BATTLING BAD WEATHER ALONG THE WAY: MEANING MAKING IN NARRATIVE INQUIRY AND ITS CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a personal account on how I embrace reflexivity while making meaning of my experiences as a narrative inquirer. Revisiting my doctoral journey, I describe the stage when my research field texts were generated from the experiences throughout my four-month research fieldwork. I then illustrate the challenges I encountered while managing my data corpus after my fieldwork ended. The biggest obstacle was during the interpretive process when I attempted to make sense of these experiences, constructed into my research texts, while travelling in the directions of an inquiry: inward, outward, backward, forward and situated within place. It was the time when I fully submerged in my reflexivity and critical reflections, but at the same time had the difficulties to emerge from the depths of meaning making. Admittedly, I was drowned in my own confusions, self-doubt and dilemma while trying to understand the true meanings of my inquiry. The decision on re-storying such experiences was another overwhelming period at this particular stage. Metaphorically, it was the time during the journey when I sailed through a stormy sea – the going was rough and bumpy. The important lessons learned throughout these meaning making experience are also accentuated towards the end of the narration.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry; Reflexivity; Critical reflection; Teaching practice; Qualitative fieldwork; Data-driven analysis; Higher education; Malaysia.

1. THE LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE OF NAVIGATION

My doctoral journey eventually brought me back to my familiar educational landscape. From July to October 2008, I was back in the university and the Faculty that I belonged to for my research fieldwork. With the attempt to re-examine my practice, I revisited my classroom teaching experience and took up my roles and responsibility as a teacher/lecturer. It was during the four-month period that I conducted an educational foundation course to a classroom of undergraduate students. Metaphorically, my research voyage started out uncharted. It was like preparing a vessel sailing towards a vast, open sea of qualitative inquiry. Despite the ambiguity and the unforeseen challenges, I was brave enough to set my destination and gradually I found my own pathways. At that particular point, I was already a traveller on an inquisitive journey towards reframing my personal practical knowledge. I had chosen narrative inquiry as the mechanism that I believe would take me to my destination. Generated by the self-study and autoethnographic approaches, it was from the deck of this "vessel" that I attempted to scrutinise my educational landscape with a pair of new eyes. I charted the course of my doctoral journey on the trail of "an interpretive qualitative research" (Creswell, 2007); the one that:

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> …..(F)ocusing on the self-reflective nature of how qualitative research is
> conducted, read and advanced. The role of the researcher, the person reading the
> textual passage, and the individuals from whom qualitative data are collected play
> a more central role in researchers' design of choice (p.3).

Hence, while narrative inquiry was the main mechanism in studying personal learning experiences, I also incorporated both the approaches of self-study and autoethnography into the method. The story of my journey of reframing my personal practical knowledge, was unfolded from "narrative (a look at a story of self), auto-ethnography (a look at self within a larger context), and self-study (a look at self in action, usually within an educational context)" (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008, p. 17). The combined approaches were significant as they "privilege self in the research design, recognising that addressing the self can contribute to our understanding of teaching and teacher education" (ibid.). The integration of these approaches made my research journey into a story of a narrative inquirer's self-study on her teaching practice, one that offered the means for making transparent her journey towards a "personal professional knowledge and growth" (Kitchen, 2005).

My research fieldwork had kept me "in the midst" – I was then "located somewhere along the dimension of time, place, the personal, and the social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.63). These dimensions of temporality, sociality and place become the main principles by which I safeguarded the boundaries of my nautical navigation – the latitude and longitude of my research journey. I was determined that with my newly discovered knowledge gained throughout my experience as an MPhil/PhD student, I was ready to engage in the process of reflection-in-action which allowed me in "hearing and seeing differently" (Russell & Munby, 1991, p.164). In addition to this, the strategy of unpacking my teaching as the means to reframe my practice had also encouraged me to challenge my "sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)" (Mezirow, 2003, p.58).

During the research fieldwork I attempted to challenge these habits of mind by embracing myself to the role of a critically reflective teacher/lecturer (Brookfield, 1995). I aimed to transform them into the ones that were "more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p.58). It was Brookfield who convinced me that to become a critically reflective teacher/lecturer, I needed to look into my practice from a different perspective. He suggested four distinctive lenses through which I could re-examine my teaching practice; three of which I adopted, i.e. my autobiography as a learner and a teacher, the relevant theoretical literature and my students' comments on my teaching through which I scrutinised my professional self.

Looking into my teaching through these three different critical lenses, I simultaneously refined my understanding on being a reflexive researcher. When I first discovered the term reflexivity from my reading of Etherington (2004), it was ambiguous to me. Nonetheless, I gradually learned that as an inquirer I must also familiarised my self with the elements of reflexivity while focusing on what I am researching. I was told that to be a reflexive researcher, I needed to nurture:

> …..(The) ability to notice our response to the world around us, other people and
> events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and
> understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and
> to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the

personal, social and cultural context in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world (p.19).

This concept gradually became clearer at the advanced course of my research. This was particularly when I struggled to manage and analyse my data, termed as field text in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which were created during my research fieldwork. The authors also reminded me that when in the inquiry field, my main foci were of two: (1) "our experience of entering the field"; and (2) "our experience of being in the field" (p. 92). Thus, I made sure that my field texts were "neither found nor discovered", because throughout the inquiry field they were supposed to be "created by the researcher and the participants in order to represent aspects of field experience" (ibid.). How my story "being lived and told" (ibid.) throughout the four-month period of my fieldwork then, was composed from three main field texts. Primarily, they consisted of my teaching/research journal, my students' weekly learning journals and life story interviews with my students. These three forms of field texts were my three important data sets which made up the data corpus for my research.

Field Text I: Teaching/Research Journal. I had decided that my method to compose my own story as a practitioner-researcher throughout my inquiry field was by recording my sense of self – mainly my being, thinking and feeling – in the written form of expressions. The best way for me was to pen down my ways of thinking and my sense of feeling in a journal. After all I was convinced by Clandinin and Connelly (1994) who said that journal writing is "a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experiences" (p.421). It is often related to autobiographical writing, thus most importantly journal writing allowed me to document my critical reflections into my pedagogical knowledge and skill. My ideas seemed to be compatible with Moon's (2006) who further suggested that entries into a journal could also be my reflections on the process of my own learning, the critical reviews on my behaviour, or the way of looking into my personal or self development. I employed a "free-writing technique" (Moon, 2006, p.101) for my writing to describe "whatever comes into (my) mind, feeling, thought, observation, observation, everything" (ibid.) about the in-classroom teaching experiences. Nonetheless, my reflections on these experiences were mainly confined to my pedagogical skills and the theoretical foundations that I relied upon.

Field Text II: Students' Learning Journals. My personal teaching/research journal was not the only field text that I composed during my fieldwork. In addition, I also employed my students' weekly journal entries as my research field text. I was first introduced to the idea of student's journal writing by Boud and Walker (1998), that the use of learning journals among students as one of the ways to encourage reflections on their own process of learning. The students' main tasks were to describe their personal learning experiences for the course that I conducted. They were asked to email their entries to me once a week, preferably after they attended the class for the week. Prior to assigning my students to write their weekly entries, I first made clear to them my position as a teacher/lecturer cum researcher. On the second week of our meeting I shared with my students the nature of my study - its scope and aims – as well as the stage of the study. I informed them that my teaching was part of the data generating process and that their feedback on my teaching was one of the main sources for my field texts. I believed then that this was the important step taken during my fieldwork in order for them to understand why their reflections on their classroom learning experiences were important to my research. By being transparent to them, I adopted "the stance of researcher vis-à-vis participant or collaborative partner" as proposed by Merriam (1998, p.101). My identity as a researcher was visibly known to my students as to demonstrate that we were the equal partners in my research process.

Field Text III: Life Story Interviews. The information that I had gathered from students' weekly feedback on my teaching strategy later guided my decision for the interview sessions. My aim was to have a deeper understanding on how these opinions had been developed. Thus, by meeting and talking to them personally, I allowed the students to voice out their personal views on the matter. Initially, I based the selection of my research participants on Creswell's (2007) suggestion that narrative research usually employs one or two individuals, thus as the researcher I needed to "reflect on who to sample" (p.128). For this reason I employed life story interview because I learned that students had the tendency to relate their current learning experiences with the ones experienced throughout their childhood and adolescent lives. While resonating with their past learning experiences, students brought along the influences of their socio-cultural and demographic backgrounds to the conversations. I believed this was what Atkinson (1998) defined as life story, which is:

> .....(T)he story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another.....
> A life story is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspect (p.8).

Considering that "the ethics of doing a life story interview are all about being fair, honest, clear, and straightforward" (ibid., p.36), I prepared a guideline or a protocol for my open-ended interview and even provided my interviewees with the copy. Most of the interview sessions were conducted either in the comfort of my office, or in the library's discussion rooms. I basically followed the life story interview guideline that was proposed by Atkinson (1998) when I conducted the sessions. Once we were seated comfortably, I maintained a casual atmosphere while I informed the students again about the aim of my study, the nature of the interview and the ethical procedures involved. Students were also informed about their rights as my research participants and the process of verification in which they would be given copies of the transcriptions and the parts of the chapter that contained their stories. They were told that I needed them to read the copies and inform me if they found any discrepancies or contradictions between what they had said and what had been re-storied by my writings.

Being transparent about these procedures, particularly on the aspect of informed consent, would also mean that I attempted to reduce the risk of misinterpretation, bias or exploitation on my part as a researcher. Prior to entering my inquiry field, I was warned about this by Kvale (1996), Mishler (1986) and Nunkoosing (2005). They were then asked to sign the release form and to fill in the cover sheet. Although they were required to provide me with their personal particulars, such as names and address, I had guaranteed the confidentiality of the information and had ensured that they would remain anonymous in the stories presented in my chapters. I believe that all these steps were vital in order to confirm to the standard procedure of interviewing, emphasised by Atkinson (1998), Kvale (1996) and also Mishler (1986).

The challenges of juggling the responsibilities between teaching and researching during the semester did not allow me to review all the field texts while I was in the field. My fieldwork was the time when texts were generated and composed, per se. The following subsections highlight the experiences when I attempted to search the meanings of these texts.

2.   SWALLOWED BY THE SEA

Dear Sheila,
So far I have managed to collect stories from 28 different students. I have also more than 500 entries of students' learning journals. Plus the recorded class activities for my class observation.   And also the experiences gained throughout my discussions with one of my senior colleagues. With all these "data" I really need to sit down and discuss with you how I can best utilise them. For example, it is part of the strategy to collect all 28 stories from 28 students who're willing to share their experiences with me. But eventually, I still need to choose the most interesting ones, as it is impossible to include all. And the selection of participants was based on their journals and my observation in class. I try to include those who are very good in class and those who are quite reserved. And also those who can reflect and write well (and those who don't). I'm attaching some of the journals just for you to get what I mean.

(30 October 2008; Personal email correspondence)

When I ended my fieldwork in Malaysia and returned to Bristol in early November 2008 to resume my research journey, little did I anticipate that the field texts I brought along with me would pose another challenge. While still in Malaysia, I had already expressed my concern to my supervisor, as depicted in the email above. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I found myself to be the novice qualitative researcher who was still shadowed by her past positivistic notions about research. It started with my irrational fear that my three main field texts were not sufficient for the purpose of data triangulation during the analysis stage. I then was overcome with the positivist notion that suggested more data would guarantee the validity of my study. After all, I was concerned with the idea that insufficient data would definitely jeopardise my research. In addition, due to time and funding constraints, I would not have another chance for another round of fieldwork.

Engulfed by these thoughts, I composed two extra field texts at the end of my fieldwork. The first one was the recorded class presentations based on students' group assignments. Their fieldwork task required them to visit a school and while in the school setting, they were asked to conduct simple interviews with the teachers to get a general idea on the profession. The class presentations were the medium where students shared their fieldwork experiences and exchanged ideas with their other classmates. My reason to record each group's presentation was because I found that students usually presented what they had experienced in forms of stories. The second extra field text that I had generated were the written reports of these group assignments. These documents contained the reflective elements from their fieldwork experiences that I thought could be the important source of field texts. In addition to these two extra field texts, I also kept all the informal emails and text messages that students sent me. I also brought the classnotes and activity sheets prepared by the students' during the group activities back to Bristol.

Reflecting on this part of my research, these excessive and unnecessary field texts were the obstacles that slowed down the progress of my analysis stage. Before I could decide on which texts that I needed to transfer into my research texts, I found myself overwhelmed by all the information that I had gathered. Indeed as Riessman (1993) put it, I was "drowning in a sea" of field texts (p.v), because I was not entirely sure how and where I should begin. My own indecisiveness and confusion worsened

"the ethnographic hangoever" that I suffered (Delamont, 2005, p.333) because at the same time, I found myself struggling to adjust to my student routine after my four-month role as a teacher/lecturer.

Gradually, I found my way and was back on track, thanks to my supervisor who advised me to be decisive on which field texts to be analysed. My readings on analysing and interpreting qualitative data had taught me that there were many ways of seeing my field texts, hence, there were also many ways of making sense of these texts. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, the analysis of its data was open to flexibility because "there is no single, accepted approach to analysing qualitative data" (Creswell, 2008, p.245). From Boyatzis (1998), the first principle that I learned was that technically, my research was data driven. I should not only identify the manifest content of my field texts but search their latent meanings. Moreover, Creswell (2008) also gave me the general idea on the process involved. Since my data were inductive in nature, the process of analysing was iterative. One of the ways I could employ was by reading my field texts several times and conducting an analysis each time. Doing this would help me in gaining deeper understanding about the information embedded in the field texts.

Most importantly it was the interpretive nature of my research that made the big difference between what I was about to venture and my past research practice. Unlike the experimental or survey studies which made me deal with the objective nature of numerical data, with qualitative data I was given the freedom to make "a personal assessment" (ibid., p.245). Therefore, with my qualitative field texts, I needed to provide the descriptions that matched these texts. By this, I was allowed to bring my own perspective to my interpretation. This notion and the overall process of qualitative data analysis brought me back to the philosophical foundation of the hermeneutic/interpretative paradigm.

Specifically, I was reminded of the "hermeneutic circle" (Crotty, 1998, p.92; Usher, 1996, p.19) or "hermeneutical circle" (Kvale, 1996, p.47) in the interpretation of meaning. I appreciate Usher's (1996) simple illustration that explains the circularity nature of interpretation. He proposed that the interpretation of texts is always grounded in a background or "a tradition" (p.19). He referred to this as "the assumptions and presuppositions, beliefs and practices, of which the subjects and the objects of research are never fully aware and can never be fully specified" (ibid.). What this meant, from my understanding, was that the descriptions about the information in my composed field texts needed to be related to the unique context where I conducted my research. Highlighting the context would then mean that I should look into my texts through the cultural lenses.

While doing the analysis, Kvale (1996) also cautioned me about another circulatory aspect of interpretation. According to him, to have a holistic understanding on my field texts, I needed to pay extra attention to their parts. I kept in mind when he said that "the closer determination of meaning of the separate parts may eventually change the originally anticipated meaning of the totality, which again influences the meaning of the separate parts, and so on" (ibid., p.47). I found this particular idea to be similar to the Gestalt concept when I studied psychology. Kvale (1996) also asserted that although the hermeneutical process of interpretation seems infinite, one could tell when the cycle ended. This is when a sensible meaning has been reached. With all these ideas in my mind I proceeded with the crucial stage of my doctoral journey: making meaning of my field texts.

3. SEE HOW THE WIND IS BLOWING

The systematic way of managing my data corpus helped me in choosing which field texts to be transformed into my research text. I decided then that my research text would be created based on the original three sets of field texts – my teaching/research journal, my students' weekly journals, and the life story interviews with my students. Applying the concept of hermeneutical cycle, in order for me to have an in-depth understanding of the whole experience of reframing my practical knowledge, I set out to examine these three main field texts, part by part. In this subsection of the paper, I illustrate the process during which I made sense of my field texts. It was the period when I negotiated flexibility in one part of my analysis method, while on the other part acknowledged the need for its consistency and coherence (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

Research Text I. The first texts that I examined were the entries of my own journal. I found my own teaching/research journal entries to be the main field text for the "ongoing, daily notes, full of details and moments of (my) inquiry lives in the field… out of which (I) can tell stories of (my) story of experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.104). The time when I re-experienced my teaching practice during my fieldwork was the period that I was practically exercising "Schon's elements of reflection-in-action" (Russel, 2005, p.200). I now believe that my journal writing demonstrated what Boud (2001) termed as "reflection in the midst of action" (p.13). When I recorded the emotions and thoughts associated to my experiences of lecturing and conducting the class activities, I was actually acting out the element of "noticing" (ibid.). For instance, in one of the entries, I described how I provided a concrete example while I lectured on the concept of metaphysics. My decision was based on my observation that most of the students were unfamiliar with this concept, thus, I needed to be creative in facilitating their understanding. What I had done according to Boud was the "intervening" part (ibid.), which was another element in reflection in action. My awareness towards my conscious actions and decisions while I was carrying out my teaching in the classroom - while being in the midst of my experience – was what Boud (2001) referred to as reflection-in-action.

My act of examining my teaching strategy and my reflections on my classroom teaching experiences during the fieldwork demonstrated the self-study on my practice (Dinkelman, 2003; Loughran, 2005). Through this "personal questioning of practice" (Loughran & Russell, 2002, p.3), I learned to critically examine my present and past pedagogical knowledge. This then led me to identify the core of my puzzle of practice – my professional identity and personal dilemmas in particular - which was socio-culturally grounded and value laden in nature. When these themes started to emerge while I revisited the entries of my teaching/research journal, I knew then that what was evident was the autoethnographic element of this research. The experience of reading and re-reading what I had written in my journal made me understand now what Ellis and Bochner (2005) tried to convey. It was the time when I zoomed backward and forward, inward and outward until "the distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition" (p.249).

The meanings gained while I scrutinised the entries from my teaching/research journal were transformed into my narrative account of my fieldwork experience. I was again struggling to decide the best way to re-story my experience at first. From Ely (2007), I learned the various ways of re-presenting my fieldwork experience. The episodes of my story as a critically reflective teacher/lecturer and a reflexive researcher were mostly elaborated from my first-person story and anecdotes. Her writing convinced me to emulate the same methods of re-storying to effectively re-present my inner thoughts, feelings, emotions, reflections and reflexivity captured at the particular moment when I experienced them. Researching previous researchers' way of representing their story

was also fruitful. Inspired by the writing by Humphreys (2005), I learned that my story was also constructed by my "autoethnographic vignettes" (p.840).

Research Text II. I did not confine my method of re-storying my teaching experience to first-person story, anecdotes and narrative vignettes. I later intertwined with the story of my teaching, revisited and unpacked, were the stories of my students' personal learning experiences. These stories were created from the second set of my field texts – my students' weekly journal entries. I had begun compiling and systematically managing each and every entry from all fifty-one students of mine ever since I first received them online in late July 2008. I had designated one folder for each student and each of his or her weekly entries was saved according to the date of submission. The individual folders then were categorised according to the students' academic programmes. For instance, I had nine folders for each student that belonged to the Chemistry programme (SPK), sixteen for the TESL programme (TESL) and twenty-six for the Sport Science programme (SPS). I coded each student according to the numerical sequence of their attendance list. For example, the folder designated for the first student appeared in the attendance list for the Chemistry group was coded as SPK1. I applied this simple coding system that I had developed for the rest of the students' folders that contained their weekly journal entries. This was also the important procedure taken which was necessary to guarantee students' anonymities in the research.

When I first started to examine students' entries in responses to the class activities that I had implemented, I found this initial categorisation to be ineffective. I then came up with another way of categorisation. While maintaining the coding system, I rearranged the entries in accordance to the fourteen academic weeks during the semesters. By this method, I could identify the specific day and week during which I applied a particular activity. To illustrate the process of analysis was when I wanted to explore students' perceptions on their participations in group discussions and class presentations based on the Jigsaw activity. This particular activity was conducted on the 10 September 2008, which was during the ninth week of the academic semester. In order to have students' views on this particular learning approach, I focused on the entries that I received starting in the tenth week of the semester. I then selected the entries that were relevant to the context of the class activity. In other words, I only chose entries that contained the feedback on the Jigsaw activity.

I doubted whether by following these stages, I had adopted the thematic analysis approach. However, the next step was for me to look for the similarities and differences of the comments as a way to identify the common themes that students highlighted. To avoid redundancies, I selected entries that I found to be meaningful to me. These were the ones which produced significant effects on my perceptions on my pedagogical knowledge and skills. My reading and re-reading of these entries suggested that students were willing to give honest opinions about what they thought and felt about my classroom teaching strategies. Although I found that most of the comments were positive, there were also those which were discouraging. During the time when I re-visited these rich sources of information I learned that students' feedback and comments were constructive to my practice regardless of their nature. I retained the originality of the email contents that were written in English. Entries that were received in the Malay language were translated into English, but without altering their original meanings.

Research Text III. The final process of analysis involved my third field notes, which were my examination of the interview transcripts. I found this to be ironic because it was the interview recordings that I had enthusiastically attended to after I left the fieldwork. Motivated by the assumption that these recorded conversations were the most important texts for my research, I was

determined to select the most significant ones from all the twenty-eight conversations. Nevertheless, after almost six weeks of listening and re-listening to the twenty-eight recordings, the sudden loss of interest was inevitable. Halfway through I abandoned the process and shifted my attention to my other two sets of field notes. This seemed to be the right move. The explorations of my teaching/research journals and my students' learning journals were facilitative in fine tuning the elements that I needed to focus on while critically listening to the interviews.

Throughout the process of listening to each of the audio recordings, I applied the similar technique that I had employed when reading and re-reading my students' learning journals. While listening to the recordings I distinguished the common issues raised by the students when they were asked to respond to the set of general questions I had outlined in my interview protocol. I could identify a more or less similar pattern of storyline when students shared with me their personal learning experiences. From the twenty-eight recorded conversations that I had carefully listened to, I selected two that I believed to have an impact on me as a practitioner and a researcher. I then proceeded with the transcribing process for these two recordings. Venturing into this process was a new experience to me. I had to get used to the manual task of listening and typing each and every single word mentioned by the participant. I attempted to use the software NVIVO at first to facilitate the transcribing process, but soon after I gave up on it and instead I relied on the Microsoft Office Programmes that were familiar to me. It was a daunting process at first because it required multitasking from my part.

Nonetheless, through this painstaking process, I believe I developed my own way of analysing the recorded conversations. I learned later that the act of listening and re-listening to each of the sentence mentioned by the student and simultaneously trying to understand and make sense of it was actually part of the analytical process.I found the first listening to the recording to be an important stage because it gave me fresh insights into the manifest content of the words mentioned by each student. Listening and re-listening while transcribing the words gave me the time to identify the general issues that the students emphasised. I usually wrote down the important cues that I managed to pick up during this process as the guideline for the later stage of analysis. By this way, I knew exactly which part of the conversation I needed to zoom in and highlight the important content.

The most important stage of analysis was after the process of transcribing ended and all the uttered words and sayings had been transformed into written texts. By scrutinising the texts, I first identified the pattern or the sequence of the conversation. To illustrate this process was the experience I had when I tried to search for meanings from what Nur had shared with me. Nur was one of my students who had willingly talked to me about her personal learning experience. I assigned her with the pseudonym name "Nur" not just because it suited her positive character, but most importantly in order to protect her anonymity. When I asked her about what she felt about her then present learning, she was quick to relate her learner self to her family background. From here, she started to highlight her experience as a learner influenced by parental expectations. When she talked about her current tertiary learning experience, I noticed that she resonated with her past experiences while at the school and matriculation levels. I identify this evolving and sequential pattern when I read and re-read her interview transcript.

After I identified the sequence of her life story that was related to her learning experience, I then separated the transcripts into parts according to the sequence. I did not differentiate the themes and the terms, thus, by doing this, I believe, I was actually adopting what Rubin and Rubin (2005) referred to as "open coding" (p. 222). For instance, I categorised Nur's learning experiences into four major

parts. The first part focused on her primary school education experiences while the second part was on her secondary school education. Part three centres on her experience while attending the matriculation college. Her life as an undergraduate student was discussed in the fourth part of the transcript. By systematically organising the transcript into categories according to the sequence of the storyline, I was clear on which part of her story I could examine. My next step was to focus on the significant events that occurred during a particular stage of her life. I first read the part where she told me about her learning experience while she was in the primary school. I retain the transcript in Malay, the language we used during our conversation in order to maintain the original meanings. I believe this method also allowed me to search for the latent meanings of her story. The parts that had been selected were then translated and presented in English.

As the story of her childhood learning experience unfolded, Nur revealed the stage of her life when her identity as an individual learner was developed. Listening to her story made me reflect on my own learning experiences when I was a pupil in the Malaysian educational system. I could not help but compare the similarities and differences of our experiences, thus this led me to examine the socio-cultural background that shaped how we, my students and I, thought about ourselves as learners. At the same time, I believed that when I started to focus on the aspect of identity as a way to understand the individual learners, it was when the element of "performative" came into the picture (Riessman, 2008, p. 106). When I re-read the transcript over and over again, it became clearer to me that I was interested to understand the significant individuals who had the influence on how these students viewed themselves as learners, the important experiences that moulded their perceptions on their learning process and the reasons behind all these experiences. By interrogating "who" an utterance may be directed to, "when," and "why," that is, for what purpose?" (ibid., p.105) I believed I had adopted Reissman's (2008) dialogic/performance analysis approach in order to make sense from the conversations I had with my students. It was a real challenge in deciding how I could represent the experience of having the insightful conversations with two of my students. Research into others' work again proved to be the best strategy. Inspired by Trahar (2006), I emulated her ways or re-storying the conversations by representing them in the style of dialogues. I combined this with Ely's (2007) first person-stories and anecdotes, as well as Humphreys' (2005) narrative vignettes as the ways to represent the stories told by my students as if they were told from their point of view. Even now, I can still find myself agreeing with Trahar (2013) when she said:

> So, although those who use narrative and other, related, methodological approaches.....may claim that they are interested in the particularities of people's stories, in order for the reader to understand an individual story, the context within which it is told, together with how it is recounted, has to be foregrounded and richly described (p.302).

In early June 2010, I emailed my drafts to Nur together with the transcriptions and asked for her feedback and comments. However, since Nur did not reply my emails by the end of July 2010, I assumed that she agreed with how I had presented her story and thus proceed with my thesis completion. My initial thought when realising that I failed to receive any replies from her was that at that particular time of the year, she was undergoing her teaching practicum in schools. I assumed that her busy schedule did not allow her to respond to my emails. I then realised that by solely relying on such assumptions, my morality as a narrative researcher who writes the life stories of others would, in the future, come under close scrutiny, potentially by those who were concerned with ethical issues, those who feared that misrepresentations in narrative study would lead to "betrayal stories" (Sikes,

2010, p.11). Nonetheless, by highlighting my effort in seeking for my participants' approval of how their stories were constructed and represented in the chapters, I demonstrated that the process of "respondent verification" (ibid., p.16) was in fact initiated in my research. In a way, making transparent my attempt of employing the strategy and the challenges I then encountered amplified the words of Sikes (2010) when she cautioned her students that in the ethics in writing life histories and narratives, "you can do what you like, providing you can make justifications for your case" (p.21).

4. CONCLUSION

Admittedly, the iterative process of reading and re-reading my field texts was time consuming. It was more like a spiral reoccurrence of making meaning of the information provided by each of my three main field texts. Each time I revisited the texts, I looked into the details with new eyes that led to the development of new ideas. The more I paid attention to the details, the more I dug deeper into the particulars. Most of the time I found myself lost while searching for the meanings of these texts. Nevertheless, I was cautioned by my supervisor about my time constraint, thus, at one point of the analysis process, I had to put a stop on it.

The meticulous process of meaning making from the three sets of field texts gradually paved the way for me to achieve in-depth understandings on the elements that I aimed to examine. In general, I gained insights into my practice by seriously taking into consideration my students' views about their own learning experiences. I found that the experiences were multi-layered as our stories – my students' and my own - seemed to be intertwined. It took me a while to think of the ways of representing these multi-layered and intertwined stories into a complete storyline. From this, unfolded later were the episodes that followed the sequence of the storyline, which was based on my fieldwork experiences.

I did not realise then that the cycles of revisiting my field texts and later transforming them into my research text in a form of stories were part of what Polkinghorne (1995) termed as "narrative analysis" (p.15). I now learned that the process that I went through was actually part of a "narrative configuration" (ibid., p.5) which resulted in "an emplotted narrative" (p.15). I discovered that when I identified the significant events and issues that were composed in the field text, I was actually developed the thematic threads. Polkinghorne referred these as the plots, and these plots' "integrating operations" were the emplotment (ibid., p.5) in a narrative. According to Polkinghorne, when events and happenings were configured or emplotted, narrative meaning was then achieved. I believed that by confining my story of reframing my personal practical knowledge to the significant events that occurred throughout my fieldwork experience, I had actually achieved "the configuration of the data into the coherent whole" (ibid., p. 15). And by synthesising the separated events and re-storying them as a whole story, I also believe that I had completed the hermeneutical circle of interpretation.

What follows, as I have described elsewhere (for example, Samah 2011a; 2011b; 2012; 2013), the stories of how I critically re-examined my teaching practice based on my experience as a teacher-practitioner during the four-month period of my research fieldwork. The experience stimulated "a new way of perceiving and thinking about (my) professional situation of practice" (Russell, 2005, p.200). It was also the time when I was in the midst. The time allowed me to examine the complexities I had to negotiate (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.63) - the purpose of my research, the transformation of teaching strategy that I attempted, and the relationships with my students who were also my research participants. Indeed, it all makes sense now when Dubnewick, Clandinin, Lessard

and McHugh (2017) mentioned that "resonant reverberations from prior research shaped further inquiries as it offers us, the authors, a place to locate our experienced past as essential to the inquiry process" (p.1). In addition, the recent work by Enosh and Ben-Ari (2015), Fitzpatrick and Olson (2015), as well as Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day (2012) gave me the assurance that by experiencing such complexity had allowed me to gain deeper understanding of what reflexivity was while searching for meanings. Not only that, I also learned the importance of having to experience reflexivity because, as highlighted by Berger (2013), it is "a prime measure used in qualitative research to secure credibility, trustworthiness, and nonexploitative research by self-scrutinization of the lens through which the researcher views the phenomenon studied" (p.229). Most importantly, I now learned that the significant events and the emerging issues during my inquiry field was my true north that influenced my decision about which path to choose while continuing the navigation of my future research journey.

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