



Conquering reality shocks and becoming ‘expert learners’

By SAN Pek Leng, Charity and CHEONG Ka Wai, Ivan



Lifelong teaching requires lifelong learning. This is almost a platitude, but it is important. Surely we should not be the same people as we were twenty years ago.

In one of the courses attended at university on preparing undergraduates to be qualified teaching professionals, we were asked these questions: ‘*Are you ready to be a teacher?*’ ‘*What have you learnt in these several years of university study to justify your professional identity?*’

As we students started to recollect proud bits and pieces fulfilled in our four years of study, we named all the books we had read, and the assignments, projects and essays accomplished, courses conquered, credits earned, friendships and job relationships nailed, and ultimately, our CVs polished. Without arriving at an adequate answer because of the seemingly countless *successes*, all the students in the auditorium went on discussing excitedly and enthusiastically about what we had learnt to justify the professional identity we were about to earn. Then another shot of quick yet thought-provoking and almost philosophical question was asked: ‘*Have you finally learnt how to learn?*’

Obviously, two challenges were posed by the latter question, addressing every teacher-to-be in the room: *Are you a good learner? And will you be a good role model of constant learning?*

Clearly, we were not. Recalling our earliest teaching experience, we may still be able to tell how hair-raising and terrifying it was to step into a classroom for the first time. Those students looked at us with curious eyes projecting inaudible stern judgments from our heads to our toes. The look of their faces was one of motivation for learning, not the knowledge, but novelty, and triggers to frights and jumps for new teachers. Somehow, without being very sure of the correctness of the teaching contents or the appropriateness of the lessons planned, we gathered our courage and presented all the points and items that we had prepared for hours beforehand, forcing a smile whenever we remembered to.

We all have survived our similar first lessons. Yet it is easy to forget how we have come this long way to act without being like a deer caught in the headlights in classrooms. The unrealistic truth is that neophyte teachers are expected to conduct good teaching, if not

perfect, as soon as they enter the education field. Esson, Johnson and Vinson (2002) capture the point that neophytes need to explore the complexities in education without sufficient mentoring from experienced colleague teachers, which can result in teacher burnout. Hargreaves (2010) echoes this, arguing that after entering abruptly after what is often a training that is not always attached to practical situations, new teachers are left to walk through the reality shocks and dramas alone. What exactly are the complexities and dramas a beginning teacher has to experience?

REALITY SHOCKS

If we ask teachers who have survived the first few years of teaching to share their perspectives on education, with several concrete examples, they will say that it is not as simple as what they imagined about retelling stories and perennial truths. On the contrary, teaching is more about realizing the changes in the known and how they interweave with the unknown. This requires capacity and capability of teachers to acquire the unknowns one by one, if not all at once, so as to catch up with the changes caused by the constantly evolving environments inside and outside school. Meanwhile, while neophyte teachers are closely occupied with compensating for the lack of experience, there are student behavioural issues to contain, such as verbal and physical abuse, family issues, social issues, or emotional breakdown caused by the adolescent amygdala activation in the prefrontal cortex,

etc. All these can snowball into matters which require student counselling, liaison with management and administration, internal meetings, discussions with parents/guardians, follow-up procedures and extra-curricular activities, etc., and as the protocols of these vary from school to school and from culture to culture, the professional knowledge learnt from pre-service training often fails to provide for practical needs. Without support, new teachers often run into catastrophic failures.

According to Law no. 3/2012, *System Framework for Private School Teaching Staff of Non-tertiary Education* (Chapter 3, indicated in the extract *Article 8*), there are legal requirements of teachers' duties. The extract indicates that a teacher needs to carry out 'teaching duties', 'non-teaching duties', and 'personal and professional development'. We can see that not only must teachers handle teaching duties such as curriculum and teaching plans development, classroom teaching, classroom management and student assessment, they also have to look after several non-teaching tasks such as participation in school administration. Do all the serving teachers possess the ability to handle every one of the tasks stated? It is challenging to equip teachers with such ability. Given that teachers' continuous professional development has been taken care of in part by the DSEJ, the great variety of tasks involved in actual situations is sometimes overwhelming to learn, for neophyte teachers.



Teaching is complex, nonlinear and with constant changes, and shocks. Knowledge is emergent and changing. Sadly, not many qualified teachers survive the first five years of teaching; they leave. According to a recent poll by the National Education Union (NEU, 2018) in England, 18 per cent of the teachers expect to leave education in less than two years. 26 per cent of those who plan to quit by 2024 are teachers who have had only five years of teaching experience. One of the main reasons for leaving education, stressed by the respondents, was the heavy workload that negatively impacts the work-life balance, and there are too few experienced colleagues to offer support and mentor new teachers,

resulting in teacher burnout. Unfortunately, a detrimental factor commonly adopted is to emphasize student test results, believing that good student assessment is evidence of good teaching. This partly explains the uncomfortable and grievous sentiments reported by teachers opting out. Despite being in different contexts, lessons can be learnt. There may not be as many neophyte teachers leaving schools as in England, but workload and the possibility of professional training are calling for attention to early professional support that helps beginning teachers to gradually pick up the unknown in a working environment.

Article 8

Teachers

1. Teachers' duties include: teaching and non-teaching duties, as well as personal professional development.
2. Teaching duties mainly include:
 - (1) Development of curriculum and teaching plans:
 - 1) Develop teaching programmes and teaching plans for the academic year, as well as draft the individualised education plan for students with special needs;
 - 2) Set the teaching objectives in accordance with students' needs, and design teaching activities and lesson plans conducive to achieving the set teaching objectives;
 - 3) Plan and organise students to join various types of education activities;
 - (2) Classroom teaching:
 - 1) In accordance with the lesson plan, prepare all the needed teaching resources, and make use of teaching skills to impart students with knowledge and skills, stimulate students to learn actively, promote classroom interaction and help students develop diverse abilities;

2) Adopt diverse ways to assess students' learning effectiveness, support students with difficulties;

3) Enable students to master effective learning methods and develop students' learning abilities;

(3) Classroom management:

1) Ensure that students carry out learning activities in a safe educational environment;

2) Create the atmosphere of mutual help and solidarity in class;

3) Promote students to comply with discipline on their own initiative;

(4) Student assessment

1) Participate in assessment meetings and give opinion to the work of student evaluation;

2) Adopt diverse assessment to evaluate students' learning performance, provide students of different abilities with teaching assistance to deepen or remedy their learning.

3. Non-teaching duties include, in particular:

(1) Participate in school administration, pedagogical management, counselling and class affairs;

(2) Concern and promote students' healthy mental and physical development, both individually and in group;

(3) Provide students with psychological counselling, as well as careers and further studies guidance;

(4) Participate and promote home-school cooperation and the link with the exterior, so as to promote school development.

4. Personal professional development includes, in particular:

(1) Participate in professional exchange activities and activities for developing professional education abilities;

(2) Conduct education research.

Law no. 3/2012, *System Framework for Private School Teaching Staff of Non-tertiary Education*



To be an effective teacher, a teacher needs to be an effective learner in the first place. In fact, with the growing demands and expectations on teachers to be professionals and act professionally, the advocacy of developing teachers as 'expert learners' is essential in teachers' professional identity which, in turn, gives rise to teachers' self-regulated learning. Being a teacher is no longer, indeed never was, only about teaching the knowledge already owned, but the knowledge that may yet be known, which points out the importance of teachers' learning proficiency, thereby, qualities of self-learning, self-assessment, self-fulfilment, organization, planning, implementation, persistence, determination, etc. Because self-regulating teachers are very capable of noticing when they are learning, when they are not, and when and where they have not learnt enough, and, in light of this, they are able to seek strategic remedies that fit themselves most to supplement the aspects of teaching which they regard themselves as lacking. In view of this, these proactive attributes in teachers are influential in their teaching, and students benefit from day-to-day exposure to positive models of persistent learning, as they are exposed to an appropriate language environment for learning a second language.

META-COGNITIVE APPROACH AND REFLECTIVE APPROACH

Graham and Phelps (2003) point out the significant lack of understanding about initiating and facilitating the ongoing formation of teachers' professional identity.

Hence, they inaugurated the year-1 unit *Introduction to Teaching* in the Bachelor of Education programme at Southern Cross University in New South Wales, Australia, with two important approaches – a meta-cognitive approach and a reflective approach. The approaches introduce the 'know-how' methods in teaching learning, as well as conceptualizing the importance of teachers' continuous professional development. Much of the feedback on the unit that Graham and Phelps had initiated was positive, saying that there was no similar teaching method before. They advocate bridging the theory-practice gap that separates the 'real' world from the 'ivory tower', as pedagogical theories are sometimes too idealized and therefore perceived superficially. By consciously confronting challenges to the owned knowledge and the teaching competence of teachers, the approaches stimulate and encourage constant learning, amendment and advancement in pedagogies. The two approaches are characterized below.

Meta-cognitive approach: deriving from meta-learning, meta-cognition refers to the active monitoring and regulation of one's awareness of learning goals and objectives and the subsequent control over the strategy selection and deployment (Flavell, Miller & Miller, 1993). A meta-cognitive approach is considered important especially for the early stage of teacher's professional identity as it takes time for neophyte teachers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of school curricula and relevant knowledge, despite the fact that many graduates now

come with a subject-specific background. A meta-cognitive approach is designed to empower neophytes to be active participants in their own learning, thus, enabling them to develop approaches that could benefit their teaching from the outset of their careers. Meta-cognitive teachers, hence, plan, select, organize, create environments, self-instruct, self-monitor, self-evaluate actively to optimise their own learning as they perceive themselves competent, self-efficacious, and independent. Put simply, a meta-cognitive approach promotes teachers' learning autonomy and this influences students if teachers willingly involve and share the strategies and tactics that have contributed to their academic successes.

Reflective approach: whilst a meta-cognitive approach concerns teacher's academic and subject-specific knowledge, a reflective approach proposes that neophytes continually construct and reconstruct their professional knowledge in understanding, developing, responding to, and eventually shaping the 'ecology' of the school to meet the changing demands and expectations of education as a 'professional teacher' (Graham and Phelps, 2003). One simple and commonly adopted application of reflective approach is that teachers record, for instance, the teaching decisions and the underlying rationales, in a journal. These practices can be referred to in future on a regular basis to draw implications for aspects of professional development, such as knowledge of pedagogies, lesson-planning, student counselling, classroom management, student

assessment, home-school communication, etc.

Thus, to develop teachers as 'expert learners', ultimately, is to consistently sharpen teachers' awareness of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they do or do not possess, or incompletely possess, so that the teachers can autonomously address their areas for development with suitable strategies to improve (Zimmerman, Bonner & Kovach, 1996).


CONCLUSION

With the SAR government's ongoing support for providing serving teachers with continuous professional development to promote their professional identity, although the teaching profession has improved over time, this has to be sustained key strategies that derive in part from school leadership and management. Ofsted's (2019) latest report indicates that factors relating to teachers' occupational wellbeing are very relevant to whether or not teachers are provided with sufficient opportunities to use their full range of knowledge and skills at work, as well as their relative autonomy in making decisions for their work tasks, enabling them to explore new ideas for professional growth. In other words, supports from school leadership and management can harness good practices and make learning a whole-school culture, in which learning at all levels can thrive.

It is perhaps as paradoxical as it sounds that the more you know about teaching, the



more you find out that you do not know. Yet it is not rocket science. Now looking back on the quasi-philosophical questions we were asked at the end of our undergraduate training, we might have given favourable answers as we interpreted the questions as 'slogans' for lifelong learning, but what have planted into our minds with the cumulative knowledge gained in practice is the realization of the infinity of learning and the hindrances in reality to make learning lifelong. Let us be honest with ourselves to admit the facts: being a teacher, a professional one, needs stamina to address multiple and difficult challenges, which can be both exhausting and stimulating; that resilience is not something we are born with but which is grown. We are capable of constantly overcoming predicaments while acquiring new things. We can see that the teaching profession is still undervalued and undermined by the society when it is compared to other professions. Also, the complexities involved are sometimes not appreciated or understood. We need professional development to refresh not only our professional knowledge, but our minds too. As teachers, we need to give ourselves strength for walking on tightropes without falling off. We need to bear in mind that education now is not perfect yet and needs constant reshaping.

For lifelong learning to be promoted and effective in society, for all walks of life, there really is no reason for regarding teachers as exceptions. 'Never stop learning, because life never stops teaching!' 

References:

- Esson, K., Johnson, K., & Vinson, T. (2002). *Inquiry into the provision of Public Education in NSW*. Sydney: NSW Teachers Federation and Federation of P&C Associations of NSW.
- Flavell, H., Miller, H., & Miller, S. A. (1993). *Cognitive Development* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Graham, A., & Phelps, R. (2003). 'Being a teacher: developing teacher identity and enhancing practice through metacognitive and reflective learning processes', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 11-24.
- Hargreaves, A. (2010). Presentism, individualism, and conservatism: The Legacy of Dan Lortie's Schoolteacher: a social study. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 40(1), 143-154.
- National Education Union (2018). *NEU survey shows workload causing 80% of teachers to consider leaving the profession*. Retrieved from <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/neu-survey-shows-workload-causing-80-teachers-consider-leaving-profession>.
- Ofsted (2019). *Teacher well-being at work in schools and further education providers*. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819314/Teacher_well-being_report_110719F.pdf.
- Zimmerman, J., Bonner, S., & Kovach, R. (1996). *Developing Self-regulated Learners: Beyond Achievement to Self- efficacy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

SAN Pek Leng, Charity

Teacher of School of Dance, Macao Conservatory

CHEONG Ka Wai, Ivan

Teacher of School of Music, Macao Conservatory