher education to be somewhat detached from the realities of actual teaching and this could further expand the practice to theory gap (Goh & Canrinus, 2019; Goh, Yusuf & Wong, 2017). The use of stories in narrative pedagogy is able to bridge the practice-theory gap as the active interaction between learners during the narration or storytelling allows them to “live in an expanded present moment where past and future events are transformed in the here and now” (Smith & Liehr, 2003, p. 273).

Narrative pedagogy is about the sharing of stories and then responding to the stories being shared by others. According to Reissman (1993), a story is “a recapitulation of every nuance of a moment that had special meaning” (p. 2). Stories would allow the preservice teachers to experience a “lived experience” of their peers and would allow the narrator and the listeners to identify the meanings within the story. At the same time, during discussion and interpretation of the story, both the narrator and respondents would become more aware of their own understandings about teaching. The use of stories, in narrative pedagogy, is therefore not only a teaching strategy but also a way to promote thinking about the meanings of the educational contents being learnt and their significance to teachers’ practice (Cheng, 2003).

This Study’s Classroom

In the class where the study was undertaken, my preservice teachers were enrolled in the first semester of their third year of their 4-year Bachelor of Education program in 2017. The Bachelor of Education from the university where this study was conducted consisted of educational papers of which the Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course was a mandatory course. This particular course looks at the different educational theories and preservice teachers are also taught how to organize and present specific content in a way that makes it accessible for an increasingly diverse groups of students in their classrooms. However, traditionally, the pedagogical approach of this course has an over emphasis on teaching content and skills. There is a reliance on lecture formats and a prevailing use of technologies, such as Microsoft PowerPoint slides, and using online platforms to cater to a large group of preservice teachers (Ikhsan & Norila, 2016).

A chance conversation with someone I met at an international conference in 2016 about narrative pedagogy stirred my interest. As preservice teachers and future teachers, learning is not merely about intellectual activity (through theories) but also a personal process that should also involve experiential engagement, and what better way than through the experiences of teachers who have been in the field of actual teaching (Goh, 2013; Goh, Canrinus, & Wong, 2019; Goh & Wong, 2014). The use of narrative pedagogy resonates well with me. From my experience as a teacher educator, I know my preservice teachers enjoyed project-based learning and being independent learners. I began to plan how narrative pedagogy can be applied in my Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course. I have approached this study from a teacher educator’s point of view and have wanted to look for new pedagogical tools that can influence change in how we prepare preservice teachers. My motivation to use narrative pedagogy is to assist my preservice teachers translate their formal knowledge of aspects of teaching and learning as an attribute into knowledge of experience into practice.

I report how I used narrative pedagogical approaches in my Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course. The focus of the study is to explore the experiences of my preservice teachers when I implemented the new approach in three topics of the Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course. I ask: "What is the experience of preservice teachers who are participating in the narrative centred approach?" Through interpretation of the experiences of these preservice teachers, this study will give voice to preservice teachers about their experiences when narrative pedagogy is used. In addition, this study not only adds to the understanding of using narrative pedagogy in teacher education but also provides an insight to those who would wish to use this approach in their own educational context.

The Methods

Philosophical Underpinnings and Methodological Stance

The theoretical philosophy of the late Paul Ricoeur [between 1913-2005] served as the platform on which this study is based. Ricoeur's theory departs from the traditional positivist stance which looked at numbers to measure teaching and learning. Instead, Ricoeur examined the meanings of teaching and learning through an interpretation of the language, self and the stories being told as a way of understanding educational experiences (Cheng, 2003; Herda, 1999).

As my aim was to capture the experiences of my preservice teachers, we "travelled" through the use of narrative pedagogy; my study was planned to describe the experiences as it happened, rather than have it collected retrospectively after the implementation. I used the two-phase representation of Ricoeur's (1984, 1988) framework in which to better understand experiences of my preservice teachers. One is known as the prefigured arena, an arena based on preconceived understandings, history, culture, and traditions. The prefigured arena of the preservice teachers is the predetermined understanding of how they have been taught in their teacher education program. I examined the interpretation of experiences from the preservice teachers as they considered the prefigured world of learning—what they already knew and understood about it and being provoked by the narrative pedagogy (a new way of learning). These preservice teachers then moved into the second phase, the configured arena, and this provided a moment of mediation or connection—of future possibilities in learning.

The Topics Used in the Narrative Centred Approach

The three narrative centred topics were taken from the Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course (taught in semester one, year three) and was focused on acquiring competencies in planning teaching and assessing. The main learning themes were writing daily lesson plans, implementing the lesson plans, and the assessment of teaching and learning in the classroom. The nine preservice teachers (six females and three males) attended the narrative centred approach class for three hours every week for six weeks.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval came from the Research Management and Innovation Centre of the University to conduct the study. The nine preservice teachers who volunteered were told that the study would involve them attending extra class hours separate from their scheduled class timetable. I told them how their well-being and privacy would be ensured throughout the study and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also given a consent form

with an attached information sheet detailing the study process and what they were expected to do. The completed and signed consent forms were kept locked in the filing cabinet.

Preparation for the Narrative-Centred Topics

On the first day of the first semester, the nine preservice teachers met me so I could introduce the semester's Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course. In this session, I explained the justification for the use of the narrative-centred topics and the processes involved. To prepare the preservice teachers for their first narrative class, I prepared a guide outlining the proposed narrative processes.

Each of the main themes (introduced every two weeks), "writing daily lesson plans," "implementing the lesson plan," and the "assessment of teaching and learning in the classroom," were introduced with a narrative session. The narratives were provided by (not their real names) - Hazmi ("writing daily lesson plans"), Rozinah ("implementing the lesson plan") and Sharifah ("assessment of teaching and learning in the classroom") who had recently completed their practicum. Hazmi, Rozinah, and Sharifah were not tied to any particular structure in their narratives. The nine preservice teachers were free to also share in the narratives; however, it was not compulsory for them to do so. Nevertheless, the preservice teachers were informed to keep the narratives confidential and within the classroom only. The narratives were focused on the experience of: "writing daily lesson plans," "implementing the lesson plans effectively," and the "assessment of teaching and learning in the classroom." The nine preservice teachers were divided into groups of three, and I was in attendance to assist as they interpreted and discussed each of the stories and what it meant for them as practising teachers.

Upon hearing the narratives, each group was told to interpret the story they had heard through a four-step process to analyse the narratives. Step one entailed a "brainstorming" session on the whiteboards (one group used a Smart Board for this purpose) of all the issues which they found from the narratives. The issues were depicted in various graphic forms or the use of mind-maps. Step two required the groups to explore those issues which they have identified. They were asked to discuss these issues and discussed which of the issues that they already were aware of. In the third step, the preservice teachers must identify "gaps" in their knowledge about what they did not understand and would require further investigation. From the third step, they then wrote their own learning outcomes. These learning outcomes were based on what they had determined were the important learning issues raised by the narratives. The learning outcomes were then further transformed into a list of questions that needed to be answered to achieve their own learning outcomes. They were given a week to find the solution to their questions. The Feedback Meeting (the fourth step) was to review each group's learning outcomes. The Feedback Meeting provided an avenue for preservice teachers to help each other to understand the topics they had been studying, to debate different sources of information (for example, why a textbook might say one thing and an article something different) and to discuss the ways in which their learning were related to teaching. I assisted the groups to facilitate the discussion, interpretation and thinking processes. The same four-step process was conducted for each narrative session.

Data Collection

There were two focus group interviews (preservice teachers in their own group of three's), one, after the story was narrated and again at the end after the third narrative session. According to Patton (2015) the question as to why focus group interview should be used is important. I used focus group interviews as the preservice teachers in their own groups have

worked together for six weeks and would share a similar relationship to each of the narrative-centred topics. In addition, these preservice teachers in their own group would be quite comfortable to discuss and share opinions among themselves and with me. The prompting questions for the first interview were: (1) What are your thoughts upon listening to the narrative?; (2) Do you feel that using narrative can influence your learning?; (3) How can you learn from these narratives?; (4) Do you think that learning through stories gives you enough content knowledge?; (5) Can you relate to “real world” teaching’ through the stories?; (6) Is there any connections to what you already know and what you hear from the narratives. Prompting questions used after the third narrative session were: (1) Can you describe narrative centred learning to your first semester friends? (2) How do you feel about learning through narrative-centred topics—how would you describe it when compared to the other methods used in your teacher education program?

Each focus group interviews which was conducted in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) lasted approximately 90 minutes and were audio recorded with the preservice teachers’ permission. The recorded conversations were transcribed by a research assistant who had signed a confidentiality agreement. In the transcripts, if there were any mention of any particular names, this information was removed. Once transcribed, all audio recording files were deleted to ensure that there would be no abuse of the data. The preservice teachers were assured that the transcripts of the interviews were only viewed by the research assistant and me.

Along with collecting data via focus groups, a written reflection was also used to record how preservice teachers felt, thought and learnt after each narrative session. They were advised to write their reflection immediately after each session so that their experiences would still be fresh in their minds. I provided the preservice teachers with a piece of A4 paper after each session, with a sentence “Today, after listening to the story about [writing a daily lesson plan], I feel ...” The preservice teachers could identify themselves if they wanted to at the bottom of the page. They were asked to reflect what they felt or thought about as they underwent each of the narrative sessions. They could hand in their reflection after each session has concluded or to hand it in by placing the written reflection in my office pigeon-hole. A total of 27 reflections were received after three narrative session (all preservice teachers handed in their written reflection). Some of the reflections were one page, half a page and there were some with just one or two sentences.

Data Analysis

The interviews in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) were translated as best as possible so that the original intentions were not lost. The translated interview transcripts and the preservice teachers’ written reflection were reviewed and analyzed manually. As a first step, I alternated between reading the interview transcripts and the written reflection to look for meaningful themes or patterns across these two different types of data. Preliminary analysis and synthesis of the data were made by typing text segments into a Word document divided into columns and rows with each row representing different themes. I then focused on shared meanings between the interviews and the written reflection to determine what they meant in light of the theoretical representation of the prefigured and configured arena. Then, I looked for excerpts from the data which could best illustrate the themes.

Findings

According to Ong et al. (2017), the teaching methods of the Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course are rarely made explicit in the curriculum. Therefore, following

Rigour's philosophy, pedagogy is generally prefigured, that is, how it is taught is usually assumed and taken for granted. Therefore, when I presented the first theme (writing daily lesson plans) using narrative pedagogy, it was something new and the preservice teachers were experiencing it for the first time.

As the initial interview showed, Aminah (pseudonym), female from Group 3 was surprised that it was something she has never seen other lecturers used in the classroom before. She said:

... this is the first time we have such a teaching method in the classroom.

Therefore, when I used narrative pedagogy to introduce each theme, the pedagogical approach was configured, it became a new experience for the preservice teachers. As the interviews in the next section will show, it proved to be quite challenging, but exciting for the preservice teachers. The configured arena draws together the prefigured arena closer where narrative pedagogical approaches became beneficial to the preservice teachers' learning.

The Prefigured Arena

Preservice teachers were rather uncomfortable with the prefigured arena. They had become comfortable with the instructional plan outlined for them by their lecturers and were also used to having a lecture format type learning in the classroom. When narrative pedagogy was used, the preservice teachers' role became very different. Suddenly, they were required to facilitate their own learning process within the group. Although, the Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One course had its own learning objectives, the preservice teachers must now formulate their own learning outcomes. My role was now not to provide answers or to answer their question, but now I only assisted them in the formulation of their own learning outcomes and questions.

Narrative pedagogy changed how the preservice teachers learned from one in which I would normally transmit information, to one in which now, they had to discuss and reflect on the information they heard from the stories told by the returning practicum teachers. German philosopher Martin Heidegger succinctly surmised in 1951 that it was much easier to simply transmit large amount of information than allowing learning to happen. Teaching as "letting learning happen" was unsettling and unfamiliar to the preservice teachers. Their attempt to facilitate this change was challenging, yet, thought provoking.

Prefigured Arena: "Feeling the Sense of Responsibility"

Preservice teachers were challenged to take responsibility and to decide what they needed to know (their own learning objectives). They were given the opportunity to decide how much they wanted and needed to learn. One of the goals of a narrative-centred pedagogy is that preservice teachers become self-directed learners and empowered to make decisions on their own. The purpose of Step 1, after the narrative was conducted was for each group to "brainstorm" all the issues they could find from the narrative. The groups also "brainstormed" what they would further need in order to better understand the identified issues. As part of the learning process was that preservice teachers became self-directed in their own learning by being able to identify their own learning needs and being able to find their own learning resources, similar to how an adult would learn (Knowles, 1975).

It was found that preservice teachers, at the beginning, had doubts about their own ability to be self-directed in their learning. It must be noted that each groups' formulation of their own objectives must also align with that of the overall "Teaching, Technology and

Assessment Part One's core objectives." However, I was not too concerned about aligning too closely, what was important was that preservice teachers were empowered and be self-directed to know what their own learning needs were. What came out was actually a further breakdown of the core objectives into smaller objectives which the preservice teachers felt very important. Initially, most of the preservice teachers found it quite hard and this was observed during Step 1. As Hasnida (Female, Group 2) said,

I find self-directed quite hard at first. I thought I must see if I satisfy the core objectives then only break down. But my group members helped during brainstorming, and we found we wanted to know more after the story.

Prefigured Arena: "Feeling Anxious"

With the introduction of the narrative-centred theme, the prefigured arena which the preservice teachers were used to was changed, thus created a sense of anxiety amongst them. Most of them were doubtful if they could formulate their own learning objectives or if what they had written were really enough or too much. Ahmad (Male, Group 1) expressed that: "... the members in the group kept asking "do we need to know that?"—everything seemed important to know, like we know we need it later for our practicum experience."

On the other hand, Laili's (Female, Group 2) group was anxious about time to look for the answers to their objectives. Laili added:

There is not enough time in the 3 hours to get out our objectives and also to list out our questions. And then, sometimes we have about 10 questions to answer—I think the one week given to us before Step 4 is not enough.

A learning objective formulated from one group under the narrative theme "assessment of teaching and learning in the classroom" was: "How do you know the students have achieved the learning outcomes?" In the prefigured arena, the lecturers would most likely have provided the information or would direct the preservice teachers to the resources needed. When preservice teachers had to look for the answers, they found that there was a lot of different assessment methods for different types of learning activities and learning outcomes in different books and articles. Preservice teachers became anxious when they saw how much they needed to learn. Nevertheless, there was healthy discussion among the members of the group when they tried to eliminate or add new learning objectives. Ahmad (Male, Group 1) succinctly summed up the group's anxiety:

... we realised immediately we had a lot of learning objectives, some repeated, it was easy, we just cancelled it. ... But those that remained was still a lot – we suddenly saw that in the topic "assessment," there was so much to cover and we don't know if we have the time to find all the answers.

Prefigured Arena: "Feeling the Lack of Experience and Confidence"

Trying to adapt to the narrative-centred approach and towards the "Configured" arena, preservice teachers felt that they did not have the experience or confidence to do so. Mejar (Male, Group 3) felt that: "... I know we are supposed to discuss and to seek answers where possible for ourselves, sometimes we need more direction around formulating questions from the objectives."

Belinda (Female, Group 2), felt that the lack of guidance hampered her confidence to carry out the group's task:

I think we will appreciate some guidance from the lecturer. We may need guidance to look for key points to focus on, instead of looking at a lot of things [which] can be difficult for my learning. Sometimes I do not feel confident that I have covered the basics of what I need to learn.

Interestingly, Aminah (Female, Group 3) provided a solution. She suggested that the group should first be taught how narrative-centred approaches worked, let them “experiment” with it before using it as part of their learning in the “Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One.” This, she further reiterated, will provide them greater confidence (rather than being thrown into it) and also some initial experience about how to go about doing the four steps in the narrative-centred approaches. Aminah continued that: “... we normally listen to our lecturers and sometimes we are in the wrong too, we like to ask ‘how’, ‘how much’ to learn from our lecturers.”

The attempt to configure the three topics from the “Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One” showed that the preservice teachers felt unsure and their responsibility challenged, specifically, about whether they were ready to learn in a new way. The prefigured arena of teacher education was an arena where the preservice teachers were comfortable with how their teacher educators controlled or guided the learning, somewhat decided what should be taught and how it was to be taught. It would appear that the teaching of the “Teaching, Technology and Assessment Part One” was predictable. In other words, in the prefigured arena, teacher educators did most of the thinking and presented their thinking to the preservice teachers. The next section explored further the experiences of these nine preservice teachers as the three topics were configured to the new way of learning.

The Configured Arena

Upon completion of the first narrative session, preservice teachers had to reflect on the session through a short statement: “Today, after listening to the story about [writing a daily lesson plan], I feel” One of the preservice teachers reflected and wrote (Aziz, Male, Group 1, reflective writing):

I was excited hearing the post practicum teacher's own story, told in his own way. I know that the story is important to me, the story of something that has happened is connected to what I will need later to write a good lesson plan. It [the story about writing a lesson plan] is from another person's experience and his difficulties, so it is real.

To me, it was an exciting start to the narrative-centred approach. Expressions such as “something new,” “realisation that wow—what a lot to know,” “Real learning,” “Writing a lesson plan for a real class can be so difficult,” were how the preservice teachers described their experiences. Their expressions reflected a deep emotional reaction to the stories. During the narration, the emotions of the narrator was also revealed, and this affected how the preservice teachers interpreted their own responses and learned about the practices of a real classroom.

Configured Arena: "Learning Through Emptions"

Siti (Female, Group 1) was quite surprised at the emotions she felt when she listened to the challenges of real teaching in the classroom. Besides Siti, Aminah (Female, Group 3) also felt emotional at the hardship the three practicum teachers had to endure. This gave Aminah thoughts about her own needs to be prepared. Aminah (female, Group 3, reflective writing) wrote: "... before these stories, I sometimes have a 'fairy-tale' notion about teaching. I am now more aware what actual classroom teaching is, and I certainly cannot learn just by sitting in lectures."

Another preservice teacher wrote:

... I felt that every teacher's experience in the classroom was totally different – it could be quite an emotional thing to go through. When Sharifah talked about actually in tears because of how the students treated her, I must remember this for my own practicum and be prepared. Sharifah provided some good advice (Siew, Group 3, reflective writing).

In the interview, when this was brought up, Siew pointed out that: "I won't cry though, but I can empathise with Sharifah."

Similar emotions were felt by Mejar (Male, Group 3). He, too realised that the experience of actual teaching was different from what he imagined it to be. Mejar formed his own insight about teaching through his reflection to make connections about what Hazmi, Rozinah, and Sharifah narrated and tried to relate to his future teaching experience. He also seemed to have echoed Siew during the interview:

Lots to remember before my own practicum. This has helped me to prepare.

In the group interviews, when asked about what the preservice teachers felt when Sharifah cried, the responses were: "... now I am aware of what can happen," "must be very sad for Sharifah when she cannot get her students to respond," "I feel sad for her, I almost cried too, thinking of the difficulties," and "I am afraid now."

The aroused emotions cannot be taught through lectures or books. Lectures and textbooks tend to focus on the methods and management for specific teaching situations, but the individuality of the teacher is precluded. There is no textbook which would state that "you may feel so discouraged that you will cry." The narrative sessions provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to learn about being prepared and that it is quite natural to feel despondent if a well-planned lesson goes awry.

Configured Arena: "Learning Through Insights"

Laili (Female, Group 2) talked about gaining insight from the narratives:

I can see how much it affected the three practicum teachers even after so many months after their practicum. I can see that it affected them quite emotionally. It is something to remember when it my turn. An important learning happened today.

Diekelmann and Diekelmann (2000) named “learning as listening” in which understandings come from listening to the narratives. Hasnida (Female, Group 2) talked about gaining invaluable insight through listening. She felt that by listening, she has learned something realistic because it came from the people who have been “through the grind.” Bowles (2016) succinctly stated that insight cannot be learned—it is not something that can be cognitively achieved. Instead it is something that is stimulated within a human being to feel and listening to an authentic story aroused that feeling (Bowles, 2016). As Diekelmann and Diekelmann wrote, “Listening can tell the human being that it must give ear to (listen to) the listenable, not as cognitive gain or other such quantifiable magnitude, but as immediate, practical, and prudent understanding” (p. 224). What was seen in this short study was that the preservice teachers gained insight about teaching through listening to another person’s actual experiences, something that is difficult to be taught. Although lecturers would explain in the class about what to expect in the classroom, it is never the same as coming from an individual who has been through it.

Configured Arena: “Learning Through Discussion”

When preservice teachers shared their learning in Step 4: The feedback meeting, opportunities arose to have a deeper level of discussion around the topic. For example, a discussion about assessment led to discussion about using technologies to assess. On the other hand, debates also arose about the lack of internet connection to use “Plickers” or “Kahoot” in the classroom, even though it would be more fun for the students than merely writing on papers.

Through discussion and exploration of an issue, preservice teachers were given an opportunity to think at a deeper level. They were stimulated to look at an issue from different perspectives and share their opinions. The feedback meeting session further reinforced their understandings about an issue. In addition, the feedback meeting was also an avenue for the preservice teachers to freely express their doubts and share their own limited experiences. Through it all, deep level thinking and reflection happened. Ahmad (Male, Group 1) said that:

... we were all thinking more. First we focussed on the issues, especially those we felt were very new and we knew we needed more information. Second, we had a lot to think in terms of our own future practices.

The opportunity for preservice teachers to reflect on their understanding is an important aspect of learning in the narrative-centred approach. As Palmer (1998) points out, “Learning does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds, does education have a chance to happen” (p. 75). More times than not, learners are reluctant to share for fear of being ridiculed in a large class. However, if the group is small, the dynamics of a small group provide a “safe” environment for learners to express themselves more freely.

Siew (Female, Group 3) felt more secure to provide her own opinion in a small group: “I get the say my point of view in my own group of only three members.” On the other hand, she also enjoyed listening to her members’ points of view as being something that she could learn from: “I enjoy the opportunity to listen to other points of view, and not just the lecturers. I like the discussion part. I also like hearing my group’s points of view and ideas.”

Pointedly, Smythe, MacCulloch, and Charmley (2009) shares that: “understanding lies in the art of listening” (p. 22). Generally, the narrative feedback meetings provide a venue for discussion and debate which is important for thinking and understanding.

When preservice teachers were asked about the new way of learning through narrative-centred pedagogy, some of them mentioned that although preservice teachers might enjoy a

narrative way of doing, they were concerned about whether their teacher educators were ready. Surprisingly, they were more concerned that their teacher educators might shy away from change. When asked to elaborate, most just smiled. Aminah (female, Group 3) said that:

Right now, most of our lecturers tend to tell us what they think is right. Sometimes, they [the lecturers] like to tell us what to do, how to do it. So if use this teaching [narrative pedagogy], they may not be ready.

When asked why she thought that her teacher educators might not be ready, she said that: "...they are used to certain ways of teaching, I am afraid, they [their lecturers] are uncomfortable to try new ways."

On the other hand, Aminah's group members thought that doing narrative-centred story would take a lot of time, especially during searching for information, and she was concerned about access to resources. Similarly, Azizi (Male, Group 1) felt that their educators would need to provide guidance to help them to become familiar with the new way of learning because a lot of work will be on the students themselves. What was a concern also to the preservice teachers and was indicated in different ways during the interviews were whether they have learnt enough. Since they were quite used to being given or told their learning objectives, they were worried if they have not covered enough or too much. For Ahmad (Male, Group 1), he did not feel like he was working on his own. He liked the group's help that I conducted the feedback meeting quite well. There were good responses to the feedback which he felt very necessary.

All too often, preservice teachers' voices are drowned by their lecturers who sometimes felt they are in a better position to inform knowledge rather than to discuss in a cooperative climate. On the other hand, Siew (Female, Group 3) and Mejar (Male, Group 3) believe that narrative-centred way of learning cannot be conducted throughout the semester. They feel it may become too tedious. They suggest that it should be conducted to supplement the traditional way of learning. That way, there is change and at the same time, new learning especially with authentic stories from past practicum teachers or in-service teachers. Getting "configured" involve being prepared to take a different route for the uncertainty that it creates. More importantly, configuration involve assuring the preservice teachers that they will not be thrown into the deep end. Azizi (Male, Group 1) feels that teacher educators still do need to provide some form of guidance, nevertheless, he still enjoyed the freedom it gave him to be independent in his learning: "... I like the independent to take control of my learning. I can take control of what is important or not so important ..."

Discussion

In this study, I explored the experiences of preservice teachers who participated in a narrative-centred approach for the first time, and asked the question, "What is the experience of preservice teachers who are participating in the narrative centred approach?" As these preservice teachers continued to learn about teaching through a narrative pedagogy which emphasized learning and thinking using experiences rather than learning through lectures, the preservice teachers were constantly encouraged to engage in a thoughtful inquiry into their own understanding and to build bridges between theory and practice. While some challenges occurred within some of the preservice teachers, such as how to use time appropriately to complete the task or whether they have learnt enough, what was significant was that they became self-directed in determining aspects that were important to them. This allowed them to critically consider knowledge and to better understand its significance for their future teaching

roles. Hence being self-directed is an important underpinning for learners to become confident in who they are, what they know, and what they will experience (Verenikina, 2008).

For the preservice teachers, the challenges of teaching were revealed through the narratives and again when each course content theme was further discussed and interpreted during the four-step process. During the prefigured arena, there was a sense of insecurity with a new way of learning when the first narrative-centred topic was introduced. The narrative-centred approach required the preservice teachers to determine their own learning and with me assisting in their learning rather than lecturing. This new approach, which the preservice teachers had never encountered, made them apprehensive yet challenged them. They would have expected that I would plan and present to them what they need to learn. What would be common in a teacher education classroom would be a rather large group of preservice teachers and their teacher educators would predominantly be projecting their multimedia presentation. There would be lesser opportunities for discussion and debates. A narrative pedagogy, on the other hand, would require a smaller group of learners working together to brainstorm, discuss, interpret and reflect upon the narratives.

While narratives and stories have often been used in education as an illustration of practice, the sharing and interpretation of narratives is usually used as an adjunct to a lecture (Gilbert, Hipkins, & Cooper, 2005). During the preservice teachers' practical experience in school, they do hear stories informally being told in teachers' staff room, school laboratories or when teachers get together. Through these stories, preservice teachers embed and align their knowledge and understanding to be used in their own teaching (Doyle & Carter, 2003). According to Doyle and Carter (2003), stories are also useful to novice teachers. They suggest that novice teachers generally lack experience to cope with unpredictable situations in teaching such as classroom management issues, student discipline or manage the use of appropriate teaching strategies. Therefore, novice teachers fall back on stories which carry information about how things work and what meanings events have.

This study showed that, from the preservice teachers' conversations, as the weeks progressed, they learned to develop viewpoints and opinions when they interpreted narratives together. When a learning environment fosters dialogue between the learners, space was created to approach learning in new and innovative ways (Brown, Kirkpatrick, Mangum, & Avery, 2008). What happened in this study was that when the learning environment inspired dialogue and discussion, an "authentic learning environment" emerged (Brook, 2009; Kreber, McCune & Klampfeitner, 2010). Such learning environment served to engage the preservice teachers around the subject matter. When the late Heidegger (1968) once said "to teach is... to let learn" (p. 15), he opened the question of how a teacher can let learners learn for themselves. Narrative pedagogy provides such an experience. When narratives are made part of the processes of learning and teaching, it provides an effective way to promote "... responsibility for self-growth" and "...can be a powerful mechanism for transformation, learning and interpretation of personal experience" (Juškevičienė & Nedzinskaitė, 2013, p. 18).

Recommendations for Teacher Education

Most times, preservice teachers are knowledgeable in the theoretical aspects of teaching but find it hard to link it to actual use, but with narrative-centred approach, the "action of practice" can be facilitated through the eyes of a teacher who has been in the field. Nevertheless, implementing narrative pedagogy is without its challenges. For teacher educators who wish to attempt a different type of pedagogy, one in which preservice teachers are involved in a learning which promotes self-independence, insights into the workings of an actual teaching world and exploration, it is worthwhile considering narrative pedagogy. However,

preparing the teacher educators, the preservice teachers, and managing change are three important aspects that must be considered before narrative pedagogy is implemented.

Teacher educators must be well prepared before undertaking a narrative centred approach. There is a shift of philosophy in how preservice teachers are taught. Teacher educators must first, understand the assumptions of the existing pedagogy (which they have been using all the while) and be able to come to terms with a shift in a new pedagogical approach and its underlying philosophy (Cheng, 2003). As with any teaching methodology, there is no one “glove fits all.” Each implementation of narrative pedagogy must evolve within its own cultural, political and social context (Gilbert, Hipkins, & Cooper, 2005). Workshops, seminars, invited guest professionals who have used narrative pedagogy would be some ways teacher educators can learn and be prepared for a narrative pedagogy. Another strategy would be to team teach and work alongside an experienced facilitator. What would be important is that the teacher educators are confident when implementing narrative-centred approaches.

The preservice teachers themselves must be ready to undertake a narrative-centred approach in their learning. They need to understand and recognize how narrative pedagogy can help them with their teacher preparation. Any doubts or negative perceptions towards narrative pedagogy would jeopardize their engagement with the process. As the interviews have shown in this study, preservice teachers at the beginning felt insecure and diffident in a pedagogical approach that is seemingly unstructured. Therefore, the preservice teachers could be provided with more structure at the beginning—through handouts and clear documentation of the processes. Preservice teachers need time to recognise the value narrative-centred approaches bring to their learning. They need reassurance through constant discussion, regular meetings and prompt feedback on their reflective writings.

For change to happen, the whole teacher education institution needs be involved. Management must be “on-board” on all stages of development, design and progress of the new pedagogical shift. Importantly, the management needs to trust the implementers and be champions of the change. Management, teacher educators and preservice teachers need to meet regularly to facilitate ongoing discussions as a group or separately at all times during the pedagogical change journey. Anderson (1999) succinctly surmise; “Managers of complex systems can only dimly foresee what specific behaviours will emerge when an organizations’ architecture is changed. Instead of relying on foresight they rely on evolution; changes that produce cascades of change are retained while those that do not are altered” (p. 229)

Summary

To my knowledge, there have not been any trial or studies conducted using narrative pedagogy in any of Malaysia’s teaching institutions. As this is also a preliminary study into the use of narrative pedagogy in a teacher education university, I do not anticipate that this study’s finding to be generalised or that the study would produce similar results when replicated. However, I hope, my study has provided an insight into using narrative pedagogy and can give teacher educators a greater understanding of this particular pedagogy. If the aim of teacher preparation is to encourage thinking, application of theory to practice, and to put learning into “real-life”—then it is worth inviting narrative pedagogy into the classrooms.

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