

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Making of a Lecturer at the Singapore Polytechnic (1965-68) and the Sheffield Polytechnic (1968-71)**

When the unit of inquiry is the living 'I' Whitehead (1989), 'I' study my practice as I try to understand and improve it. My research generates a theory of myself ( Mcniff & Whitehead 2000-p. 14).

This chapter presents my living educational theory as a new lecturer in construction subjects in two polytechnics. At that time I was mainly concerned with the acquisition and transmission of technical knowledge, skills and attitudes in direct teaching. This chapter is divided into two parts: (1) the Singapore Polytechnic experience mainly concerned with the acquisition of a professional qualification in Building (content-knowledge) and (2) the Sheffield Polytechnic experience mainly concerned with the development of pedagogical-content-knowledge (Shulman 1986). I improved my professional self mainly through self-study (Hamilton et al, 1998).

#### **Part One: A Lecturer at the Singapore Polytechnic (1965-68)**

**Self -study is about the learning experience that is embedded within teachers creating new experiences for themselves and for those they teach (Hamilton et al 1998, p. 6).**

Immediately after completing the Technical Teachers' Certificate at the Huddersfield Technical Teachers' College and obtaining a technician qualification in Building, (**appendix 18**), I joined the Singapore Polytechnic as an instructor and a technician. I left this place as a lecturer and a professional builder with commendations for excellence in teaching from the external moderator from the UK. However, this success was marred by the tragic illness of my son indicating hazards of working in developing countries. The first part presents mainly my living educational theory of qualifying as a professional builder through self-study (Hamilton et al 1998) and the use of the connective curriculum (Young 1998) integrating theory with practice.

### **Recruitment**

Soon after graduating from the Huddersfield Technical Teachers' College, I got my first teaching post at Singapore Polytechnic as a senior-instructor in construction technology and management in the school of Architecture and Building. The head of the school, an architect from Great Britain, interviewed me while he was on leave in England. I accepted this post mistaking it for senior-lectureship in England. In fact the post was equal to an assistant lectureship in England. This incident shows that I was a novice in teaching as a new profession.

### **The Context outside the Polytechnic: Living Environment in Singapore**

I lived in a very unstable and dangerous environment. The first day I reported to the Polytechnic, Singapore was seceded from the rest of Malaysia by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia. The Polytechnic was immediately closed from fear of riots. At home my 2-year daughter was ill and she had to be hospitalised for a week. There was always a risk from Indonesia of war with Malaysia. Occasionally there were bombs planted here and there. Lee Kuan Yiu, who became the Prime Minister of independent Singapore, worked extremely hard in the early days when there were dangers to Singapore from several directions, including from Mainland China.

### **The Context Within Singapore Polytechnic and the School of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Building.**

The Singapore Polytechnic existed before polytechnics emerged in the UK. At that time 90% of the teaching staff were expatriates from many countries. For instance, the principal of the polytechnic was a Canadian and the head of my school was from England. I was placed in the school of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Building.

I was situated in the Building Section with six lecturers and sixty students on a three-year full time course leading to a technician diploma and a four-year full-time course leading to a professional diploma. The lecturers were responsible for planning, teaching and examining their own programmes under the leadership of a senior lecturer. The polytechnic had a good infrastructure including buildings, equipment and Library.

### **My Role and Contributions towards Personal Development and the Development of Teaching in the Building Section**

I enjoyed considerable autonomy to choose my own subjects to teach construction technology, construction economics and management to preservice students on both full-time programmes mentioned above. Highly motivated students and experienced teaching staff provided incentive and support for professional growth. Such a context was a blessing for a beginner in the teaching profession.

I enjoyed congenial relations with colleagues, students and the management. My significant professional contributions in teaching included the introduction of construction economics as a new subject and a commendation for a good examination paper from Prof. Sidwell of Herriot Watt University, who was our external examiner. At that time I was mainly interested in qualifying as a professional builder. I was mainly concerned with the self. Concerns for the task and the impact had not surfaced fully (Fuller and Bowen 1975).

### **Becoming a Professional Builder through Self -Study**

Qualifying as a Chartered Builder was the highlight of my stay in Singapore. I was not fully qualified as a Professional Builder when I arrived in Singapore. Unlike the technicians, the professionals such as architects, quantity surveyors and builders are the leaders of professional knowledge. In addition to teaching building subjects I also prepared myself for the final part two examination of the Institute of Building to become a qualified builder. I took this examination from the UK while teaching in Singapore Polytechnic and passed it in my first attempt with four “A” grades. On passing this examination and with a professional qualification in teaching I was promoted from a senior instructor to a lecturer. This personal experience taught me that teaching in the FE/HE sector involved a high level of content knowledge and the ability to communicate it clearly. More importantly I learnt that effective teaching also implied continuous learning.

Passing this examination without any formal education and training was an outstanding achievement of a new teacher. I had known colleagues who passed this examination after several attempts. I used the following learning strategy to pass this examination in the first attempt.

*I already possessed a recent and a relevant industrial experience under a mentor in the UK. I gathered the appropriate theoretical knowledge from books and articles on constructional*

*management in professional journals. Teaching management subjects at the same time provided me with skills for the integration, consolidation and communication of the content knowledge. Past examination papers and the examination regulations provided me with the criteria used to assess the students' work in the examination.*

Unknown to me at that time I had successfully planned and implemented my own curriculum to generate my own professional knowledge in understanding and improving my teaching practice. Thus I had created my own living educational theory to become a professional educator in Building (Whitehead 1999). This type of curriculum making is needed for the lifelong learning of students and teachers in the future (Whitehead 1999, Young, 1998 and Bloomer, 1997). However, it took me many years to develop the present discursive consciousness of this phenomenon from further experiences and formal learning. At the end of this experience concern for pedagogical-content-knowledge replaced the concern for the content-knowledge.

### **A Dramatic Exit from Singapore**

Working overseas in developing countries can be a hazardous and an enjoyable experience. For instance, I remember my Singapore experience for considerable pleasure and pain. My success in qualifying as a professional builder brought immense pleasure and the serious illness of my young boy changed that pleasure into an extreme pain. After two years in Singapore I had a family tragedy. My son, who was born in Singapore, became seriously ill and later died after many years of family suffering. This tragic incident brought me back to England in 1968 to a lectureship at the Sheffield Polytechnic in the UK, the country of my permanent residence. I was only thirty years old without previous overseas teaching experience and knowledge of the promises and problems of working overseas. Prior knowledge of the problems and promises in overseas work might have averted the mistakes I made in my life.

## **Part Two: A Lecturer at the Sheffield Polytechnic (1968-71)**

**There is nothing more important to an individual committed to his or her own growth than a supportive environment (Senge, 1990).**

Although I came to Sheffield Polytechnic from Singapore Polytechnic with a professional qualification in building and a Technical Teachers' Certificate in teaching, I added

considerable depth to my teaching at the Sheffield Polytechnic. This section presents accounts of my reflective teaching (Ghaye & Ghaye 1998) to improve the quality of my pedagogical-content-knowledge (Shulman 1986; Mortimore 1999).

### **Recruitment**

The following narrative shows that the Sheffield Polytechnic seemed to have developed an excellent system to select members of the teaching staff but failed to understand the principles of human resource development as an integrated system comprised of carefully recruiting, inducting, supporting, appraising and training staff. The Sheffield Polytechnic interview remains a memorable event. I was invited to Sheffield one day earlier than the day of the interview. I had been booked to stay the night in a four star hotel where in the evening my future colleagues came for a few drinks and a social chat. Next day I met several of my future colleagues again for informal talks. Later in the day I had a formal interview with the head of the school who took me to meet the principal who offered me a lectureship in the school of Building and Civil Engineering. The authorities in the polytechnic carefully matched me with the available post but later failed to keep me in the department through lack of an adequate support and career prospects.

### **My Role**

This section presents my evolving sensitivity towards student learning needs and my desire to enhance my repertoire of teaching models. I taught construction technology, construction economics & management to full-time students studying for the Higher National Certificates, Diplomas and for the final parts 1 &2 examinations of the Institute of Building. Unlike the Singapore Polytechnic where I taught only the full-time pre-service students, in the Sheffield Polytechnic I taught both pre-service and in-service students from industry. Teaching pre-service and in-service students requires different levels of content-knowledge and different teaching strategies. Usually teaching full-time technical students without industrial experience is considered less problematic. These students do not challenge lecturers' technical knowledge of their subject and their use of the transmission model of teaching. In-service students tend to challenge their lecturers with their recent industrial experience and demand authentic learning situations from their lecturers. Thus I became aware of the need to acquire a repertoire of teaching-learning strategies to match the varying needs of students.

### **My Professional Contributions**

A lecturer's professionalism in his content-knowledge is often assessed by his ability to communicate his content-knowledge with his professional colleagues. I designed and successfully offered a short training programme on 'the Estimating Practices in the Building Industry of the UK' for professional Builders, Architects and Quantity Surveyors from the building industry. This course was a good indicator of the quality of my content-knowledge and pedagogical-content-knowledge in building subjects at that time. My other major contributions are listed below.

(1) I was able to achieve the highest number of passes in the Institute of Building examination in quantity surveying in England. I had developed my personal strategy to teach this subject.

(2) I received commendation from an external examiner for the quality of my examination paper in Quantitative Analysis. (See a similar commendation from an external examiner in the Singapore Polytechnic).

### **My Developing Professional Judgement in Teaching**

Although I had developed a considerable expertise in subject matter in constructional technology, I had much to learn about pedagogy. The following episodes of my developing professional judgement in teaching are indicators of my professionalism in teaching at that time. These episodes represent important dilemmas in teaching. From these incidents I learnt the following lessons which might be useful for new teachers.

1. Human relations are a prerequisite to successful communication.
2. Generation of authentic criteria to assess students' learning remains a contested issue.
3. I had to learn to manage the context.
4. Teacher performance evaluation in classroom teaching was a contested issue.

#### **(1) Tension in Relationship with a Student**

The first incident illustrates the need for establishing personal contact with new students before any teaching can take place. In fact human contact is a prerequisite in all kinds of communication amongst human beings. In this case a group of in-service adults from

industry were attending the first session in my class. There was a complete silence in the class with full attention to what I was saying. Suddenly two persons began to chat. I got annoyed and probably used harsh words to seek attention. Later I forgot all about this incident. About three months later a senior lecturer passed me a letter from a training officer of a building firm complaining about my attitude and ability to teach in a polytechnic. My colleague had full confidence in my ability. He asked me if I could handle this situation by myself or needed his intervention in this matter. I decided to deal with the situation personally.

By this time the student and myself had come to know each other better. I could not understand the reason for the student's complaint. When I approached the student for the explanation he almost broke down in tears. He narrated to me the incident of our first meeting. He told me that he got angry, as he knew little of me at that time. Consequently he sent a complaint to my department through his training officer. He was very sorry for his behaviour and promised to correct the situation. I never checked if the student corrected his mistake or not. However, I had learnt an important lesson from this incident. I must be particularly careful in my behaviour towards new students.

## **(2) Tension in Marking Students' Scripts**

The second incident concerns a long-standing issue in vocational education in determining authentic criteria for the assessment of student learning. In this incident I set an examination paper with model answers and a marking scheme. An unknown examiner moderated the examination papers at the national level. After the examinations I marked the scripts according to my marking schemes to find that all students had passed the examination. But to my dismay 25% of the students who passed the examinations obtaining minimum marks from parts of the examination questions. I failed these students on the grounds that if they entered industry they might harm their employers. When the marked scripts went to the external examiner he passed all the students with a note for me to follow my approved marking schemes in future.

From this incident I realised the strength and limitations of marking schemes often used in education to enhance the reliability in marking but with the possibility of decreased validity of the examination to assess learning. In professional practice the marking schemes are a source of tension amongst academics from education and professional educators from industry. My later experience as a consultant has shown that educators tend to look at

performance analytically and objectively whereas the practitioners assess holistically and subjectively. I have learnt to reduce this tension using both analytical and holistic criteria. Collaboration amongst the academics and the practitioners to establish the assessment criteria further reduces this dilemma. A deep understanding of student performance assessment is necessary for professional educators. A careless assessment of student performance can distort the curriculum and ruin students' lives.

### **(3) Performance Appraisal as a Lecturer**

Teacher performance appraisal in classrooms remains a contested issue. This incident occurred at a time when teacher performance appraisal was rare in the UK and it had not become an aspect of Human Resource Development. The head of my department decided to introduce 'Performance Appraisal' in his department to assist him in confidential report writing on his staff. According to this scheme the senior staff were to appraise the teaching of the junior staff. I argued that the lecturers were likely to be better teachers than their senior colleagues who spent less time in teaching and more in administration. Furthermore, the senior staff had no teaching qualifications. I proposed to conduct an experiment to test my hypothesis. An opportunity soon presented itself.

A team of us including lecturers, senior lecturers and the principal lecturers were teaching a short course for in-service professionals on a management course. At the end of the programme we gathered participant appraisal of our teaching. The results of the exercise were as I predicted. The lecturers obtained the higher ratings as compared to their senior colleagues. Consequently the idea of performance appraisal to prepare confidential reports was abandoned due to lack of validity. Although I had a high rating for frontal/direct teaching in the above appraisal, I had much to learn about teaching.

### **Tensions in Relationship with the Head of the Department in a Hierarchical Organisation Structure**

I had a cordial a relationship with colleagues but a sour relationship with the head of the school. Six months after I joined the department the principal invited me for a chat to check if I was adequately settled into my new job. I casually mentioned to him about my desire to be more involved in the activities of the department. The principal may have mentioned it to the head of the department who, in turn, mentioned to me in a lift that he would not offer me any opportunities to enhance my career. This head of the department never invited me to his office to provide feedback on my contributions to the department. Such information usually



reached me through my colleagues who respected and affirmed my work. Within this situation I seemed to have little chance of any career development. This case is a good indicator of the fact that I had not learnt to manage the stakeholders and the context and the Head of the School probably needed to learn about Human Resource Development.

### **The Emergent Image of the Self as a Lecturer**

I valued technical education only as a tool to enhance economic development. In the Singapore Polytechnic I taught pre-service students, whereas in the Sheffield Polytechnic I had developed a full confidence in teaching preservice and inservice students individually and in team-teaching. The short course for professionals in the construction industry was a good indicator of my professionalism in teaching at that time. However, I had not learnt to manage teaching contexts and my teaching experience was restricted to the transmission model of teaching.

### **Departure from the Sheffield Polytechnic to Hong Kong**

I decided to leave Sheffield Polytechnic in 1971 for two main reasons. Firstly, I seemed to have little chance for career development within the department under a head who did not appreciate my contributions. Career advance was important for me for personal and professional development. Secondly, I had developed an interest in education as a separate field of study. A senior-lectureship in teacher education in Hong Kong offered me with the opportunity to develop this new interest and to further my career. The next chapter presents how I made use of this opportunity for personal and social development. This chapter closed my career as a lecturer in construction technology and opened a new door into teacher education as a separate discipline for study.