Weaving the Personal and Professional Threads of My Communication Pedagogy to Envision New Ways of Thinking and Knowing

Wendy Rawlinson

My research study on the exploration of my communication pedagogy was motivated by my experience as a white lecturer struggling to engage personally and professionally in a meaningful way to teach undergraduates from diverse backgrounds at a University of Technology (UoT). The majority of students in my classroom were African but there were a few Indian students and students of colour. A mixture of language, culture, and educational backgrounds was also evident in the classroom. Some students came from well- resourced homes and school environments but some came from rural areas with poor infrastructure, a lack of resources, and where English was minimally spoken. As a communication lecturer, I felt unhappy with the teaching of my classes, which differed from the classes I had taught in the past where all the students were of a similar background and class. Some of my frustration stemmed from the confined system in which I taught that meant subscribing to a skills-based approach to teaching, at the expense of a more holistic approach. The other part of my discomfort was related to a disconnect that I felt between my students' understanding and grasp of the course material and mine. Employment of Social Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) and Critical Communication Pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2007) as a theoretical framing offered potential for me to explore the personal-professional aspects of my communication pedagogy more critically. It also allowed for an exploration of the dominant social identities of class, race and gender that influenced my academic self. Communication pedagogy at my institution comprises a short course in which students study verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as barriers to communication. In addition, they are meant to master effective spoken and written communication skills. Lecturers follow a prescribed curriculum driven largely by summative assessment. This does not auger well for students whose first language is not English and who require more time to understand the material. I recognised that my own education had been privileged, and non –diverse in the sense that the student body comprised all white students and staff. I realised that I would have to make changes in order to challenge the status quo and experience deeper learning.

Foucault's theory of ethics (1985) enabled me to adopt an ethical stance in order to excavate my personal beliefs that seemed to shape the perspectives and actions that I adopted daily. I hoped that as I processed and activated Foucault's modes of ethics, I would be able to identify my fixed ways of thinking and my entrenched ways of teaching.

Objectives of the Study

I was initially concerned about the black undergraduate students who were not sufficiently engaging with the course and from whom I felt slightly disconnected. My students' communicative competence,

I believed, reflected my ineffective communication pedagogy. I was sure that looking at myself as the primary source for exploring improvement of my practices (La Boskey, 2004) might garner fresh insights into how teaching and learning could more effectively happen. In searching for clues as to my beliefs and values, I looked to Cohen (2008) who claims that teacher identities play a significant role in establishing the beliefs and values that are adopted in educational practices. These, he claims, dictate how teachers interact with others, as well as play a role in steering their actions in and beyond the classroom.

The research question driving the focus and purpose of the self-study was: *How does my communication lecturer identity inform what I do in a diverse undergraduate classroom at a UoT?*

Method(s)

I employed personal history self-study (Samaras, et al., 2004) to story and interrogate my personal contextualised lived experiences as a white woman lecturer. As a specific genre of self-study, Samaras and Freese (2006, p. 2) define it as the "formative, contextualized experiences of our lives that influence how we think about and practice our teaching, and provides a powerful mechanism for teachers wanting to discern how their lived lives impact their ability to teach or learn." Significant nodal moments (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004) of my teaching and learning over a period of time from my early life and schooling in the 1960s to my professional experiences were highlighted. Adopting this emic perspective aligns with Pinnegar's (1998, p. 33) view of self-study as "a methodology for studying professional practice settings." My choice to video my students in the classroom provided evidence of my practices (Whitehead, 2004), and served as a data source. Collecting critique from critical friends demonstrates how I attempted to follow the procedures of self-study that includes a call to action (Pithouse, et al., 2009).

In order to avoid the pitfalls of navel-gazing as a white lecturer, I engaged in collaborative processes with diverse critical friends. They helped to ensure triangulation of the understandings that were presented and interpretations offered (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). The group of critical friends to which I belonged, comprised fellow colleagues at my institution, and another vibrant self-reflexive group who met once a month. Collaboration with my critical friends offered potential space for risk-taking and the critical self-disclosure of my teaching beliefs for more in-depth insights into self, my practices, and relationship with fellow colleagues (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

Multiple Data Generation Methods and Data Sources

In addition to the video recording, a short excerpt from my journal, and critical friends' feedback was employed. Drawing on multiple sources allowed for multiple perspectives and truths (Samaras et al., 2004; Leitch, 2006), and provided a more nuanced understanding of who I was as an educator. "Researchers use a wide range of art forms to represent and reinterpret, construct and deconstruct meaning…" (Samaras, 2011, p. 100), which includes video. Whilst positioning "I" at the centre, the methods allowed for excavation of my hidden assumptions and values that might not have been as perceptible had I chosen a different type of methodology. The diverse methods helped to break down boundaries in my belief system and dig up embedded perceptions that I held as a white communication lecturer. The choice to video record my lessons helped generate data to answer the research question: *How does my communication lecturer identity inform what I do in a diverse undergraduate classroom at a UoT?* It also helped provide evidence of my teaching and the learning of communication. Unlike the written mode, I believed it would better reflect the discipline of

communication. Although the video-recordings happened over a six-week period in 2012, I draw on only one situation in this chapter.

Data Analysis

Because my personal and professional identities and practices are complex I chose to employ Foucault's framework of ethics (1985) as a tool to assist in the unlearning and re-learning of self and my communication pedagogy. I recognised the need for an analytical lens where self would be positioned at the centre. I was drawn to the work of Foucault who not only views the individual as the primary source of transformation (Allan, 2013) but critiques current systems and offers a language of growth, transformation, and hope (Batters, 2011).

The following excerpt from my research journal, the transcript from my video-recorded lesson, and critical friends' feedback were analysed thematically to make sense of the interconnections between the personal and professional identities in shaping ways of knowing, being and doing. Coding these field texts helped to highlight patterns, threads, tensions, and themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

A Need to Open up the Self

Foregrounding myself as principal object of care (Foucault, 1983), I needed to inquire of self first and then self in relation to others. I recognised the need to pry open spaces to see myself in multiplicity, thereby addressing and confronting my biases. In exploring who I was, my classroom pedagogy and how I had regarded my students as deficit (Flores & Rosa, 2015), in relation to pre-determined measurements, prompted an opening up. This was firstly to self from the inside, which required growth as a professional, and then from the outside which meant opening up to critical friends.

Effecting Changes in My Classroom Practice

In order to allow for more participatory lessons, decentralising myself from my position in the classroom was a priority. I knew that relinquishing of control and vulnerability would be challenging. I began to critically question the automated, technicist way of teaching that I felt under pressure to employ, and the restrictive and formulaic curriculum that I taught. I created a platform where students could examine their own experiences of prejudice and stereotyping instead of reading examples of prejudice from a textbook. I thought an interactive approach would engage students, knowing that some students see participatory methods as an abdication of the teacher's role.

Based on my own experience at a Historically Black University in 1993, I considered how this situation had influenced my teaching. I had been confronted with an unfamiliar identity, that of my own racial identity. This might sound strange, but having grown up in an apartheid country where enforced segregation was the law, my knowledge of other races and cultures was severely limited and my understanding of their experiences diminished. During a lesson where a student presented an oral on Bantu Education, I became cognisant of my whiteness and the privileges afforded to me because of my race and language. With this experience in my mind, I purposed to allow students an opportunity to express their experience of how prejudice, as a barrier to effective communication, had impacted their life.

The following illustration documents an attempt to alter how I taught the concept of barriers to communication, in the form of prejudice, in my classroom, and the ensuing feedback from critical

friends. Students were given the following task: *Speak about a prejudice you hold against someone and explain why you hold this prejudice, or outline a situation in which you have been a victim of prejudice or stereotyping.* I positioned myself in front of the room since I believed students might feel vulnerable to share. To put students at ease I described a brief example of how my children had been prejudiced against because of my divorced status. Students in the audience were allowed to ask questions for clarification, but I cautioned that careful listening and reserving judgment in the classroom were essential (hooks, 2010).

Stepping off the Stage: Allowing Other Voices

I encouraged students to voice their experiences and views, knowing that this activity could include viewpoints that might silence the voice of 'others.' For the purposes of this chapter, only a very short excerpt from a video recorded lesson is shown below. It highlights a section of the conversation that emerged. Short transcript excerpt from the lesson on barriers to communication:

> Student 1: I come from Umlazi Township and I am tired of people being prejudiced against me because of where I come from. People think I'm a gangster or a criminal and that's not true!
>
> Lecturer: Oh no, I'm sorry. That's terrible.
>
> Student 2: Yes, …I am prejudiced against the former white Prime Minister. He made sure that black people were put at the bottom of the list (wiping her eyes). Sorry…this is very emotional. Other people look at us because they think we are, are dirty! We can never walk in the street without people thinking we are bad. They treat us unfairly. We just don't have things other people have. Our parents were teachers but, but… they were just stuck there!
>
> Because there were no other jobs that Blacks were allowed to do. They couldn't move on. They even had to have second names because the people couldn't pronounce their names properly. Apartheid did a lot of bad things…
>
> Lecturer: You're right! It was a terrible system of forced separation where many Black people couldn't get jobs based on their race. Whites were seen as superior and the policy was inhumane and evil. It lasted a long time so many people were scarred for life through this racist system.

In my journal I recorded the following:

> Whew! I feel shaken now that the lesson is finished and relief that it's over. It was sobering and very painful to hear the information being shared and to see the visible show of emotions. It is so difficult to know what is going to emerge when lessons aren't scripted, and know how to manage spontaneous emotions, including my own. I had to gather my thoughts and try to manage the tensions I felt between feeling guilty, and having to look at the situation from the student's perspective.

Helping to Open up to Self

The above data was analysed according to Foucault's mode; *forms of elaboration of ethical work* (Foucault, 1985*)*. Ethical work is the work he claims "that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour" (Foucault, 1985, p. 27). At this point, I attempt to read my responses and what is happening in my practice through the lens of diversity and difference. Foucault's *forms of elaboration of ethical work*) offers me an opportunity to open up my professional learning, and begin to think in alternative ways of being a communication lecturer. I also have a chance to respond to the dangers of becoming entrenched in rigid practices that end in confinement and enclosure.

Opening up to Critical Friends

In order to aid reflection, and deepen analysis of my data, I chose to obtain feedback on the video recorded lesson (Samaras & Freese, 2009). Without providing details, I explained it was a lesson on barriers to communication focusing on prejudice and stereotyping. I asked for comments on the learning and teaching (or not) that they saw happening. A few of the comments comprise the following:

> Critical friend 1*: I don't like the format of the classroom with you in front. This isn't conducive to dialogue. Why didn't you let students work in small groups and just hover to hear what they were discussing?*

> Critical friend 2: *Wow! This lesson is so interesting! You could have chosen any lesson but you chose to speak about prejudice, so you're obviously passionate about prejudice.*

> Critical friend 3*: It's evident that students are talking about their prejudices and feelings. I think you have created a space in the classroom where students felt safe to speak freely about their experiences. There's an element of trust.*

> Critical friend 2: How did it make you feel when students were talking about being prejudiced against whites?

> Lecturer: Well honestly, I felt uncomfortable and bad! But I didn't try to defend myself, so I think I am growing a little in this area.

> Lecturer 4: It's not easy to teach in this way because it's unpredictable and hard emotionally. That's why so many lecturers don't try to introduce interactive methods.

The critique of critical friends caused me to reflect more deeply on the lesson. The vulnerability I experienced in revealing my experimental teaching practices to colleagues was outweighed by my trust in them. I knew their honest comments and questions would help me to grow. Through their feedback and discussion, I become a novice learner of my own privilege and prejudice. A few of the main themes to evolve after scrutiny of the data is that of the need to be in control, embracing emotion, and giving up uncertainty.

The Need to Be in Control

In considering the question; *"Why didn't you let students work in groups and hover to hear what they were saying?* highlights my need to be in control and monitor the dialogue. I believed that in a lesson, such as this, students would benefit from listening to other students' views and learn new ways of expressing themselves that prior educational experiences had not permitted. Some students might have benefitted from a small group and been more honest without my presence, but students engaged in the conversation despite my being visible. In prior lessons, I would have chosen to direct the lesson and transmitted most of the coursed material, whereas now students were ably taking the lesson forward with their experiences taking centre stage. In examining whether students fluently expressed their prejudice, I had to come to the conclusion, as did my critical friends, that students were verbally competent because they were voicing personal life experiences and therefore showed passion and engagement. My previous view of students who I believed struggled to express themselves, proved to be unfounded in this interactive environment.

Embracing Emotion

My critical friend's comment*, I think you have created a space in the classroom where students felt safe to speak freely about their experiences,* caused me to consider how my previous classroom environments had been fairly sterile*.* I recognised that my view of good teaching, until fairly recently, had been one devoid of emotion (Reio, 2005), as manifested in my traditional practice. However, I am aware that it is one of the characteristics required in a responsive classroom. By trying to underplay students' emotions I am contradicting what I believe about the acceptability of strong emotions that accompany feelings of prejudice since I experienced that myself in 1993. Although I felt moved by my students' show of emotion, as she spoke about how apartheid had affected her and her family, I was able to adopt an empathetic attitude toward her. In not disregarding her emotions, and choosing not to defend my race, I demonstrate a willingness to include emotional responses as part of the classroom milieu and become a novice learner of prejudice. When there is an element of trust more authentic forms of communication will emerge and all participants learn and grow.

Giving up Uncertainty

The critical friend comment; *You could have chosen any lesson but you chose to speak about prejudice,* signaled to me that I was learning to take risks, and relinquish the scripted text with which I was familiar. In a sense, I knew that the topic of prejudice would elicit heartfelt expressions, but in examining my position as a privileged, white middle-class academic (Warren & Hytton, 2004), who by default has power and control in the classroom, I needed to open up a space for all voices to be heard. The comment; *How did it make you feel when students were talking about being prejudiced against whites?* caused feelings of guilt, but enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of my complicity in the apartheid system. Although I felt tension in the room, and a sense of my race being contested (Brown, 2004), I was able to acknowledge my role.

Feedback from my critical friends, on my lesson, raised awareness of why I had chosen this lesson. Being confronted with my 'racial identity' during my experience at the HBI had prompted me to make room for students to speak. By confronting my white race and privilege, I was able to obtain a level of freedom that Foucault suggests is possible in taking an ethical stance. Critical discussion helped me to understand what my biases were, and to draw from students' own knowledge to expand and enhance my understanding of privilege. I was able to examine my tendency to be defensive and to

question what I was protecting. Better understanding the nuances and complexities that existed in my pedagogy, instead of maintaining a linear reading of my students and practice, opened my eyes. I was able to acknowledge where power and voice shifted and reconfigured and I became a learner desiring a less hierarchical approach.

Through opening up with self and critical friends, I am forced to recognise how ingrained my beliefs and values are concerning students' knowledge resources and their learning, and the extent to which these perceptions unconsciously weave into my practices. Through this classroom interaction, my identity is constituted (Fassett & Warren, 2007) in ways that position me as 'learner', and knowledge resource recipient rather than sole transmitter. My curiosity, desire for spontaneity, and for shifting hierarchies in the classroom are opened up in this interaction as I learn to yield to uncertainty and let go of my preconceived ideas. I also relinquish control of my thinking about what constitutes knowledge, teaching and learning. Social identity theory helps me to recognise how my race and classed self intertwines with my academic identity (Jenkins, 2008), and can constrain instead of liberate.

I recognise how my personal life is interwoven with my practices and acknowledge, as suggested by Coia and Taylor (2009, p. 4), that "We cannot divorce our lives from our teaching." I realise how my whiteness, with its accompanying privileges and entitlement, prevented me from seeing how the injustice of apartheid, where control was the order of the day, was being perpetuated through my actions in the classroom. My passive, aloof stance negatively influenced my notions of knowledge, students' ability, and approaches to teaching and learning. It also blocked many of my other qualities such as curiosity, empathy, and flexibility when engaging with a diverse group of students.

In this attempt at transforming a lesson, I am able to identify a few aesthetic moments (Aguirre, 2004) where the distinct yarn of the personal and the professional interlace to form an aesthetic fabric. The classroom became a place where students had agency to affirm and challenge. In recognising how pedagogy comprises both technical and aesthetic aspects (Eisner, 2002), I understand the need for spontaneity and I am beginning to understand how the classroom can be a space where I can change dominant discourses, as well as perspectives and practices. It positions me to enact agency and move toward the telos that Foucault (1985) suggests one should strive toward.

Outcomes

This research illustrates my learning and development from a technicist, linear way of 'telling-doing' to an evolving, way of understanding the value of one's personal craft knowledge (Connelly, et al., 1997). Critical communication pedagogy that encompasses uncertainty, spontaneity and empathy can enliven diverse undergraduate classes. It has potential to open up traditional practices and promote more organic ways of being, thinking, and acting as teachers and learners. The use of video helped me to represent, construct, and deconstruct my thinking about teaching (Weber & Mitchell, 2004). The self- study methodology, together with Foucault's framework of ethics, offered a space for the author to care enough for the self to identify, confront and 'dissipate accepted familiarities' (Falzon, 1998, p. 70). This was helpful in order to re-imagine my communication pedagogy and to create a space where threads of personal and professional identities could interlock.

I was able to reflect on and question my taken for granted ways of thinking as a white woman lecturer, and the values that I privileged in my everyday teaching practices. I demonstrate some growth in that my uneasiness in trying to navigate a path in a racially diverse teaching environment,

were the very factors that caused shifts in my thinking and actions. I recognised how the risky process of unpacking my personal narrative could open pathways for unlearning my prejudices and different types of self-closure (Pillay, et al., 2018). Confronting my white privilege revealed my complicity in how I pathologised my students, as well as my constricted views of knowledge and learning. It is what Nuttall (2009, p. 14) suggests is about "confronting one's secret life, including the untruths - latent, blatant, imminent, potent - that inhabit the white self."

Collaborative reflective experiences not only allowed for trustworthiness but for more creative approaches to be interrogated and critiqued (Pithouse-Morgan & Pillay, 2013). It became clear how the warp and the weft of individual strands of personal and professional experience can be woven together to form new understandings of practice. One contribution to educational research is the way in which a reflexive process enabled a higher education educator to recognize the social constructedness of her communication lecturer identity and to reconfigure this in order to transform ways of thinking and knowing. Furthermore, allowing the personal to interweave with the professional provided opportunity for an opening up to alternate ways of thinking and enacting communication pedagogy.

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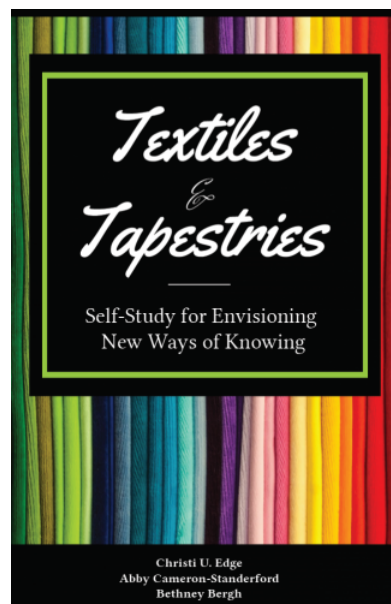
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