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# BRIEF REPORTS AND SUMMARIES

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## ***Failing the Practicum: Narrowing the Gap Between Expectations and Reality With Reflective Practice***

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■ The practicum has come to be recognized as one of the most important parts of the language teacher education program and many preservice teachers assume that they will be able to neatly translate what they have learned in their theory classes into practice (Richards & Crookes, 1988). However, preservice teachers have spent more time in classrooms as students than as student teachers, and these prior experiences may have more influence on how information on teaching is translated into classroom practices during the practicum than what they have been exposed to in the language teacher education program (Bailey, et al. 1996; Johnson, 1994). Because preservice teachers may not be aware of the influence of their experience as students on their teaching during the practicum, Bailey and colleagues have suggested that language teacher education programs include activities that encourage them to bring their “past experience to the level of conscious awareness” (p. 11) so that it can be subjected to analysis. One method of encouraging such reflection is by encouraging preservice teachers to identify the maxims they use during teaching practice. As Richards (1996) notes, a teacher’s maxims “function like rules for best behaviour” (p. 286) and these rules reflect their belief systems and prior knowledge. This article outlines a

case study of how one preservice English language teacher in Singapore failed her practicum and was thus required to take a re practicum with this author appointed as her supervisor. I sketch how I encouraged her to reflect by having her identify the maxims she used to guide her teaching so that we could uncover her unconscious assumptions about teaching and learning. Because I am not permitted to provide exact details of each of her officially observed classes, most of the evidence of how this reflective practice contributed to positive changes in her attitudes and practices comes from discussions which I audio-recorded (and later transcribed) and from her regular journal writing.

## CASE STUDY

Ho (a pseudonym), a 4th-year English language preservice teacher in Singapore, arrived in my office one day and announced that I had been appointed supervisor for her re practicum because she had failed her initial practicum. I suddenly realized that I had never encountered a preservice language teacher before who had failed teaching practice (although I had supervised many who had barely passed), so I was somewhat puzzled as to how I should go about supervising her re practicum. First, I looked for published research about failing the practicum, and then I attempted to answer why Ho had failed her initial practicum.

The main theme that emerges from the limited published literature on why preservice teachers fail the teaching practicum (both TESOL and general education) centers on differences between preservice teachers' expectations before they begin teaching practice and what they actually experience during the practicum (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Research within TESOL suggests that these expectations have, more often than not, been influenced by the preservice teacher's experiences as students in the education system (e.g., Bailey et al., 1996; Zitlow, 1986). Zitlow, for example, found that 20 English language teachers were surprised that the classroom context where they were posted for teaching practice was very different from their own experiences as students, and thus they had difficulty adjusting to their new teaching environments. As Cole and Knowles have pointed out, preservice teachers' expectations can be "shattered by exposure to certain realities of schools, classrooms, and teaching" (p. 457) and the result is that they become "disillusioned, and dysfunctional" (p. 464) about teaching even before they start their teaching careers. When Ho arrived in my office she too was disillusioned by her initial experiences.

A review of Ho's initial practicum report indicated that she had failed because she had "not been well prepared for her classes" and that she

was “not focused in her teaching.” I asked Ho why she thought she had failed her practicum, and she said it was because she was too nervous when the supervisor and cooperating teachers observed her teaching. Because she was posted back to the same school for her re practicum, I also had an opportunity to talk to the principal about her practicum failure and she mentioned that Ho had “great difficulty” managing her classes and that she was not well prepared for many of her classes. When I mentioned these stated reasons to Ho, she said that she was aware of them, but I also assured her that I would not let these previous reports influence me as her supervisor for her re practicum.

## **RE PRACTICUM**

To help her reflect during her re practicum, I asked Ho to write a teaching journal which would not be graded (Farrell, 2004). To help her begin her journal I asked her to write about the school she was posted to, thinking that this may have played a role in her initial practicum failure, and to my surprise she wrote that

There is one thing I noticed about this school is that its teaching staff are warm and friendly towards newcomers not just to me. Some teachers actually took the initiative to come up to my desk and introduce themselves. The CTs [cooperating teachers] here monitor my lessons very closely too, giving me feedback after every lesson.

This entry led me to believe that Ho’s main difficulties during her initial practicum may not have been related to school personnel. So we began her re practicum and made an appointment for her first observed lesson. Because this first lesson sets the scene for the re practicum (and was subsequently not graded, which I explain later), I outline it in some detail.

## **FIRST OBSERVED LESSON**

### **Preobservation**

I had attempted to set up a preobservation discussion with Ho some time before the first classroom observation, but she kept postponing. I ended up receiving her lesson plan 10 minutes before class and so had no time to discuss any aspect of it before the class began, but she seemed confident. Just before entering the classroom, she mentioned that “I know what is best for my lesson.”

## Observed Lesson

Ho started the class by walking into the room and quickly throwing small rolled-up items at students in the front of the class. Other students, who were standing and talking at the back of the room, had not realized that the teacher had started class. Some of the students near the teacher picked up these items and saw they had candy inside. She asked them to write on the whiteboard what was written on the item. When they had finished writing on the board, Ho read aloud the rules for subject-verb agreement that were written on the board. The other students then stopped talking to each other and looked at the teacher. For the next 15 minutes, she attempted to explain these rules. Then she handed out worksheets for the students with fill-in-the-blank exercises. She asked them to complete the activity in pairs while she stood in front of the class. When the bell sounded indicating the end of the class, Ho told the students to finish the worksheets for homework.

## Postobservation

After the lesson I asked her what she had thought the students had learned, and she said that she did not know. We then talked about various aspects of this first classroom observation, summarized as follows:

- *Planning*: “I could not finish typing the objectives! The original lesson plan was written at home the night before in point form in pencil, so I typed it in school. So I could not give it to you.”
- *Lesson objectives*: “Actually, I feel that the objective that I intended to use was very general. I did not mention what the rules were.”
- *Lesson sequence*: “Strangely, after everything was over, I felt that I should only have chosen two out of the four new rules to teach. The first rule is not new as it is the basic rule: verbs should agree with their subjects. What followed next after you saw that class was a continuation of that lesson in a single period lesson. I just revised again two rules that were done in the previous lesson to refresh their memories and a short worksheet containing exercises for two rules only.”

Thus, this first lesson was a lens for me to see what was actually happening in Ho’s classes (and may have happened during her initial practicum), and it offered me a starting point in my attempt to understand Ho’s reality. I told her that I would not evaluate this first observation if she would honestly reveal her practicum and re practicum expectations so that we could reflect on them. Ho agreed. As she was explaining

(orally and in her teaching journal) her practicum expectations in the next few meetings, I realized that she was using particular statements in the form of maxims (Richards, 1996) as guiding principles for her teaching. Consequently, in our future interactions (both oral and written) I encouraged her to articulate these maxims so that we could both reflect on how they may have guided (or misguided) her both during her initial practicum and her re practicum.

## MAXIMS

I now briefly outline three maxims she stated after her first classroom observation that were somewhat misguided and may have contributed to her failing her initial practicum. I will show how, as we began to uncover her unconscious assumptions about teaching, she also began to formulate and articulate more appropriate maxims as she went through her re practicum in her journey toward becoming a more satisfactory teacher.

### **Maxim of Apprenticeship of Observation: Teach the Same Way as I Have Been Taught**

I call Ho's first maxim the *maxim of apprenticeship of observation* (from Lortie, 1975) because Ho said that she decided to teach her classes in the same way as her secondary school teachers had taught her. For example, for her second lesson observation Ho decided to follow the book strictly and use worksheets because she said her secondary school teachers had used this approach. She explained:

Everybody will try the same worksheets and I will elicit responses from students by asking them to tell me orally, write on the board or OHT [overhead transparency], depending on the situation. Then they will try some exercises from the book. Students will not be taken through the procedure of discovering, they will have to memorize it, like how I learnt it in those days.

I then shared Bailey and colleague's (1996) observation that "if it is true that we teach the way we have been taught, rather than as we have been trained to teach, then we are bound to perpetuate the models we have learned in our own teaching" (p. 11) and asked her to reflect on her previous experiences as a student and how these experiences may be adversely influencing her teaching. As the re practicum progressed, Ho began to articulate a new maxim similar to what Richards (1996) has termed "the maxim of encouragement: seek ways to encourage student

learning” (p. 290) as she attempted to provide more learning opportunities for her students, which she indicated in her journal:

Last time, I felt that I had difficulty putting myself in the shoes of learners of that age. Little did I expect that I had over-estimated their learning capacity. I guess this has something to do with my own experience when I was in secondary school. I came from a “non-neighbourhood” school and the teachers I had did teach quite fast. And my classmates and I understood what she said most of the time. I suppose our better command of English helped. Now, I intend to teach slowly whenever I introduce a new topic in order for students to build a strong foundation for the basics of the topic.

### **Maxim of Planning: Finish the Lesson at All Costs**

Ho’s second maxim required her to plan a lesson that she would execute strictly according to plan regardless of what transpires during the lesson. Richards (1996) would explain this maxim as involving a situation where teachers see their students only as instruments in implementing and completing the lesson plan. Ho, for instance, remarked that she wanted to make sure to finish every lesson, especially when her supervisor and her cooperating teachers were observing her. As a result, she chose teacher-centered teaching methods that she thought would guarantee her control of the class pace and enable her to cover everything she had planned. She said that even though she preferred a student-centered approach to teaching and learning, she did not include it in the lessons that were observed because she thought she would not be able to finish the lesson and as a result would “look bad” [to observers]. She continued:

We must ensure that all the teacher wants to complete in a lesson must be achieved. Inductive learning is good but there are time constraints. I admit that I resist the urge of doing what I would do if I were not being observed. The problem is that I hesitate too much because of grades, the irony is that when that happens, I lose out on time and grades.

I explained to her that research in TESOL had a maxim for this belief: “The maxim of planning: plan your teaching and try to follow your plan” (Richards, 1996, p. 288) and that this approach has a tendency to downplay students’ interpretation and reactions to the lesson material, and as a result, it can impede their learning. I reminded her that she had said she is more comfortable with a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning, and as the re practicum progressed Ho began to articulate a different maxim to describe her instructional approach, one similar to what Richards (1996) has termed “the maxim of involvement: follow the

learners' interests to maintain student involvement" (p. 287). In the later lessons that I observed, I noticed that Ho was becoming more confident with allowing her students to react to the materials she presented and was paying more attention to her students' learning during the lessons. She wrote in her journal about one of these later lessons:

Today's lesson is slower than expected. I think the main reason is that the instructions for the first worksheet were not detailed enough before the students started. Hence, as I walked around and saw a few students giving incorrect answers I realised then that I needed to elaborate a little more, and this then resulted in some students having to change their answers, but in the end I know everybody got the instructions right as I walked around. I think the positive thing about today's lesson is that I try to make the students logically see why this way is good. Yes, I do feel confident today.

### **Maxim of Conformity: Give Observers What They Want**

Ho used this maxim of conformity, explained by Richards (1996) as "make sure your teaching follows the prescribed method" (p. 291), in a slightly different way. Instead of trying to teach the classes as she "normally would have done," Ho attempted to predict what her observers (e.g., supervisor and cooperating teachers) wanted to see in her classes. For example, although Ho said that she did not normally like to conduct pair work activities, she nevertheless attempted this in one class that was observed in her practicum because, as she said,

I have always heard that there should be pair or group work for observations. I asked my friends [other preservice teachers] and they said that for every classroom observation, they made sure that there was some pair work because that was a popular technique.

After reflecting on the usefulness of this maxim, Ho wrote in her journal, "But never mind about observations anymore, let me say how this English lesson would be if it wasn't for observation" and thus began to move toward using a more appropriate "maxim of encouragement: seek ways to encourage student learning" (Richards, 1996, p. 290). This maxim was more evident in her final lesson observation, when she noticed that some of her students were reluctant to speak in class; she wrote in her journal:

They don't want to give answers even if they know it, because they are fearful that others may think they are trying to act smart. Lose face if answer is wrong. Actually, I was like that in class too before.

She was also able to reflect on her role as a teacher and how she could encourage her students more, as indicated in her final journal entry:

I wish I could go slightly slower so that I could avoid offering answers to the students too quickly if the person I call couldn't answer. I was rushing a little because some students came in later and I have to wait for them to settle down. This way I can get them to volunteer answers too.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION**

Although the case study outlined in this article may not provide the basis for prescription for all language teacher education programs, it nevertheless illustrates the importance of probing preservice English language teachers' unconscious assumptions about teaching and learning and how those assumptions can lead to teaching failure. The case study outlined in this article also demonstrates how important it is that preservice teachers articulate their expectations of the practicum before they go on teaching practice and how important it is to engage in critical reflection throughout the practicum. Identifying the maxims they use to guide their teaching may be useful because these maxims are an indication of teachers' evolving theories of teaching, and Richards (1996) suggests that "the use of such maxims clearly deserves recognition in teacher education programs" (p. 294). A key challenge for language teacher educators is how to elicit preservice teachers' maxims before, during, and after the practicum. The case study outlined in this article suggests that a process of writing and discussion with the supervisor may offer insights that both the preservice teacher and the supervisor can use to track and reflect on growth in the prospective teachers' understandings of what it means to teach.

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