Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice: Reflective Journal

Dr. Mike Diboll, July 2010

Reflection 1: UK Higher Education Authority Areas of Activity 1, *Design and Planning of Learning Activities and Programmes*, **also; Area 2**

Months before the moment to deliver the programmes came, I became aware that responsibility for the launch of BTC's Professional Development curriculum (E.1.0; E.5.1; E.5.2; E11.1 to E.11.11) was a very significant undertaking that would stretch my existing skills as an educator to the limit, requiring me to develop new skills 'in real time' as I worked.

Extensive observation of NIE's PD provision, along with focus groups of tutors highlighted:

- The language issue
- Indiginising core concepts and practices
- Morale and motivation issues with participants

Reflective Practice (Schön 1983) would clearly be a valuable tool to enable me to deliver the first round of PD programmes effectively.

During a recent "jigsaw" activity on collaborative learning, I put the participants into five groups of five, each group responsible for interpreting a different condition needed for CL (E.2.1, Arabic version E.2.2). The text was in English, but the participants' discussion, and subsequent presentation and writing was in Arabic. Working as a "guide on the side", I facilitated participants in the interpretation of the CL texts that went beyond translation to encompass the "cultural transplantation" (Dickins et al 2002: 32 and Evidences E.2.4 to E.2.16; E.3.0) of core concepts.

Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (1991), William Gudykunst on Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (2005), and Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (2001) provided theoretical insights into ways in which to reduce the shock of the (culturally) new when introducing these Bahraini teachers to innovative pedagogies.

By the end of the session, I had gained insights into the linguistic and cultural issues surrounding the development of effective PD session for Bahraini teachers. This was very much "new knowledge", and will be valuable in helping me to develop and manage PD programmes that are relevant and meaningful for Bahraini teachers (E.2.4 to E.2.16; E3.0).

Enabling participants to explore the text, reflect on its practical application in a Bahraini context, and produce their own Arabic equivalent was highly empowering, and this sense of ownership and empowerment in their own learning contributed in no small way to overcoming certain negative issues surrounding morale, motivation, and expectations (E.2.4 to E.2.16).

The challenge is: (a) to maintain the momentum of this reflection-in-action over subsequent sessions, and; (b) to devise a systematic means of recording reflections on participant-tutor interactions, and developing action plans based on these.

Reflection 2, UK Higher Education Authority Area of Activity 2, *Supporting Student Learning*, also; Area 4

Developing and maintaining an effective, participant-focused learning environment for BTC PD is challenging:

- not all classrooms are equipped for problem- and discovery-based participant-focused learning (E4.0)
- the regulations and procedures that control the nature of the multi-stakeholder BTC-UoB-MoE-NIE-EDB[1] partnership are still evolving and are often unclear (E.6.0, BTC PD regulations were still under discussion as BTC PD concluded for Semester 2, Academic Year 2009-10)
- participants have no choice but to attend PD sessions after work, since no permissions are granted to enable students to train during school times, thus working days that end in PD can stretch from 7.00-19.00 hrs
- participants often bring to the sessions negative assumptions and attitudes derived from earlier, unsuccessful experiences with in-service training.

Finally, there are the difficulties of implementing what, to use Douglas McGregor's terms, is a largely Y-Theory educational reform project in what remains an X-Theory organisational structure (Heil et al 2000).

There are ways in which the tutor can exert a powerful influence on participant dynamics within the classroom in such a way that facilitates student support and guidance in a positive learning environment. This is especially true when sessions are conducted in a collegiate peer-to-peer learning environment, in which participants take responsibility for their learning.

Implementing discovery- and problem-based learning at first proved challenging: many participants had little experience in this kind of learning. Sometimes, participants would complain about the slowness of this approach to learning, and expressed impatience with the changed participant-tutor roles: if the tutor didn't have all the answers, what was the point of his being there? (E.2.4, E.2.7 and E.2.16)

Listening to participants, I realised that this venting was part of a process through which these adult learners were re-orientating their roles as classroom participants. Participants gradually became more 'on-task', and the more active participants began to develop ways of drawing their more passive and reluctant colleagues into the PD activities (E. 3.0).

Whereas at first my insistence that "I don't have the answers" elicited confused looks, participants became increasingly eager to draw me into group discussions and activities,

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[1] BTC: Bahrain Teachers' College; UoB: University of Bahrain; MoE: Bahrain Ministry of Education; NIE, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technical University, Singapore; EDB, the Bahrain Economic Development Board

seeing me not so much as an "expert" as a colleague and a peer whose different experience could shed new light on familiar problems.

This experience led me to rethink my "teaching self" (Bosch, 16) in such a way as to create a more positive learning environment by becoming more supportive of the needs of mid-career Bahraini adult learners. Cultural, professional, and other defensive barriers began to break down the more I became a peer and a colleague offering different insights rather than a foreign "expert" possessing technically-rational knowledge (Schön 1983: 21) that they were expected to learn.

Thus, while it might not be possible for a tutor to substantially influence the big-picture organisational culture of the College, participant-centred learning strategies, combined with patience and cultural insight, can vastly improve the learning environment in specific classes.

This experience provides an example of how to develop "cultures-that-create", where the reconciliation of cultural difference through negotiation, accommodation and mutual understanding leads to positive outcomes (Hampden-Turner 2004: 36).

Reflection 3, UK Higher Education Authority Area 3, *Assessment and Giving Feedback to Learners*, also; Area 1

Saphier and Gower (1997: 459) begin their discussion of assessment with the observation "There is almost no correlation between grades in school and success in life". They then pose the question ". . .what is the point of any grading system?" as an introduction to the topic of "alternative assessment", and the need to measure "significant learnings" that are not necessarily measured by traditional forms of assessment.

The difference between "traditional" assessment and "alternative" assessment came home sharply to me while delivering two sections of the PD course *Collaborative and Cooperative Learning* at BTC, and co-ordinating the wider PD programme (E.2.3; E11.1 to E.11.10).

The courses as inherited from NIE Singapore are clearly structured around what might be termed "authentic assessment":

- project work replicates real-life learning situations in schools

- it is on-going throughout the course, with the largest part of the final grade being awarded for collaborative work done on a "sink or swim" basis

- the facilitator verifies learning and participants' progress in their project work throughout the course, rather than at the end of it, following a clear and topic-relevant set of assessment criteria that participants have had in the form of rubrics since the beginning of the course (E.2.3; E.5.1; E.5.2).

- the act of assessment is very much an evaluative "act of learning" (Saphier and Gower 1997: 480), "the most powerful enhancement of learning" being "feedback during learning" (Biggs and Tan 2002: 97).

Given the collaborative nature of the criteria against which participants are graded, and the professional development context of the courses, a Pass/Fail, or Complete/Incomplete model of assessment would seem to be most suitable (E.6.0). However, a mismatch between UoB regulations, MoE expectations, and the ethos of the NIE-derived courses means that PD modules are expected to be graded according to the UoB's system.

This system uses fine gradations between, for instance, the grades C-, C, and C+, each grade being separated by only three marks on a scale of 0-100 (E.6.0). The UoB system is set up for summative examinations using, for instance, multiple choice or right/wrong questions, wherein a score of 88 would earn the student an A-, while answering two more questions correctly to score 90 would earn the participant an A grade (E.7.1 and E.7.2).

This mismatch has a number of effects: it makes the assessment of PD overly complex, as the Ministry of Education rationalises all grades into either "Pass" or "Fail" in order to assess whether participants are eligible for the pay rise resulting from successful completion of a PD course. Further, it is hard to explain to participants why one person might have earned an A-, whereas another participant might obtain a B+. Moreover, it reinforces competitive, individualised approach to learning, and undermines the collaborative ethos we are trying to

create, and undermines the reflection and self-examination that is an important part of the individual work on this course (E.2.16).

Saphier and Gower point out, this kind of work can be hard and does not come without its costs: it can be "messy", "intimate", and "frighteningly subjective" (1997: 497). Complete/incomplete allows the facilitator to acknowledge the journey of self-discovery that the participant has made. This assessment schema merely indicates whether that journey is complete or not. An academic grading system on a scale of F to A complete with plus and minus grades imposes unnecessary value judgements on one person's "messy", "frighteningly subjective" journey when compared to another's.

Lastly, Biggs and Tan identify "assessing for structure, rather than for independent facts" as a key to creating an environment in which "deep learning" takes place; "emphasising depth of learning" is more important than mere "breadth of coverage". This sort of assessment helps build on participants' previous experience, and encourages "need-to-know" and curiosity (2002: 24-5). At present, while the NIE-derived, MoE endorsed the PD module does encourage all these things, while the UoB's method of assessment works against it (E.6.0).

The "big-picture" solution to this problem is to work towards achieving all-stakeholder constructive alignment on how best to harmonise assessment approaches to course learning outcomes so as to assure an effective participant learning experience. Having a leadership responsibility in PD I have a role in facilitating this alignment. In the meantime, I need to work as constructively as I can with participants to ensure they have positive experiences in collaborative learning, and that these experiences are reflected as accurately as possible given the assessment model I have to work with.

Reflection 4, UK Higher Education Authority Area 4, *Developing Effective Environments and Student Support and Guidance*, **also; Area 2**

Developing an effective learning environment and supporting participants' learning in BTC PD means tackling the language issue.

BTC regulations establish BTC as one of the few bilingual colleges within the UoB system, with Arabic as the "official" language of BTC, and English as a "professional "one (E.11.12). The 41 PD courses developed for in-service PD by NIE, Singapore, are entirely in English, and the NIE's 2008 concept paper on BTC PD makes no mention of the language issue (E.5.1).

In a PD participant survey carried out with four sections of the course *Collaborative and Cooperative Learning,* and two sections of *The Classroom Learning Environment*, over 50% of PD participants self-identified as either "speakers of Arabic only", or as "speakers of Arabic and another language other than English" (E.11.1).[2]

Most of the other participants identified as "bilingual Arabic-English"; however, a about 30% of these were English Language teachers, and even then English language abilities were in the "intermediate" ESL range. These findings supported by survey data indicating that around 70% of PD tutors taught in subject areas that are never or not normally taught in English, such as Arabic, Islamic Studies, Maths and Science (E. 12.0).

Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory stresses the importance of linguistic "convergence", where speakers of different languages and dialects converge by adapting their talk to each other's usages in order to create "in-groups" (1991, 8-9). I soon realised that this kind of convergence is exactly what is needed to create an effective learning environment in BTC PD, that minimising the perceived "foreignness" of the PD would also offer means of overcoming motivational and attitudinal difficulties. Likewise, the tendency towards linguistic "divergence", the use of languages and dialects to create "out-groups" posed a substantial threat to the coherence of BTC PD.

This convergence-divergence, in-out group dynamic has inter-Arab and inter-Bahraini dimensions as well as an Arab-non-Arab dimension. Arabic diglossia is a highly significant factor in Arab World education reform. As Maamouri notes:

> *"In the foreseeable future, perhaps in the next 2-3 decades, the diglossic situation in the Arab region could continue to produce dramatic widening of the ranges between the various Arabic colloquials and* fusha*. The fracture of the internal structure and dynamics of the Arabic linguistic continuum will have important consequences for education."* (1998: 72)

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[2] Subsequent data, derived from extending the data gathering to other PD sections changed the ratio so that the ratio of participants self-identifying as "Arabic only" speakers or "bilingual Arabic-English changed to around 50% for each category. Data collection is on-going; latest data can be viewed on www.surveymonkey.com Login: PDcoordination Password: faculty1 (case sensitive).

Arabic diglossia is subject to subtle variations that create in-groups and out-groups according to an interaction between a variety of ethno-confessional, socio-cultural, and socio-economic factors. This is particularly important in Bahrain, where ethno-confessional differences between the Shiite Baharnas and the Sunni Arabs are reflected in language, differences that are deeply intertwined with the dynamics of Bahraini politics, and the politics of the wider GCC and Middle Easter continuums, including highly charged ethno-linguistic situation in contemporary Iraq (Bassiouney: 2009, 105-111).

A non-native speaker of advanced Arabic, I communicate well in Modern Standard Arabic (*fus-ha)* and in Egyptian dialect[3]. During eight years' working in GCC HE I have acquired a listening ability in Gulf dialects, but such is in the complexity of regional dialects that participants can easily "lose me" linguistically, if they go deeper idiomatic and local language.

I adapted to this in the following ways (E.2.4 to E.2.16; E.3.0):

- delivering teacher talk in a mix of about 70% Arabic, 30% English, code-switching ("the alternating use of two or more recognisably different language variants within the same text" Dickins et al 2002: 233) for technical terms

- using about 90% MSA on the whiteboard

- allowing group discussions to take place in Bahraini dialect ("natural" language use is best for brainstorming), with presentations and demonstrations of teaching given either in standard languages (English or MSA)

- allowing coursework, lesson plans, posters &ct to be produced in Arabic

A lot of contemporary terms and concepts in Pedagogy and related fields have not been systematically Arabicised. Moreover, a lot of the English terminology in such fields, particularly that originating in North America relies on "concrete" metaphors derived from everyday experience, rather than Greek- or Latin-derived meta-language. While this makes pedagogic terms user-friendly in the English-speaking world, it also makes translating this terminology into Arabic very difficult when (as often happens) metaphors do not translate well across cultures. Literal translations of such concepts can be very misleading indeed.

One effective way around this problem was to get students to work collaboratively in group work to produce their own Arabicisations, indeed Bahrainisations, of English-derived concepts. Rather than translating (going from the language to the concept) the aim here was to support students in understanding the concept, then encourage them to express this in Arabic, using metaphors and examples derived from real Bahraini usage and experience, a form of "cultural transplantation"(Dickins et al 2002: 32; E.3.0).

This was highly successful. It produced very accurate and usable Arabicisations (E.2.4 to E.2.16), and also helped the participants and the tutor to bond via linguistic "convergence".

[3] Probably the most widely understood Arabic dialect; certainly the dialect most widely taught to non-native learners.

Accordingly, the atmosphere of these sessions was usually highly creative and dynamic, a real achievement when working after working hours PD with mid-career teachers.

These sessions were very useful for the participants, and I underwent a "deep learning process" (Biggs and Tan 2002: 24-5), gaining valuable insights into the relationship between language, learning and best practice in facilitation in a bilingual environment:

- there is a significant generational difference in the English-language abilities of the middle-aged, mid-career Bahraini teachers on PD courses compared to those of the much younger "globalised" Bahrainis on BTC's B.Ed. and PGDE programmes (E.12.0)

- while younger students generally have a very positive attitude toward English, this is not necessarily the case with older teachers, who sometimes see the spread of English in Bahrain as a form of "linguistic imperialism"

- "linguistic convergence" either on the level of language or dialect can have a very positive influence on morale, attitudes, and motivation, creating ownership of learning for the participants, and genuine inclusion for the tutor

- the Arabicisations of core concepts and practices that can come out of "convergence learning" between Arabic-speaking tutors and participants are a significant contribution to existing knowledge worthy of publication

- subsequent experience with tutors with little or no Arabic showed that linguistic convergence can still take place, and still be nearly as effective the convergence that takes place between an Arabic-speaking facilitator and Arabic-speaking participants (E.9.1)

- often a "gesture" towards convergence, such as allowing discussions to take place in Bahraini, or using some bilingual course materials, is all that is needed to facilitate attitudinal and behavioural convergence (E. 9.1)

Thus, focusing on the importance of language in tutor-participant relations is of value to other BTC PD faculty, especially non-Arabic speaking faculty, as it enables outsiders to achieve "convergence" in a cultural setting which values "a close long-term commitment to the member 'group'" where "loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules" (Hofstede *Cultural Dimensions: Arab World*).

Reflection 5. UK Higher Education Authority Area 5, *Integration of Scholarship, Research, and Professional Activities with Teaching and Learning*, also; Area 6

BTC is only in its fourth semester of operation, and PD at BTC is very much "start-up". Thus institutionally, research at BTC is still very much at an embryonic stage in terms of the identification of research priorities and procedures.

However, interacting with and listening to B.Ed and PGDE students, and PD participants, it has become clear that there are a number of potential areas at BTC where research could greatly enhance student/participant learning. The potential for multi-disciplinary research at BTC is huge (E.10.1 to E.10.5). However, the challenge is that time pressure from my teaching and administrative responsibilities at BTC inhibit the formulation of a traditional "academic" research agenda.

Accordingly, it is necessary to integrate scholarship and research as closely as possible into teaching-learning activities, so that PD sessions become what Donald Schön has described as a "Reflective Practicum" (1987: 305), where through RP the practitioner becomes "a researcher in the practice context" (1983: 68). Apart from being more time-efficient, this approach has a number of advantages:

- it breaks down the artificial barrier between theory and practice, the "practical" and the "academic"
- it locates the research enterprise in context (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007: 3)
- it ensures research feeds directly into practice, improving understanding and practice as an integral part of the research (Mcniff, Lomax, and Whitehead 2003: 124)
- it gives voice to students and participants, reducing the risk of them becoming mere "research objects" of the technically-rational "expert"
- it allows research to feed directly into course planning, design, development, and assessment

This has led me to collaboration with colleagues in a number of activities (E.10.1 to E.10.5):

- participation in conferences on bilingualism in Qatar and Oman
- participation in the conference "Plurilingual and Pluricultural Education: Focus on the Languages of the Wider World", at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
- a proposal for a three-year research project on language use in Bahrain education

Schön's "reflective practicum", together with Louis Cohen's "action research" model provide a basis on which research activities can be factored into day-to-day classroom activities to the greater benefit of both participants and practitioner.

I am striving to integrate activities such as demographic data gathering, course evaluation, participant and facilitator satisfaction surveys as closely into my practice (E.8.0; E.12.0).

Gathering and analysing this sort of basic data should help me to improve the participant learning experience at BTC, and lay the foundations for a more developed research agenda.

Reflection 6, UK Higher Education Academy Area of Activity 6, *Evaluation of Practice and Continuing Professional Development*, including 5 year Individual Professional Development Plan

PCAP has proved to be a very valuable experience, it has provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my practice at a time when I have been very busy working in a change-rich start-up context, it has also helped clarify my own professional development needs, in a SMART way: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Time-related (Boise State 2007: 2). This has led me to develop the following professional development plan:

Dr. Mike Diboll: Individual Professional Development Plan, July 2010

Overall Five-Year PD Goal

To achieve development in and convergence of my knowledge, skills and experience as a multi-disciplinary educator-scholar and as a manager in GCC education reform in order to work at senior HE management and/or consultancy in the region, or for UK HE institutions aiming to set up in the Gulf.

Goal 1:

To extend and develop "critical friendship groups" (Curry, 2008; also E.9.1 and E.9.2) at BTC, and set up procedures for regular peer observation in BTC PD

Why?

At present, it's very easy for work at BTC to become individualised and competitive; while it has many committees, the college lacks structures whereby colleagues can share and discuss experiences in a non-judgemental and constructive manner

How?

Network more effectively with colleagues; extend reflective and CF experiences from PCAP into BTC PD; supplement BTC PD's formal meetings with informal CFG gatherings; raise the matter of CFGs with the new BTC Dean, who will be in post from August 2010.

When?

Throughout academic year 2010-11, from September 2010; review and develop at end of academic year for 2011-12.

Goal 2:

To continue gathering demographic, satisfaction, and course/tutor evaluation data for BTC PD, and integrate data gathering activities into learning activities (E.8.0; E12.0)

Why?

A lot of the basic background data on participants has not been gathered by other stakeholders, knowing more about the profile of participants enables more effective course development and tutor preparation, and is therefore is beneficial to my PD.

Guiding participants in developing their own on-line surveys is a collaborative learning activity in its own right, and enhances participant ownership of the data gathering process, allowing insights into what is important from the participants' perspectives.

How?

Continue existing data gathering activities; develop these through CFG activities; encourage all BTC PD tutors to engage in data collection activities; raise awareness of the importance of this with the new Dean.

When?

From the commencement of 2010-11 BTC PD, review and develop for 2011-12.

Goal 3:

To undertake Action Research activities throughout the Academic Year, and encourage other BTC PD tutors to do the same.

Why?

PCAP has acted as a powerful stimulus motivating me to undertake much-needed AR in the area of language use and learning, and has given me a specific goal to aim for in completing the AR. This has certainly improved my practice, and raised my awareness of myself and my needs as a practitioner, the language needs of participants, and how I can meet them.

How?

Raise with new Dean ways of incorporating AR into faulty members' workloads and PMS (at present BTC lacks coherent PMS); critically appraise and reflect on 2009-10 PCAP AR to identify new AR questions.

When?

Beginning of the academic year 2010-11, review and develop for 2011-12.

Goal 4:

Embed academic research into my practice at BTC, writing for publication and participating in conferences.

Why?

BTC offers a very rich opportunity to undertake interdisciplinary research incorporating Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics, Development Studies, Management Studies, and Pedagogy. The fruits of research undertaken at BTC have the potential to make a genuine and valuable contribution to existing knowledge in these fields, and to inform practice regionally and internationally.

How and When?

- Raise the importance of research with the in-coming Dean; to-date the start-up nature of BTC has not been a research enabling environment
- Poster presentation accepted for Second East Asian International Conference on Teacher Education Research, Hong Kong Institute of Education, December 2010
- Proposals submitted for International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation, Madrid, November 2010, and; Redesigning Pedagogy, National Institute of Education, Singapore, June 2011
- Work closely with Dr. John McKeown, and Dr. Vanitha Saravanan, "critical friends" at BTC, to develop data derived from PD surveys, PCAP AR, and other sources into three academic papers for publication, September 2010-June 2012
- Work to initiate three-year socio-linguistic/pedagogic research project on language use in education in Bahrain; the plan for this has been developed and refined throughout 2010, a version of it was presented at the February 2010 SOAS conference on plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in international education; this led to SOAS making a serious expression of interest in becoming a research partner, but to-date I have yet to match this with an expression of interest on the part of UoB/BTC. Timeframe, 2010-14

Goal 5:

To work towards extended "M" level study in Education.

Why?

PCAP has been a very valuable learning experience, and I wish do build on this.

My CV really has two parallel strands: the comparative humanities and education. With regard to the former, I have a 1st class honours degree in Modern Languages, a PhD in Comparative Arabic-English literature, and postdoctoral publications. As for the latter, I have a CTEFLA, a PGCE in Postcompulsory Education and Training, City & Guilds NVQ Assessors' Awards, and (hopefully) PCAP.

An appropriate "M" level award would consolidate my theoretical knowledge as an educator and enhance my effectiveness as a practitioner. It would also better "balance" the two "halves" of my CV in terms of level of attainment. The best "M" level award would be one that brought the two "halves" closer together, creating conceptual and practical links between Middle Eastern focused comparative Humanities, and my work in GCC education reform.

How?

Options I have looked into to-date include:

- Continuing my PCAP studies at YSJ to Diploma and ultimately to MA level
- Studying for an MA in Comparative Education, Development Education, or a Masters of Teaching in Higher Education partly by distance learning at the IoE, University of London
- Studying for an MA in Development Studies at SOAS with an Education focus
- Studying for an MBA in HE Management at IoE
- Other Education/Development focused MBA

When?

Continue to research courses/modes of study, academic year 2010-11; two to three years "M" level study from September 2011.

Appendix

Joint Reflection on "Critical Friendships"; by Dr. Mike Diboll and Dr. John McKeown (E.9.1 and E.9.2)

Dr. Mike

One positive outcome of my PCAP participation has been the development of Critical Friend relationships. According to Maine Curry (2008: 735-6), Critical Friends Groups differ from more traditional Professional Development initiatives in that whereas the latter often involve b(r)ought-in outside experts offering generic, context-poor expertise, CFGs allow "insiders to construct their own learning through a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action", which is context-specific to the practitioners' place of practice. This has the advantages of having "[a] direct link to institutional practice", "[creating] a low-stakes forum in which to explore politically charged reform topics", encouraging "constructive controversy" and "curtailed teacher isolation" (769). This resembles Schön's idea of collaborative "layers of reflection", which have the power to "transcend normal educational practice", leading to new forms of collaboration, process and practice (1987: 326).

At the BTC, the evolving context involves a lot more than the use of b(r)ought-in external expertise, a "quick fix" frequently found in GCC-region education reform. However, the utility of such expertise is seriously constrained unless it can be reconstructed. The BTC is rich in formal fora in which practice is discussed and planning takes place. Thus, there are many traditional style committees at BTC, perhaps too many. These adhere to a strict procedural format, and are perceived to be "high-stakes" gatherings in which it would be inadvisable to openly discuss topics deemed to be "political".

The complexity of these interactions is further determined by a complex array of cross-cultural interactions that bring together North American/Northern European, GCC, non-Gulf Arab, South Asian African, and Far Eastern cultural practices, assumptions, and perspectives. This cross-cultural aspect to BTC's professional interactions is the "elephant in the room" tacitly acknowledged.

CFGs provide a "low risk" forum for creative, experimental, and "low-risk" interactions around perceived "high-risk" topics connected to differences in organisational and national/ethnic culture in the developing context of professional practice at BTC. Of key importance is the diversity and mutuality of the CFG, its "low-stakes" status, the fact that it is experiment-tolerant, honors diversity, and shares professional commitment, and concentrates on education reform (Curry 2008: 769).

Focusing on specific concerns and practices of the PCAP allows discussion in a more constructive way. Nevertheless, there are still real barriers; cross-cultural communication, and the ways in which collegial interaction around the PCAP tasks form around cultural groupings.

Dr. John

In this context, I had wondered about how to facilitate my learning and was intrigued by the use of learning groups. Tried as I might I couldn't connect successfully with the group I was assigned, and that could be for many of the reasons listed. During the organizing the content of a PD course, I had been working collegially with the Head of PD, Mike, and in the process developed a critical friendship. From there I began to see the vital role that the CF plays.

I am discovering that reflection is best not carried out alone. Mike provides a mirror to facilitate reflection as he knows the context and at the right time can feed in suggestions for further reflection. An additional benefit is that the quality of reflection is deepened and writing improved, avoiding some of the clichés and surface responses that had become fossilized.

It also adds to the richness of source, as Mike is developing a PD program and that corresponds to some of the work being done in TP development and dovetails on a number of issues including BTC context, cross-cultural language and decision making issues.

This is an opportunity to sharpen initial reactions which may be superficial and connect to realities related to teaching and learning and find ways to improve a situation or adapt to it.