
International pre-service teachers' self-confidence in critical reflective thinking and writing through an intercultural Patches program

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This paper describes part of an action research study that was designed to explore the outcomes of an ongoing program in which the participants, a group of domestic and international pre-service teachers and lecturers, worked together in reflective writing workshops. While the primary long-term goal of the program was to develop the intercultural competence and understanding of all of the participants through social activities, the development of social relationships was initiated and supported by involving the participants in weekly writing workshops that focused on shared salient skills of critical reflective thinking and writing. The focus of this paper is upon the outcomes for the international students, a cohort of second year pre-service teachers from Malaysia. Findings indicated that the program was successful in developing the Malaysian pre-service teachers' self-confidence in perceiving themselves as writers and future teachers of writing, in shifting their focus from writing product to writing process and content, and in increasing the depth of their critical reflective thinking and writing.

Keywords: *reflective writing; intercultural; self-confidence*

Introduction

A common concern for international students is that they rarely have opportunities to interact with domestic students outside of formal classroom settings. Without such opportunities, it is difficult for international students to improve their language and academic skills and gain a better understanding of their new social context for study (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010). In this paper, we describe a subset of findings from an action research project which focused

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on an ongoing program (the *Patches* program) designed to develop participants' intercultural communication and understanding as well as their critical reflective writing skills through involvement in lecturer-scaffolded and peer-initiated social activities as well as weekly writing workshops. In particular, we focus on the writing outcomes of the program for the group of international pre-service teachers, a cohort of second-year Malaysian BEd students.

The Malaysian pre-service teachers were enrolled in the second year of a four-year Primary Bachelor of Education (TESL) transnational twinning program. In this program, students complete their first and fourth years of BEd studies at an institute of higher education in Malaysia but their second and third years at a university in Australia. The Australian BEd students, who also participated in the *Patches* program, were completing a core final-year unit on inclusive education, in which they chose a Service-learning pathway, which involved spending a minimum of 20 hours participating with their Malaysian peers in social activities as well as the reflective writing workshops.

Such a 'partnership' between Australian and Malaysian students could be conceived as a unidirectional program, that is, one in which the domestic students would assist international students to adjust to the academic context and language of an Australian university. However, the *Patches* program was specifically designed to frame intercultural learning as a two-way process in which both groups of students would benefit from their participation in social activities as well as the weekly structured reflective writing workshops.

Teaching/Learning issues

The *Patches* program and its associated action research project were designed to address two common concerns within higher education. First, it has been widely acknowledged that the ability to reflect on one's practice within its social and cultural context is critical to becoming a competent professional (Bolton, 2010; Schön, 1987). Within many disciplines, especially teacher education, reflective writing is frequently utilised as a way of strengthening reflective capabilities (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Nonetheless, many students struggle with reflective thinking and writing and need specific assistance to develop these capabilities (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002; Moon, 2004; Ryan, 2011). Reflective writing has the potential to support pre-service teachers in engaging in a journey of understanding about who they are and how they are situated in relation to becoming a teacher.

Second, as increasing numbers of international students enrol in institutions of higher education in Australia, there are growing concerns about the lack of authentic opportunities for these students to interact with domestic students outside of their formal classes. Without such opportunities, it is difficult for international

students to improve their language and academic skills, gain a better understanding of the social context in which they are studying (Gu et al., 2010), and develop intercultural social and communication skills that will assist them in developing and maintaining relationships with domestic students (Gresham & Clayton, 2011). In most cases, international students rarely mix spontaneously with domestic students outside lectures or tutorial groupings. In preference they tend to associate with co-national peer groups where they share a common language and/or culture (see for example, Volet & Ang, 2006). While it is important for international students to feel safe and secure while studying in Australia, these kinds of interactions do not expand the idea of intercultural exchange or foster cross-cultural awareness with domestic Australian students.

In response to these concerns, we created a program where the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers shared a common interest in developing an important skill (critical reflective writing) and where that interest would provide a context for the development of intercultural social relationships. Developing awareness and an understanding of others in the community is a critical skill for teachers to develop if they are to engage in inclusive practices within their classrooms and schools. Developing awareness and an understanding of others is also consistent with a social constructivist paradigm, to which we ascribe. Elements of social constructivism include student engagement in authentic tasks found in complex learning environments where students participate in a process of social collaboration (Adams, 2006; Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Method

An applied “practical action research” design (Williamson, Webb, & Abelson-Mitchell, 2004) was chosen for the present study because this design facilitates teacher-as-researcher inquiry and accommodates interactions between researchers and participants. In particular, the study has used an *action research spiral* (Creswell, 2008) which supports the ongoing development of a project.

Participants

Although both Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers volunteered to participate in the action research study, we report here only our findings in relation to the writing outcomes of the Malaysian pre-service teachers. Thus, the participants in this report of the study are 56 pre-service teachers from Malaysia who are studying in Australia (10 males, 46 females). These pre-service teachers, who constitute a convenience sample, are enrolled at the university in the second year of a four-year Bachelor of Education (TESL) transnational twinning program. In this program, students complete their first and fourth year of study at an institute of higher education in Malaysia and years two and three of their BEd course at Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

Data Collection

The Malaysian pre-service teachers' weekly written reflections based on prompts (*patches* of writing) and the final reflective questionnaire constitute the data that were analysed to address the two research questions posed in the present paper. The pre-service teachers' weekly reflective writing was scaffolded and subsequently analysed in relation to the 4-R writing model of Bain, Ballantyne, Packer and Mills (1999). In the 4-R model of reflective thinking, students are provided with a framework that ranges from lower-order thinking (reporting on an incident) to higher-order thinking (reasoning and reconstructing). The students are guided through the four stages: reporting and responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the topic upon which they are reflecting (Bain et al., 2002).

The final reflective questionnaire (Adams, 2001; Brookfield, 1995) provided additional information concerning the Malaysian pre-service teachers' perceptions of reflective thinking and writing, intercultural communication, and how scaffolding through the *Patches* program could be improved.

For the purposes of the present paper, we have focused on addressing two research questions:

1. Does the utilisation of the 'power writing' model facilitate pre-service teachers' focus on process and content rather than on the 'correctness' of the final product?
2. Does deliberate focus on the 4Rs model of reflection over a six-week period of writing workshops enhance Malaysian pre-service teachers' depth of reflective writing?

Operationalisation

In the *Patches* program (first session held in Semester One 2010), four or five Malaysian pre-service teachers were grouped with one Australian pre-service teacher who was completing a Service-learning component of study. Although participation was voluntary for both groups, the pre-service teachers who participated in the program were required to engage in weekly writing workshops and additional activities loosely scaffolded by the researchers. The first scaffolded activity was 'a requirement' of the program and involved the pre-service teachers visiting the Cultural Precinct in Brisbane (e.g. the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) and the Queensland Museum). Most groups recorded their visit with still photographs and video. The remaining component of the program involved the groups of students organising a series of peer-initiated activities (e.g., shopping, going to the movies, bush-walking, camping, horse-back riding, and cooking meals for each other in their homes). All three components, the writing workshops, the visit to the Cultural Precinct, and the peer-initiated activities provided opportunities for the students to engage in intercultural communication,

to develop intercultural understanding, and to build intercultural relationships.

In this paper, our focus is on the outcomes of the program in relation to the Malaysian pre-service teachers' development of reflective writing abilities. The two researchers worked voluntarily with the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers one evening a week in a series of scaffolded writing workshops. Although the writing workshops were designed to assist all of the students to become more confident about writing, especially reflective writing there were a number of group-specific goals. With regard to the Malaysian pre-service teachers in particular, we wanted to assist them in becoming more expressive (using their personal voice) and less constrained by the formalities of writing in English (especially focusing on correct spelling and grammar) when completing first drafts of writing.

Although the writing workshops (2010 and 2011) were designed primarily to develop participants' critical reflective thinking and writing skills, there was also a focus on the pre-service teachers and lecturers sharing their *patches* of writing within small groups and the whole class. These sharing sessions were incorporated into the workshops to promote deeper thinking about 'self' and 'self as teacher' as well as the critical importance of intercultural communication, understanding, and relationships in living and teaching within increasingly globalised communities.

Procedure for the Patches Writing Workshops

In the first semester of 2011, the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers participated in a series of 6 writing workshops or '*Patches*' based on the *Patchwork Text* model (Dalrymple & Smith, 2008). In *Patches 1* and *2*, the pre-service teachers were introduced to the concept of "power writing" (short, sustained periods of writing focused on a specific prompt as described by Goldberg in 1998 and Yagelski in 2009) and oriented to the nature of reflective writing across the 4 levels of reflection proposed by Bain and his colleagues in 2002. In *Patches 3-5*, the pre-service teachers engaged in writing reflectively about self, self as teacher, and special place. In the final *Patch*, the pre-service teachers reflected on their experiences and learning across the *Patches* program and responded to a final writing task, an open-ended reflective questionnaire.

Across the series of workshops, the participants reviewed the rules of "power writing" or "writing in the moment" (e.g., keep your hand moving, don't cross out, don't worry about spelling, grammar or punctuation) and the levels of reflection before beginning a specific patch of writing. After completing a *patch*, the participants would be asked to share their writing within their small group if they felt comfortable to do so. After the small group sharing, the participants would then be asked whether anyone felt comfortable to share with the whole group.

For all of the *Patches*, the primary focus was on the experience of writing and the ideas expressed and not on the quality of text. The oral sharing of writing and ideas as well as the discussions about levels of reflection facilitated intercultural understanding and communication and broke down possible mentor-mentee barriers. We wanted our Australian Service-learning students to abandon a mind-set that they were “providing service” and to recognise that they were “being of service” – giving of themselves in equal peer partnership with the Malaysian pre-service teachers. We did not want the Australian pre-service teachers correcting the Malaysian pre-service teachers’ language. We wanted all of the pre-service teachers, whether Australian or Malaysian, to understand that they were not deficient in skills but rather in the process of strengthening their reflective writing skills. To reinforce this critical distinction, the academics facilitating the workshops also completed the *patches* of writing, and when relevant, shared portions of their writing.

Data analysis

An interpretative approach to both data sets with ongoing researcher reflection has shaped the investigation. Interpretations were initially coded into broad themes to determine what patterns if any were revealed. From these themes, core categories were developed and labelled, highlighting each occurrence with reference to the frequency of data for each category (such as ‘self as teacher’ and ‘self as writer’). Sub-categories were formed where needed and these were related to the core categories. These categories were cross-referenced by the two researchers in order to achieve a level of transparency for analysis (Lomax & Parker, 1995) as well as to optimise the validity of our findings.

Results

The results of the study are presented in three sections. The first two sections describe the findings in relation to the two research questions while the third section describes additional findings emanating from our analyses of the data, which have informed our ongoing research. It should be noted that participants’ writing has been presented as written in order to preserve the authenticity of the pre-service teachers’ ‘voices.’

Research Question 1: *Does the utilisation of the ‘power writing’ model facilitate pre-service teachers’ focus on process and content rather than on the ‘correctness’ of the final product?*

The participants began the program by engaging in power writing activities in response to the prompts such as: *Why did you enrol in a teacher education program? Has this been a good decision for you?*

Sometimes participants found it difficult to begin the process of writing, but were encouraged to write something even if it was to say that they did not like writing. One participant responded thus:

I hate writing. I hate to reflect back on this. Oh, I'm hungry. I can't wait to go back and cook. Yummy! O.K. what is it? Oh, the decision, erm. Actually I've never thought that I would be a teacher some day. (NAa)

After a further stream of thought on paper, this participant comes back to the question:

Oh...what should I write now? Yeah, I think this is a good decision for me even though at first I don't love teaching, but I love kids. (NAb)

Through the process of power writing, the participants were given time to record their thoughts without having to worry about the conventions of writing (especially spelling and grammar), and they became much more expressive when considering their place in their teacher education program:

I really enjoys teacher education programme, and really looking forward to teach[ing] hopefully. I think teaching is a wonderful career and should not be the last choice for every single person that want to enrol in university. They should make teaching as their first choice... (Ib)

Perhaps I do not have teaching in my mind initially, but now I do. It is just the beginning and I am dying to find out...(LMb)

In the final 'final reflective questionnaire', most of the participants reported that the "power writing" had helped them to be more flexible, confident writers who could now express their thoughts in writing. Three Malaysian pre-service teachers noted:

During the patches program, the writing is not confined to academic discourses only. I am able to write freely, whatever that came across my mind. Normally I don't write anything to myself, not even in a diary, but here I learnt to express my thoughts and feelings in written form. (RN)

I am more confident to write about my opinions now. It allows me to express my views without feeling threatened and betrayed by judgmental opinions (I've been robbed off the freedom before when my privacy has been intruded). (IM)

I feel confident with myself and let loose all the stress that I face during writing. Each times, I reflect myself in the writing and this has tremendously assist me in my academic writing. (SH)

In the final 'final reflective questionnaire', the participants were also asked how the 'power writing' had affected their

attitudes toward writing and teaching writing. Again, the majority of participants noted positive growth.

I feel no fear of writing anymore. It makes me always positive and I can easily do my assignment. Before this I usually stuck and not organise my writing. (AA)

It affected my attitude towards writing and teaching writing by enlightening me that writing can also be something relax, leisure, and insightful. Undeniably we often have to do academic writing in assignment but we do need to write the way we want to as to develop our love for writing. I've found that writing can turn out to be very enjoyable activity and to know ourselves better. (M3-5)

Research Question 2: *Does deliberate focus on the 4Rs model of reflection over a six-week period of writing workshops enhance Malaysian pre-service teachers' depth of reflective writing?*

Participants were introduced to the 4-R model when they had an opportunity to revisit and reflect on their earlier thoughts in a more structured way. In *Patch 2*, the pre-service teachers had responded to the question: *What sort of teacher do I want to be?* while in *Patch 4*, they were asked to reread their *Patch 2* writing and to consider again what kind of teacher they wanted to be, moving through the 4 levels of reflection. The second *patches* of reflective writing indicated deeper thinking about the question. For example:

After rereading my writing on what kind of teacher would I want to be, I realised that I sound or appear to be shallow and not critical enough. I mean I know I can do more than being an exciting teacher and I know teaching is not only about having fun. (FY)

This pre-service teacher's first piece of writing was a somewhat stereotypical answer given by many of the participants, that teachers should be fun and exciting. Pre-service teacher FY goes on to consider how he can be the best teacher for students in the rural areas of Malaysia (a very real possibility for new teachers) and concludes by suggesting that he wants to prove to his friends and society that, in his words, teaching can be "an awesome job". In doing so, FY's writing moved from merely relating and responding to the prompt to engaging with the deeper levels of reflection, namely, reasoning and reconstructing (Bain et al., 2002).

Many of the participants reflected on the teachers they had as either a good model for them or a not so good model and how they would incorporate such modelling into their own teaching practices:

I never really had teachers who inspired me, giving words of motivation or advice. So there were sometimes when I was really disappointed with my teachers becoz they do not only ignore their students but they also criticise. For me, that is very unbeing a teacher becoz that is demotivating. Hence, I have decided that wherever I teach, whoever I'm gonna teach, I will inspire them. (ST)

Some of the participants included references to theory in their reflection, thus indicating their ability to reach the reflective level of reasoning:

I could provide support and scaffolding towards my students as mentioned by Vygotsky theory that scaffolding is important in help the students develop themselves. For that reason I intend to make my teaching engaging and interactive...with my students' abilities. (ML)

Having an opportunity to revisit their previous writings allowed participants to see how to think more deeply and critically about the choices they had made. The final piece of writing was a critical incident report where participants provided their final writings on how their thinking had evolved over the six week program where were asked to respond to stimulus questions. The first question was: *How has the Patches program helped you to learn more about yourself?* All participants responded that they now took time to think about themselves and also about themselves as future teachers. For example:

This patches program made me realise the true identity of myself. For instance, I was able to reflect back the reasons why I choose to be a teacher. I had always, always looked down upon myself as a teacher as my cousins and friends all chose professional careers such as doctors, engineers and lawyers. Today I am proud to say that I am a 'TEACHER' as I believe doctors, engineers and lawyers definitely cannot have classroom management skills like a teacher does. My goal is to continue my studies and do my Masters. I hope I will achieve my aim for the reason to prove to myself and others. (MZ)

A final question asked: *How has the Patches program contributed to your thinking about yourself as a teacher?* Participants on the whole responded that the writing sessions had helped them to think about teaching more and their place in teaching. For example:

I have been reflecting and asking question to myself on how to be a good but friendly teacher in the future in the

future through this *Patches* program. I've been doing some thoughtful thinking and coming up with different ideas on strategies to handle students when I'm a teacher...Doing free writing develop my order of thinking and organise my thoughts of how I will be a teacher soon. (NI)

Additional findings:

The very first writing prompts – *Why did you enrol in a teacher education program? Has this been a good decision for you?* – informed us that most of the Malaysian students had not wanted to become teachers. Forty out of fifty (80%) initially described that teaching was not their first choice of occupation:

Honestly being a teaching is not my first choice. (Ia)

Well, I did not exactly sign up to become a teacher. I signed up as a second option. (LMa)

We were astounded by this discovery, given that we knew the students would be bonded to teach for five years in Malaysia after their graduation. As a consequence, we were relieved to learn that the majority of the students indicated that they felt more positive about becoming a teacher in their responses to the 'final reflective questionnaire' question, *How has the Patches program contributed to your thinking about yourself as a teacher?* One student noted:

Before this my goal was mainly to finish my degree, but not really what I was going to be afterwards. Thus, when I gave myself some time thinking about being teacher, I can develop myself starting from now to be the kind of teacher that I want to be. (MF)

On the 'final reflective questionnaire', the participants were also asked: *How has the Patches program helped you to learn more about intercultural communication?* All participants agreed that they had been positively affected through their association with their service-learning partners. For example:

As I first arrived in Brisbane, I was overpowered by fear and nervousness in regards to communicating with the Australian people. Fear that they may be prejudice and refuse to befriend us because of our religion and nervous because our spoken English is not as good as theirs, hence a reason to ignore us. But the Patches program had proved that such thing is not true as I have the chance to meet lovely and friendly people like T., her family and also her boyfriend. They showed me how nice Australian people are to everyone they

meet and they are very eager and interested to learn about our culture. (AN)

This change in thinking was expressed by many of the Malaysian pre-service teachers in the program. They had come expecting one thing and were pleasantly surprised to be so warmly accepted by their service-learning partners.

Discussion

The present study has yielded strong findings with regard to the contributions of power writing and 4Rs reflective writing (Bain et al., 2002) to the development of the Malaysian pre-service teachers' writing abilities. First, engaging in a series of purposeful power writing workshops did assist the pre-service teachers to focus on the process and content of their writing rather than on the correctness of the final product. It was found that the workshops enhanced the pre-service teachers' self-confidence and sense of identity as writers; therefore, if used consistently, power writing can positively support students' self-belief that they are competent writers.

Consistent with the findings of Hume (2009), engaging in writing tasks or "*pitches*" that deliberately focused on the 4Rs model of reflection enhanced the pre-service teachers' depth of reflective writing. The pre-service teachers' reflective writing during the workshops sessions showed evidence of greater depth over time. In addition, the pre-service teachers reported that they felt much more prepared to think critically and write reflectively at the levels of reasoning (Level 3) and reconstruction (Level 4) in their academic assignments, a transfer effect that we had hoped to see but had not intentionally scaffolded or assessed.

Through the research it was found that having a sense of freedom about writing allowed the pre-service teachers to reflect on how they would use this process in their own classrooms as English teachers in Malaysia. Accordingly, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to reflect on how their personal learning helps to inform their future teaching.

The spiral of the present action research study continues to spin as we come to a richer understanding of our data. Although we have not reported on the intercultural outcomes of the study in this paper, we intend to do so in a subsequent paper. We have, however, begun to plan the next phase our study, which involves migrating the power writing and levels of reflection across from this voluntary workshop to a two-semester core unit on second language teaching that the Malaysian students will complete by the end of the academic year.

With regard to this migration, we can already report that the process of power writing has already been successfully employed

by one of the researchers in one of her tutorial classes, indicating that as a teaching strategy it can be utilised across curriculum and with a range of students. The process of power writing can be applied in a variety of settings and should be done so for the above reasons.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Despite the obvious limitations imposed by the size and characteristics of a convenience sample, the present study has a number of strengths. First, the study has provided additional support for the utility of the model of reflective thinking (Bain et al., 2002) to facilitate pre-service teachers' development of critical reflective thinking and writing skills. Second, the study has confirmed that specific focus on reflective thinking, writing, and sharing about self and self as teacher in a series of purposeful workshop sessions can enhance pre-service teachers' self-confidence, sense of personal and professional identity, and intercultural understanding and relationships.

Implications and recommendations for future research

Findings of the present study have a number of implications for future research. First, important limitations of this study need to be addressed in future investigations. For example, the writing workshops were conducted within the Faculty of Education only; there is no reason why such workshops cannot be done in other faculties to allow students to develop their writing skills. Anecdotally, one of the authors has taught Creative Writing to students from a range of faculties and has found that students who are encouraged to engage in the freedom of such practices as 'power writing' also gain in confidence in their academic writing skills. This observation has been born out in the current research. The added focus of reflective writing extends students' writing confidence for both personal and academic writing. To this end, studies with larger, gender-balanced and nationality-balanced samples as well as comparison control groups would allow for more robust assessments of pre-service teachers' development of critical reflective writing skills.

Additionally, studies that are longitudinal in scope across both years of pre-service teacher training and across the transition period into teaching practice would be valuable in developing an understanding of how critical reflective thinking and writing supports the growth of reflective practitioners. The writing completed in the *Patches* program was not a platform for teaching writing fluency in English. Indeed the pre-service teachers were encouraged *not* to focus on the mechanics of writing but rather on developing their sense of 'self as a writer' through the activities and the social interactions with their peers. The next step in the process would be to conduct a further series of reflective writing workshops in which there was a focus on both the richness and depth of ideas as well as the structural and mechanical aspects of writing to communicate.

Finally, the process of developing critical thinking skills through the 4-R reflective writing process has many benefits. Over the course of a semester, students have opportunities to focus specifically on achieving greater depth in their critical reflective writing (i.e., shifting from relating and responding to a greater emphasis on reasoning and reconstructing), to engage in self-assessment of their writing across time (i.e., assessment for learning), to consider how their academic theoretical learning applies to the practice of teaching and learning in relation to themselves as well as to their future students, and to observe their growth in self-confidence, in their sense of identity, and in their intercultural understandings. Such growth is a real-world reflection of the theory of inclusive education.

Conclusions

The ability to reflect on one's practice within its social and cultural context is critical to becoming a competent professional and an effective teacher (Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Schön, 1987). Reflective writing is frequently utilised in teacher education programs as a way of demonstrating learning and strengthening reflective capabilities but many students struggle with reflective writing (Bain et al., 1999; Hume, 2009; Moon, 2004). In working with our Malaysian and Australian students on the shared salient skill of reflective writing utilising the *Patchwork Text* approach (Dalrymple & Smith, 2008) and a power writing or *writing in the moment* approach (Goldberg, 1998; Yagelski, 2009), we have documented growth in their critical reflective writing skills as well as positive developments in their self-confidence, sense of personal and professional identity, and intercultural understanding and relationships.

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