

# Struggling with Intellectual Inertia: Reflection on Participation in Higher Education Fellow Programme

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## Abstract

This paper analyses issues related to my professional journey of becoming a teacher. The key highlight of this paper is that teacher's engagement in a dialogical self-regulated inquiry (individually and collaboratively) is essential and provides a unique ongoing mode of teacher development. The study was conducted over a period of six months during my participation in a certificate course on enhancing academic practices at the higher education level. The data and analysis include extracts from the portfolio developed during the course. The findings indicate that continuous examination of my teaching and learning experiences pushed me to re-establish and escalate my journey towards becoming an effective teacher. My analysis suggests that, to promote self-inquiry approach; relationship between work culture, teaching and professional development support needs to be strengthened in terms of its conduct, quality, purpose and use.

**Keywords:** self-inquiry; professional development; reflection.

## 1. Methodological Approach: Self Inquiry

This narration began with a fundamental question; what constitutes becoming an effective teacher educator? The questions engaged me in a self-dialogue through reflective inquiry approach. My engagement in the self-inquiry indicates that an ongoing professional space within the self and at workplace is crucial to continue with the processes of becoming an effective teacher at school to university level where perceptions and practices are discussed, revisited and expanded. The purpose and use of this professional space are to invite/ generate deeper perspectives and practices to unpack theories and practices of becoming effective teachers. The theoretical foundation of self-inquiry is based on the assumptions of that individual's engagement in, and commitment to be engaged in critical reflection promote perceptions and practices, authors in reference [1] write: "...a form of research which places control over processes of educational reform in the hands of those involved in the actions".

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Reference [15] states that the key feature of the professional is the capacity for self - evaluation and self-improvement through rigorous and systematic research and study of his or her own practice. Building on individuals' critical reflection, the literature [21] suggests that transformation of practice needs engagement and participation in the 'pedagogy of practice'. Through dialogic engagement and inquiry, academic staff development may be viewed as a space of possibility, a process of becoming, understanding and engaging with teaching and learning in increasingly critical, creative and co constructive ways – pedagogy of practice [5]. Self-inquiry, individually and or participatory, empowers a teacher and makes them responsible for using professional conversations, within self and/or with community of practice, for understanding strengths and weaknesses of practices, and for accelerating continual learning. Teachers' and/or practitioners' engagement in the understanding of one's own practice, where actions and professional justifications are simultaneously attempted, raise their potential to be knowledge producers rather than knowledge reproducers [17]. My own involvement in self-inquiry on my activities and various practices helps me understand the reality of my practice, difficulties and my own contribution to achieve my development in teaching and learning context. As authors in reference [12] state: '...self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out'. In this regard, understanding and developing teaching through self-inquiry is viewed as substantive rather than technical, academic rather than administrative, analytical and appreciative rather than deficit-based learning approach. Beyond my approach to enhancing content and pedagogy, the self –reflective inquiry provides me to use my feelings, experiences and judgments as a learning web for the journey of learning and unlearning to becoming an effective teacher. This study was conducted over a period of six months during my participation in a certificate course on enhancing academic practices at the higher education level in the UK. The focus of analysis was to understand and analyze issues related to my professional practice through the evidence gathered from my self-reflexive commentary on various phases of my growth including my participation in the academic practice course. Reflection and analysis of the reflection engaged me in examining my teaching and learning experiences, which further harnessed my teaching capabilities. In order to gain a critical understanding of reflection, various other forms of data such as anecdotes of observations, sample of feedback from colleagues and the tutor were referred in the analysis.

## **2. Conceptual Framework: Professional Learning Web**

The current literature discusses feedback, self-reflection or peer/ mentor review as an important tool to enhance academic practices at higher education level, proposing that the institutions should include staff development opportunities to encourage and empower continual learning of their staff. The available venues for staff development at the workplace – such as conferences, seminars, etc., are valuable opportunities for staff's learning; however, the most effective learning takes place when they are provided with a space to reflect and discuss their practices, to create shared meanings, and to develop critical perspectives on their teaching practices in collaborative and nonjudgmental settings [5 & 11]. The content for such conversations could come from peer review and/ or self-monitoring feedback. References [5 & 6] highlight an issue of limited interpretation, where mainly 'evaluating' teaching has been misinterpreted by many institutions. In such cases, peer review or self-reflection has been used as a means of evaluating performance instead of developing practices, generating new learning or transforming practices. Author in Reference [6] suggests that 'evaluating teaching and assessing

teaching are rather two distinct notions, at least, in terms of their purposes, if not in conduct'. The assessment of teaching is mainly product-oriented and used by externals for teacher appraisal, whereas, the evaluation of teaching is processes-oriented and used by the teachers themselves for their professional growth and development. Authors in reference [1] state:

It has been very useful to have a fairly impartial and supportive colleague looking at the practice and opening up reflective conversation; however, to achieve its real purpose, the focus should be on development, not on evaluation for the purpose of appraisal (435:448). These theoretical perspectives mainly invite teachers to undertake a self-regulated inquiry towards their development and growth. Reference [3 & 4] indicates that the teacher transformation involves two continua: A shift in believing in qualitative view about knowledge instead of quantitative; and change in practice from individualistic and unidirectional to dialogical learning approaches. Hence, transformation of learning is linked to the transformation of teaching [4]. The learner of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century lives in an information loaded era. Knowledge and information are widely spread and easily accessible through media and technology. Receiving knowledge is not an issue any more for learners; rather, what to select from it has become a challenge. It is important to recognize that a shift in the practices is more important today than ever before. Teachers need to be creative in designing active learning approaches, innovative and reflective in their examination of pedagogical practices, and philosophical in developing deeper perspectives of teaching. Indeed, it is also important to recognize that the work culture has its own authority to define teaching and learning and, therefore, transformation in practice should be multidimensional processes, and a collaborative process. To initiate such holistic process, it is important that teaching is recognized as a scholarly work and the notion of evaluation of teaching for appraisal be revisited – work culture should view good teaching as a self-reflective and developmental process, instead of technical, procedure-based activity [17]. To establish such shift, teachers need a collaborative, supportive and learning culture within and around them so to develop their role and practices as effective teachers' continuously. When teachers are committed to the value of change, they give meaning to change. However, it is important to recognise here that critical reflection is central to nurturing culture of self-learning within the workplace; also, that a commitment of learning together fosters confidence and promotes trust and compassion through self and mutual dialogue. My inquiry began with the question that was raised during the course, 'What is your learning moment'? How did/ do you learn? Who is an effective teacher? These questions opened ways for self-reflections on my learning journey – its evolution and issues. The next section describes and analyses this journey.

### **3. Learning Successions**

#### ***3.1. Understanding Teaching***

My mind gets refreshed and my heart gets filled with respect when I recall my experiences as a learner at school– in my memories, teaching included care and concern to ensure the completion of students' work. I am not sure what specifically they taught me, but I could still remember the care and empathy that my teachers demonstrated. My reflection indicates, "*effective teachers are those who are always loved and remembered by their students.*" My learning was that a teacher's attempt to provide a caring and comfortable environment to learners or their understanding, love and respect for learners made them effective teachers [14]. On completion

of my secondary education, I entered a higher education institute, and experienced a very different learning culture. The teachers were experts in their respective fields and inspired me with the knowledge they were best at. However, upon my successful completion; I recognized that teachers' command over subject knowledge makes them confident and successful. My reflection is:

Self-examination of two different learning scenarios led me to establish a value system for understanding of teaching: caring attitude towards student learning and sound content knowledge of the subject specialized.

### **3.2. *Joining Teaching at School***

I joined a secondary school as a mathematics teacher. I loved my students; my students also loved me. In fact, 'individual attention', 'care', and respect for each student – these had been the distinguishing characteristics of my teaching and conveying the subject knowledge effectively was my strength. Teaching had, thus, become a self-rewarding and enjoyable process for me. Though I was not aware of any theories of transformational teaching (discussed in reference [5, 10 &18]), I would still transform my students' experiences by putting my heart into their successful learning.

### **3.3. *Developing Teaching***

At the fourth year of my teaching, I joined a Master programme in teacher education at the Institute of Education in Pakistan, where I got exposure to new ideas and theories of learning, which were based on the philosophy of 'social constructivism' [9 & 26], reflective practice [2] and teachers as change agents [8]. My reflection indicates the facilitating factors involved in my professional growth:

I got introduced to an active collaborative learning culture, where I was able to share my understanding and perspectives, my disagreements and rationales, and try out innovative ideas and construct theoretical and practical understanding of active learning and effective teaching. My engagement in self-reflection enabled me to learn how children learn the best and how to sustain my professional development –thus, learning became a lived experience for me [15]. I, thus, started considering myself as a responsible and independent, active learner becoming an effective teacher. My intellectual horizons, along with my ethical perspectives as a teacher, were enriched. The emerging theoretical position informed that unless a student goes through deep learning, any attempt of teacher-care towards a student will stay at the superficial level. Students are rational human beings and bring a wealth of experience (formal and informal); and new learning is established when they are able to discuss new ideas, face constant dissonance, and relate the new learnings to their prior knowledge and real world experiences in an interactive and dialogical environment [26]. The outcomes, of viewing students as active learners, go beyond rote memorization to include higher level of thinking, such as application, problem solving, critical thinking, diversity, appreciation, decision making, and reflexive capacities. This theoretical position towards learning is contrary to underpinning the traditional approaches, which promote a view of knowledge as a fixed, complete and available in tradition. With such a conception of knowledge, the aim of the teaching becomes transmission, faithful passing on from one generation to another. As knowledge is taken as an inert object, its receivers have to be passive objects of reception. Together this creates what is called the banking

concept of learning, a metaphor that refer to an understanding of students as containers into which the teacher must put knowledge. As indicated in my reflective notes:

I was thrilled, for I was happy to discover that these experiences fit best with my teaching values; I further enhanced my abilities to teach, engaging students' hearts and minds in the learning processes. I would design interactive activities that involved student engagement such as frequently asked questions, group work (including case study and problem solving and mathematical investigation activities).

### ***3.4. Becoming Teacher Educator***

Later, I joined the institute as a Teacher Educator – my practice was transformed further as I worked on ways to transforming my student teachers' learning so that they could, in turn, impact the students' learning at large. A culture of support and inquiry sustained and accelerated my professional growth. My theoretical perspective and professional practices were getting further strengthened; the learning endeavour was more complex and advanced, more stressful and yet enjoyable at the same time, more endless than a project with an end to it. I started to view a teacher's role as acknowledging learners' psychological and social perspectives of learning in the classroom as well as nurturing their identity as independent and life-long learners [4]. My teaching maintained a balance of theory and practice, local and external readings and resources to ensure that students are exposed to multiple perspectives on any related topic under discussion. For example, in a course on classroom assessment, the utility of alternative classroom methods and dual role of assessment for nurturing and evaluating learning, and significance of rubric in ensuring valid assessment information – these are discussed with research based evidence and their reflection on their experiences and practical work so that they develop strong theoretical underpinnings. Based on the theoretical perspectives developed during classroom discussions, the student teachers in my class would design formative and summative assessment tasks, seek their alignment with learning outcomes, design a small scale action research to implement, analyse the outcomes and issues of their alternative assessment practices, and learn ways to sustain their learning upon the completion of their education. I would make use of the case analysis approach to provide students with new perspectives. I provided them with scenarios for critical review and facilitate discourses on alternative perspectives and their relevance for reforming practices in their own context. Thus, my mind and heart, together, were put in designing, delivering and evaluating my teaching to improve my practice.

### ***3.5. Struggling Teaching***

After serving a decay at the institute, I joined a private organization abroad as a faculty teacher in an education programme. The new work culture followed the patterns of practices discussed in research (e.g. Pratt, 1997); a place where the scholars and/ or educators are competent in their specialized field of subject, and are very much skilled in organizing lectures and seminars in the area of their specialized content at higher education level. I would provide my students with an enabling environment to support their deep thinking and understanding of becoming a teacher. Since the students on the programme were from diverse backgrounds, at the initial stage in my class, I along with my students, designed a 'learning and teaching ethics agreement' and examined continuously if that was being followed. The agreement included elements of care, respect for time and

individual contributions, and collaborative learning. I spoke softly, listened to each response genuinely, handled students' responses adequately, appreciated and probed their responses, encouraged high order thinking questions, and discouraged evaluative judgmental comments to make them feel emotionally secure and intellectually inspired. The culture of care and respect communicated to students that their interests and development is close to my heart, which raised their confidence to speak and question. Thus, throughout the programme, there were various opportunities designed to encourage them to construct/ reconstruct their identity as educators/ learners. The participants in my courses would generally undertake a small inquiry to try out new ideas in the practical context, in order to examine the feasibility of these ideas in context. By doing so, each participant is involved in the learning process; hence, a focus on equity and equality in the learning process was a core element of my teaching practices. However, overall, I did not observe a culture to discuss on how the student learning experiences can be enhanced and maximized further at higher education. The management appeared to disagree and discourage my approaches to teaching. I found myself isolated from the community of scholars at the institute abroad. The existing research highlights that the current practices at many places at higher education do not recognize teaching as a reflective task work; the evaluation of teaching is mainly done/ supervised by administrators and management, who are involved in decision making regarding promotions. The purpose of evaluation of teaching is limited – it is procedural and performance-based rather than self-reflective and development focused. I found myself less confident and less motivated to continue my teaching as a teacher educator. Perhaps, it was an issue of my integration within the community of practices that existed at the workplace. I had come from a background where reflective discourse, collaborative learning and researching practices were the key attributes. I stopped enjoying teaching, I wanted to get out of this intellectual and emotional crisis, as teaching appeared to be a burden for me, as portrayed in my reflections below. My lectures include power-point slides and a small element of group work – but the focus remains on searching literature around various theories of learning so that I could inform them with extended theoretical perspectives. Author in [20] states, 'certain actions are reinforced as a result of their outcomes, so learning follows action' [17]. My analysis is that certain actions are also reinforced as a result of intellectual isolation so teaching follows external forces and the internal fear caused is by the quantity of this force. My practice had shifted to mainly being evaluation-driven rather than based on the earlier desire to develop, nurture and transform ideas, perspectives and perceptions – this created a gap between my practice and sense of fulfillment from that practice. I realized that my reflective comments mainly reflect my frustration and burden. Moreover, I had been moving away from an appreciation of practice to deficit-based judgments/ perspectives, where reflection also mainly involved comparing my practice to follow the external requirement rather than valuing comparisons and contrasts as an opportunity for professional learning.

### **3.6. *Re-Transforming Teaching***

With my participation at the academic enhancing certificate course, after a couple of years of self-confrontation, the desire to reinvent my professional practices and appreciative reflective potential was re-ignited. For me, the course provided a space to generate professional discourse around ways to maximize learning and teaching practices. The underlying principles of the professional discourse and position of participants in that discourse were driven from a social constructivist and co constructivist perspective of learning. It was based on the primary idea that individuals are rational human beings and they bring a wealth of experiences (formal and

informal) along, and learning is established when they are able to discuss new ideas and relate them to prior learning and real life experiences in an interactive and dialogical environment. This was similar to what I had experienced in a phase of developing teaching. According to the author [26], *'good learning is always in advance of individual development'*, as cited in reference [19], and for me it was re-achieved through the 'pedagogy of practice' [22]. Learning is a process to leading the change in knowledge, skills, behavior and attitude; working with many other participants from various disciplines and organizations in a collaborative, supportive culture; discussion on deeper learning perspectives and practices [17]; ways to becoming an effective teacher – all these connected me back to a community of learning. A community that flourishes effective practices in the classrooms, where teachers and learners are learning partners instead of two distinct roles; knowledge is not delivered, instead, it is constructed collaboratively. Good teachers extend students' critical abilities and discussions in their learning with a minimum 'teacher talk' [23] – they empower students' participation and thinking and provide appropriate facilitation to find own answers rather than viewing teacher as the ultimate knowledge authority. The evolving perspectives and practices/ experiences were not new to me, but my prior theoretical underpinnings and practices had been frozen unknowingly due to my discomfort at the institute – however, my engagement at this course contributed significantly to break my evolving inertia. I found myself reconnected with the community of learners, and a community of innovative practice and practitioners – we were speaking the reflective language, constructing and co-constructing theories together, in a non-judgmental manner; feedback was given to understand teaching and learning instead of rewarding the performance. I felt professionally rescued! During the course, all participants were expected to teach a session in the real context of classrooms. These lessons were observed by either a tutor or a colleague to get feedback on teaching practices. The feedback received from the course tutor and colleagues raised my confidence and sense of appreciation. Even though you have not written the objectives and learning outcomes clearly on this form, during the session you provided the students with a very clear set of objectives and learning outcomes. That is what I am more interested in rather than what you have written here. ... I also enjoyed the relaxed nature of your classroom set up. Another key strength of your method of teaching was that you engaged the students throughout by eliciting key points. This created a very positive dialogic environment in the classroom [ Extracts from the tutor's Feedback: Data Source: Tutor's post observation comments 03 February 2015]. The tutor's feedback was positive, constructive, appreciative and critical, and provided me with a sense of achievement, and very much alike with my own practice as a teacher. I had developed such skills as to provide my students with constructive feedback as well as myself. However, my self-discomfort had made me stuck in appreciating my own practice. Research indicates that 'discomfort arises when external culture conflicts with teaching values' [4] – for me, the discomfort arose when I forced myself to undo what I had learnt over the years as a transformative teacher. I would believe in the power of 'self' in changing practices and culture; however, my analysis now suggests that unconsciously my internal power was being dominated by my fear of external structures (the debate of agency vs. structure). This indicates that becoming a teacher is not a smooth process – teachers need continual learning spaces at every level regardless of their professional expertise and experiences.

#### **4. Synthesis of Learning: Connectivity and Sustainability**

It is important to indicate here that becoming a teacher is on-going individual, as well as collaborative reflective process. Teachers do transform their teaching practices and perspectives and interact with innovative ideas in a

conducive learning environment. Reflection on practice also helps teachers grow in practice. However, teaching at any level, for a long period, along with contextual and individual barriers cause an unseen professional inertia; regardless of its length, it could hinder a teacher's professional growth consciously and/or unconsciously. Becoming a teacher is a learning journey. It is evident from my reflective inquiry that perceptions and practices of a teacher are influenced by their experiences and interactions with the context where teaching and learning take place [17]. My participation in the fellowship programme reminds that connectivity with professional forums, including formal and/or informal discourses about professional practices, is unavoidable for sustainability of effective practices as teachers. Self-growth independently and/or individually needs a dialogical reflective space where practices are shared and discussed openly and critically in a professionally secure environment – it is important to understand that teachers need to refresh their perspectives and practice from time to time. Developing and/ or sustaining effective teaching approaches is both, quite demanding and complex – teachers, regardless of their expertise and experiences, tend to follow a routine of professional practices; sometimes, factors such as work pressure, contextual constraints, and/ or professional isolation could also cause unintentional or unconscious inertia in relation to their professional practice. Regardless of one's reflective approach towards teaching, approaching self-inquiry does not occur automatically.

## **5. Conclusion**

My conclusion is that learning (of a teacher) is a universal concept and/or need regardless of their context and the level of their education. It is also noticeable that mainly teacher education programmes are available to educate schoolteachers. Teachers as well as teacher educators, at higher education, also need space, forum and appreciation and deliberation to refresh their perspectives, invent and reinvent their practices, and sustain professional growth. They require ongoing teacher education to address their issues related to professional growth in addition to their active engagement in research and publications. Thus, approaching self- inquiry for development involves consistency and continuing interaction between the two components:

- Internal Professional Support
- External Professional Support

Internal support comes from a commitment to continuous examination of beliefs and practices through self-dialogical inquiry. Self-reflective dialogues are guiding principles for individual practice, and that what a teacher reflects influences what the teacher does in the classroom. I strongly believe that teachers as reflective practitioners are able to respond to teaching dilemmas and tensions “more effectively” and develop positive perspectives and actions towards reform [15]. However, reflection in isolation sometimes takes someone into the reverse position, especially when outside culture appears less supporting. I conclude that despite having strong beliefs and experiences of constructivist teaching approaches and self - learning through reflection, I felt a loss of confidence and control over my teaching practice and started operating in ways that were considered as more important by/ at the workplace. My reflection alone could not help me to get out of this negative change. Moreover, teachers need external support, too, which could come from their participation in ongoing discourses and professional courses. External conflict and sense of rejection of practices cause isolation and intellectual

crises; teachers need to be part of a community of learners, where they can discuss new perspectives of learning and teaching, revisit their existing practices, and find ways to regulate their learning so as to construct effective teaching practices. Teachers need a collaborative culture of learning, where practices are shared, reviewed and co-constructed through commitment to self-inquiry. Author in [4] indicates that a culture of support, where people ‘speak the same language and share the same belief’, gives confidence to accept the resistance, and to sustain professional approach. The clash between internal values and outside expectations causes pressure and therefore, the teachers at higher education level need to have such professional forums at their workplace or professional courses to question the cultural barriers hindering their practice as well as to strengthen their professional beliefs and practices. My experience at this course suggests that there were fellow participants who were not aware of active learning approaches and when exposed to those, they started to examine possibilities and challenges. I thus conclude, that transforming teaching and learning are universal concepts regardless of the context and level of teaching.

## **6. Recommendations**

Teachers, from any level, need to be engaged in freshening and refreshing teacher education courses, face to face or online, to take break from their routine practices, and get engage in collaborative discourse around sharing best practices and addressing dilemma. Transformation of teaching and learning is not episodic neither it is achievable in a culture of silence and isolation with regards to professional practices. The availability and continuity of comprehensive teacher education courses for teachers at higher education, together with professional help and counselling within an organisation is thus, mandatory. Hence, teachers, at higher education institutes, require a dialogical culture within their workplace to share best practices and related concerns and to examine their identity as reflective practitioners. Teachers also require to participate in fellowship programmes to update and refresh their theoretical perspectives and professional practices.

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