Reflections on subject centred learning, writing skills, research methods and spirituality for transformative teaching

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Personal reflections from my own teaching experience based upon subject centred learning, writing skills development, understanding research methods and spiritual inquiry are offered to encourage similar engagement or reflection by other higher education teachers. I explain how my teaching in the environmental sciences has been transformed for each of these themes in a series of narratives or stories from experience. My approach is grounded in reflexivity and phenomenological methods. Subject centred teaching and learning enables students to enter into deep relationship with the mutual subject shared by teacher and student. It transcends alternative approaches to teaching through unity of focus and of being. Teaching writing skills with an emphasis on revision and opportunities for rewriting in response to teacher feedback, and in a broader framing context of writing as story telling encourages deepening of student relationship with their subject. Similarly in-depth understanding of research methods, especially the influence of researcher values and epistemology on research execution and outcomes, invites a deep philosophical encounter with the learning process and nature of knowledge as well as the realisation of research as a form of story telling. I have found that the power of story telling inspires and empowers students in the learning process. It also potentially invites inquiry as to the higher spiritual dimensions of being that lie behind the stories that humans construct to give meaning to the world. My own personal evolution and development for each of these four themes has transformed my own teaching practice and enabled me to realise effective teaching strategies. I hope to provoke further conversation on how exploration of subject centred learning, teaching of writing skills and research methods, and how inquiry into spirituality can transform teaching in the tertiary education sector.

Introduction: Background, approach and aims

There are many pathways to attain transformative learning and teaching in higher education. My own pathway over the past 25 years as an academic in the environmental sciences is encapsulated in the four themes in the title of this paper: subject-centred learning, writing skills, research methods and spirituality. These four themes may not initially appear to be related as the first refers to an approach to teaching, the middle two are specific skills or subjects that I teach, and the last concerns qualities of being and processes of self-inquiry. However, in reflecting on my own teaching journey in the context of the 'Transformative, Innovative and Engaging' theme of *TLF2104* it was these four themes that came to the fore as the abiding influences on transforming my teaching practices and understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher.

The literature on transformative learning points to processes of transformation that can take place in a learner, especially around frames of references, critical reflection and challenging long-held assumptions or positions (Mezirow, 1997; Elias, 1997). Transformative teaching is that which encourages such change; some characteristics might include a curriculum organised around powerful ideas, interactive teaching approaches and high levels of student participation in learning activities (Banks, 1995) that promotes the development of critical, literate and socially aware students (Elias, 1997; Mockler, 2005). I have chosen to focus upon the notion of transformative teaching in this paper, as my experiences in attempting to be such a teacher along with other life experiences have served to similarly transform me in the process. To determine transformation within my students is beyond my capacity; instead I draw on the 'experience-derived know-how which professionals intuitively use' (Eraut, 1985, p119), as like the majority of academics surveyed by Bamber & Anderson (2012) I too mainly evaluate my work through ad hoc discussions with my students and through reflection on my own practice.

Teaching is highly personal and tied to individual values (Haggis, 2009) and as Clegg & Stevenson (2013, p7) note higher education research is as if academic researchers were 'studying ourselves'. Thus it invites a qualitative and subjective approach grounded in autobiography (Campbell et al., 2004),

phenomenology (Saljo, 1997) and a reflexive approach built around personal reflections (Fox et al., 2007).

My principle aim in this paper therefore is to explain how my own experience with subject-centred learning, teaching writing skills and research methods to my students, and interest in spiritual grounding or connection has been transformative for my own teaching practice. In doing so I hope to provoke thought about effective teaching in higher education in relation to these four themes, as I imagine that at least some of them might resonate with other academics. Palmer (1998, p2) argues 'that we teach who we are' and it is this personal and confronting nature of teaching that means it requires considerable courage (as the title of his book indicates). I am used to being open and revealing with my students in a classroom setting but a further personal aim within this paper is to have the courage to tell personal stories aimed at an audience of higher education colleagues. I know that I do not stand alone though, and I have weaved the perspectives of other higher education researchers and practitioners by means of literature review through my narrative.

I have structured the paper around my four central themes with a section devoted to how each has transformed my own teaching practice and contributed to what I consider to be effective teaching. In each section I explain the context and specific focus for my short personal narratives as they are each massive topics in their own right upon which much is already written. In the conclusion section, I attempt to show how these four story-lines became interwoven on my journey of transformation and how I believe that this benefits my students.

Subject-centred learning and effective teaching

Subject-centred learning is discussed in detail in the work of Palmer (1998) and has been a focus of my own recent co-authored reflections and publications on higher education (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Morrison-Saunders & Hobson, 2013a, 2013b). These works explain the concept in detail and review the work of other writers relevant to the topic so I do not repeat them here. In short though, subject-centred learning is about building a curriculum and the focus of individual classes around the subject that itself underscores any given university unit or course so that it becomes the united interest of student and teacher alike. Thus it is a reframing of the teacher and student relationship as understood in other competing paradigms around the subject (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, 2103). As argued in Morrison-Saunders & Hobson (2013a), the alternative paradigms of either teacher-centred, or student-centred learning make little sense as they give undue focus on only one of the partners in the learning process, and we outright reject any managerial model for determining how higher education teaching should be carried out (Morrison-Saunders & Hobson, 2013b) as standardised and force-fit models are about efficiency and consistency rather than whatever is special or unique about our subject.

Effective teaching happens when both teacher and learner are both focused on and equally beguiled by their (shared) subject. When describing this process Palmer (1998) adopts an almost mystical air describing the subject as a 'great thing' (p116) that speaks to teacher and student alike and represents a transcendence of the two alternatives (i.e. student- or teacher-centred approaches). In Morrison-Saunders & Hobson (2013b) we also used the word transcendence to describe the process of change within students arising from subject-centred learning which fosters students developing a sense of control over their own learning relationship with their subject. Importantly, the mirroring of equivalent behaviour occurs where teachers are modelling their own engagement with the subject simply by being themselves as researchers in the field. This has been my experience when teaching writing skills, a particular subject that I now specifically address in the next section.

Writing skills and effective teaching

One of my own transformative and powerful learning experiences occurred during the final stages of writing my Honours thesis (back in the late 1980s). I was fortunate to have a co-investigator working on the same research project in addition to my supervisor both of whom provided sharp and insightful feedback on drafts of my thesis. It was the process of writing and rewriting draft after draft of thesis

chapters that taught me how to write well and to think clearly. As Tredinnick (2008, p39) puts it: 'writing is about the toughest and most disciplined thinking work you'll ever do'.

Ever since becoming a full-time academic in the 1990s and assuming responsibility for the design and execution of units (previously I worked for some years in a tutor capacity), I have made writing skills an important focus in all of my teaching whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level. My practice has been to establish writing assignments, or simply optional opportunities for submitting drafts or for re-assessment, that revolve around the students receiving feedback on their written work and then rewriting the work. I have found this to significantly enhance the quality of subsequent written work, and I have frequently received feedback from students along the lines of my own epiphany when I was an Honours student. As reported in Morrison-Saunders (et al., 2012) I also hold journal article writing workshops with Masters and PhD level research students as well as other (e.g. junior) academics. Here again the emphasis is upon critique and feedback followed by the opportunity to rewrite. As Powell (2010, p.874) notes, even for experienced published researchers a key to successful writing is to 'revise and revise and revise' and to have other people critically review written work is commonly identified as key to enhancing both written work and writing skills (Morgan, 1986; Weil, 2004; McIntyre, 2007).

Another technique that I have found particularly helpful when teaching writing skills to students of any level is to discuss the notion of scientific writing as story-telling. This apparently comes as a surprise to most students, especially those from the sciences, so to give the topic some credibility I cite the work of experienced writers publishing in peer-reviewed journals on the topic of writing as story-telling; for example:

- Powell (2010, p873) states that: 'Before starting to write the paper, authors should carefully choose a journal audience for their *research story*' [emphasis added];
- Cahill et al. (2011) write that the most important writing skill '…is having a story and not deviating from the narrative' (p196) and further that: '…single papers will typically have a single story'. (p197); while
- Minto (1998, p47) advises that: 'Telling a story guarantees that the reader will pay attention to what you say. … The lure of an unfinished story easily takes precedence over the jumble of thoughts that a reader brings with them and which might otherwise distract them from reading and engaging in your writing.'

Having established this framing of writing as story-telling, I encourage each student to work out the 'story' of their writing in a short planning process focusing on their target journal or specific audience for their writing, the working title of their paper, and the aims and 'main message' of their paper. For undergraduate students submitting assignments, I emphasise that their audience should be a member of the 'general public' rather than me (i.e. an 'expert' in the subject). I find the notion of story-telling in scientific writing, for which most of my students report that they have been previously taught to treat as if it were objective and value-free and must be written in third-person voice, to be personally liberating and I observe that this approach helps to free up some creative spirit and make the job of writing a lot easier for me and my students alike. Story-telling is something that comes naturally to most people (e.g. it is the basis for social conversation when telling others about events or occasions or situations in our own personal lives) and as Tredinnick (2008, pp. 14-15) writes:

> When you write, you talk on paper; when it's good, you sing. … When you write, using letters to make words, and words to make phrases, and phrases to make sentences, and all of it to make sense, what you're doing is patterning sound, as you do when you speak. The more you write as though you were saying something to someone, the better they are likely to understand, to be moved, to be changed, to be sold; the more likely they are to read on and still be awake at the end.

I find this simple approach to teaching writing skills empowers students to take control of their writing and for the process to become more natural to them. As I argued at a previous Teaching and Learning Forum (Morrison-Saunders, 2012) plagiarism, philosophically, is the absence of the student in their writing, meaning that they have not engaged with their subject. Rather than accuse such students of

being cheats, I view the situation as a missed opportunity for student relationship with their (chosen) subject, or a recognition that perhaps the student is not enrolled in the 'right' discipline/subject area for them. I want my students to be beguiled with their subject (like I am), to engage with it in a natural way where it not only 'speaks' to them but becomes part of them and they in turn become enmeshed in stories about the subject so that they speak and write about it in a normal manner (along the lines of the Tredinnick quote above). Thus for me, the notion of story-telling as an approach to teaching writing skills goes hand-in-hand with subject-centred learning, and as I have sought to demonstrate in the previous text, I role-model this process for my students in the construct of my teaching activities - in other words, I actively equally engage with the 'subject' of 'writing' in this kind of class too. One of the writing skills resources I provide to all my students is a work entitled *Writing about writing: Ideas for short report and journal article composition* (Morrison-Saunders, 2013).

When discussing story-telling with my students I draw attention to two particular aspects. Firstly I emphasise the importance of writing style and structure in conveying meaning. I explain that the choice of language, order of words or phrases and the framing of their argument (or story) directly affects the meaning understood by their reader. Evidence of this effect is well documented in the psychology literature; for example, (and this coincides with my own subject area interest of environmental decision-making), the way in which information is presented to decision-makers influences the actual decision that is reached (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) including the choice of words and the order in which they are presented (Beike & Sherman, 1998) [1]. The second aspect of story-telling that I discuss with my students concerns the sheer volume of literature available to them when writing. It is (usually) an impossible task to review all of the available and relevant literature in any given field and therefore the students must make choices and engage only with a selection of materials in their writing. As the writer, they have control over these choices and they are effectively choosing which 'story' they will tell about their subject. This aspect of teaching writing skills meshes with my next topic of research methods.

Research methods and effective teaching

Despite undertaking formal university studies at Honours and then PhD level, both involving independent research projects, I have never received any formal training in research methods. Several years after I became a full-time academic I was fortunate to receive detailed feedback from two reviewers on a paper submitted to a journal focusing especially upon my research study design and methods; rather than outright rejection which could so easily have been the case, I was given a chance to substantially rework the paper (which I did, and which was subsequently published). This was another transformative experience for me; not only did I thereafter give much greater attention to research methods in my writing, but I have attempted to be equally helpful to other authors when reviewing papers where major research design or writing flaws are evident. A few years after this experience I had the opportunity to formally teach a research methods unit; an experience I relished as the old adage "If you want to learn, teach!" was personally extremely beneficial to me for my principal academic roles as teacher and researcher alike.

A profound personal learning arose when I engaged in research methods literature regarding the 'higher level' considerations such as paradigms, theoretical perspectives and epistemologies (Brannen, 2004; Crotty, 1998) and the realisations that different positions on these held by a researcher leads to different standpoints as to what data is, how it is collected and used, and ultimately what the findings of the research will be (Nilsen, 1998). This literature gave me a language and grounds to understand that all research (but perhaps especially social research which characterises my subject area) is not about fundamental truths but revolves around constructed understandings of how the world works. My own simplistic way of conceptualising this is to frame the researcher as a story-teller, in continuation of the point made previously regarding the literature review component of research and writing.

In terms of how this has transformed my teaching, I get students to take control of their own learning of their subject and more specifically to take control of their 'stories' about their subject as an extension of learning and thinking about the nature of research and of research methods. I previously explained how I do this in Morrison-Saunders & Hobson (2013a) where during the introduction to a

unit I teach I put up a slide entitled: "Welcome to *your* world of… [our subject]" and subsequently explain to them how they must make sense of available knowledge and of their own learning about our mutual subject, especially around how they undertake the written assignments. I take a similar approach with my supervised research students too. I find this approach to be empowering of my students and to bring them closer to their subject directly, without so much of 'me' serving as the broker between them and the subject.

Returning to my earlier revelations about research methods regarding worldviews and epistemologies, these concepts are the stuff of philosophy. This is far removed from the mechanics of data collection and debates over qualitative versus quantitative, subjective versus objective, or inductive versus deductive approaches to research prevalent in the literature (Cresswell, 1994; Brannen, 2004) as well as the narrow 'rational-scientific' perspective that seemed to characterise my early undergraduate education in environmental science and within my specific subject area (such as Caldwell, 1991; Culhane 1993). I have always particularly appreciated and celebrated the name of the highest university qualification being a Doctor of Philosophy, the notion that in-depth research of any subject is actually a philosophical inquiry, and thus it was revelatory for me to engage in the 'higher' aspects of the research methods theory (this was several years after I had completed my own PhD). Engagement with philosophy (i.e. explorations for ways to listen for the stories of the world and how it works), is bordering on exploration of spirituality, my final theme for reflection in the next section.

Spirituality and effective teaching

This is the first time I have had the courage to broach the topic of 'spirituality' in my professional work and writing. Previously the furthest I reached in this direction was to argue that 'teaching is being' (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, 2013, p782). In Morrison-Saunders & Hobson (2013a) we drew on a dialogue by Socrates some 2,500 years ago as recorded by Plato (cited in Kahn, 1996) which shows how knowledge and learning comes from within the learner, but we stopped short of the following statement by Socrates which explains this phenomena in spiritual terms (Cahn, 2009, p11):

> Seeing then that the soul is immortal, and has been born many times, and has beheld all things in this world and the world beyond, there is nothing it has not learnt… For learning and inquiry are wholly recollection.

This quotation aligns with the simple definition or understanding of 'spirituality' that I employ based on wholeness, unity or one-ness. This refers to a state beyond dualism (e.g. such as the mind/body split) which is timeless and infinite. From my personal glimpses and experiences of such a state, my best words to try and describe this is immersion in the 'infinite golden void' or being in a state of 'is-ness' during which the abiding feelings were of joy, unconditional love and connectedness to all things.

Obviously theological writers discuss the topic of spirituality openly; for example, Suzuki (1957) demonstrates how Christianity and Buddhism share equivalent spiritual realisation or 'enlightenment' based on the work of writers drawn from both religions. My own pathway towards such understanding arose initially from my studies, research and teaching in the environmental sciences including:

- the 'first law of ecology' of Commoner (1971, p16) that 'everything is connected to everything else';
- the notion, made famous by Sagan (1974), that everything of us and of planet Earth and beyond is made of 'star-stuff',
- teaching about deep ecology (Naess, 1973) in an undergraduate unit on environmental ethics;
- the systems thinking work of Meadows (2009, p184) in which she includes discussion of expansion of the boundaries or horizons of caring; and most recently
- researching and teaching about sustainability assessment (one example is Bond et al., 2013).

As I quip to my students, regarding the latter point, 'sustainability' can be seen as a metaphor for 'life, the universe and everything' (To borrow the title of the book by Douglas Adams in his 'Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy' series). I have since tuned into writings and discussions about spiritual matters by people from all walks of life - the film 'What the bleep do we know?' is one example which brought

together commentary by theologians, brain specialists, social commentators, physicists and other professions in discussion of seemingly identical phenomena of a spiritual nature.

Returning to my science roots, I have found the work of McGilchrist (2009) on the human brain to be particularly illuminating. My highly abbreviated summary of this detailed and engaging book on his life's work as a psychiatrist follows. The right hemisphere of the brain engages in the world around us in a deeply connected, integrated and timeless manner along the lines of my own experiences described previously. It operates experientially and only in the present moment. The left hemisphere, which is where our language functions reside, receives, arranges and stores information into memory including that generated in the right hemisphere. The left hemisphere essentially operates systematically and provides us with 'a "re-presented" version' of our experiences (McGilchrist, 2009, p30) as they have been processed after the event (even if just milliseconds of lapsed time) [2]. In other words, any thoughts or communication in language by our left hemisphere are essentially a 'story' of experience. In simple terms, enlightenment refers to the state of being when these stories are transcended enabling the deeply connected experience of the right hemisphere to come to the forefront of consciousness or awareness. Writers such as Parsons (1995) and Katie & Mitchell (2007) provide explanation or guidance on how a person can realise such spiritual awareness beyond the confines of our stories, while the *Circles of Trust* technique advocated by Palmer (2004) (who is more immediately part of the higher education community) would appear also to perform a similar role.

How does an awareness or experience of spirituality relate to effective teaching? My own spiritual evolution significantly advanced a few years ago in response to a series of major events in my life including some set-backs and difficulties experienced within my university. I realised that the university was not going to change (nor should I reasonably expect it to) and the best thing was to change myself. One change was practical and external with regards reducing my employment contract to 75% and taking on a 25% role at a second university which lead to a transformation in my research and teaching activity through freeing up additional thinking time, especially during periods away from my home university. The second type of change was internal and related to my way of 'being', especially in 'letting go of ego', and this change of itself has transformed my relationships and experience with my students. Relative to my 'former self' I am calm and relaxed and I 'meet' my students with compassion and acceptance for exactly who they are or 'where they are at' in their personal and learning journey (i.e. without judgement). Similar to the advantages of adopting a subject-centred approach to teaching advocated by Palmer (1998) with respect to allowing the subject to speak to teacher and students alike and thereby preventing egos of the two stakeholder types to dominate, I have found my classrooms to be much more conducive to individual and collective learning alike under this new way of being. Several colleagues have independently remarked on how different I have been of late and how calmly I cope with the dramas of university life outside of the classroom. Thus, I concur with Lupton (2013, p161) that 'the mind-body-spirit of the teacher' is a crucial dimension in effective teaching.

Conclusion: Weaving together the four stories

At the outset of this paper I set out to explain how my experiences with the four themes of subject-centred learning, writing skills, research methods and spirituality have transformed my teaching practice. Here I attempt to weave the four personal narratives together by way of conclusion by highlighting the common ideas or linkages that exist between the themes.

Through encouraging my students to come into relationship with our mutual subject, and by demonstrating this relationship in my own life and work in the sense of teaching as being, subject-centred approaches to teaching enable transcendence to occur. There is a mystical or spiritual dimension to this way of being with subject. By actively teaching writing skills to all my students, regardless of level of study, with an emphasis on rewriting in response to feedback and on story-telling, I encourage a deepening of relationship with subject. The notion of writing and research as story-telling goes hand-in-hand with revelations from engagement with research methods literature that knowledge is constructed or highly influenced by the values and qualities of being that a researcher brings to their research activity. For many of my students, such insight marks the start of a consciously

philosophical level of engagement with subject and with understandings of the nature of learning or knowledge. I suggest that understanding the world as 'story' potentially invites inquiry of what lies behind or beyond. While as a rule I do not discuss spiritual matters in the classroom (unless a student directly asks a question of this nature), I appreciate the qualities of being that such inquiry brings to me personally and the transformative effect it has had upon my teaching practice. Perhaps most profound of all for me is the new-found tendency to find unity and connection (e.g. in people or place or subject) where previously I might have focused on difference and duality.

I have shared my teaching and personal journey so far, in relation to the (for me) inter-connected themes of subject-centred learning, writing skills, research methods and spirituality, in the hope that my reflections provide some inspiration or provocation for other teachers around notions of effective teaching and opportunities for transformative learning. Some of the specific topics within these themes that I have addressed are not commonly discussed in the higher education community in my experience. It has taken courage to confess, so to speak, about my inner feelings and development on this teaching journey; if nothing else perhaps my stories may encourage others to join in the conversation.

Endnotes

[1] This knowledge is not new as the 17th century French mathematician, philosopher and physicist Blaise Pascal is quoted as saying: 'Words differently arranged have a different meaning and meanings differently arranged have a different effect'. http://thinkexist.com/quotes/blaise_pascal/
[2] A very moving experiential account of the functions of the right and left brain hemispheres can be found at http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight.html

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