

Taboos, Censorship, and Student-Centered Learning: A Critical Review of the Melayu Islam Beraja and its Implications to Liberal Education

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ABSTRACT

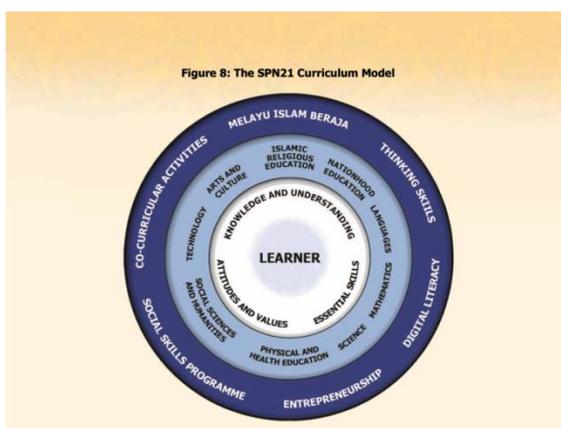
This paper critically reviews the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) national philosophy of Brunei and its implications to student-centered learning (SCL) paradigm. It uses Ralph Tyler's Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction in reviewing SCL teaching and learning assumptions in relation to that of MIB's national philosophy. In this paper, I present my personal teaching experiences in a private higher education institution in Brunei. Reflexivity is given focus by presenting my experiences as a student in a teacher-centric and learner-centered setting, and from being a teacher in a learner-centered setting in the Philippines and the adjustments I had to make in my first year of teaching in Brunei. I pointed possible issues in the integration of SCL and MIB and its implications to higher education pedagogy. Ultimately, this reflexive account aims to generate discussions about SCL as a paradigm its adaptability in different contexts, and the importance of academic freedom.

Keywords: SCL, student-centered learning, MIB, higher education pedagogy, learning paradigm, ralph tyler, academic freedom

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

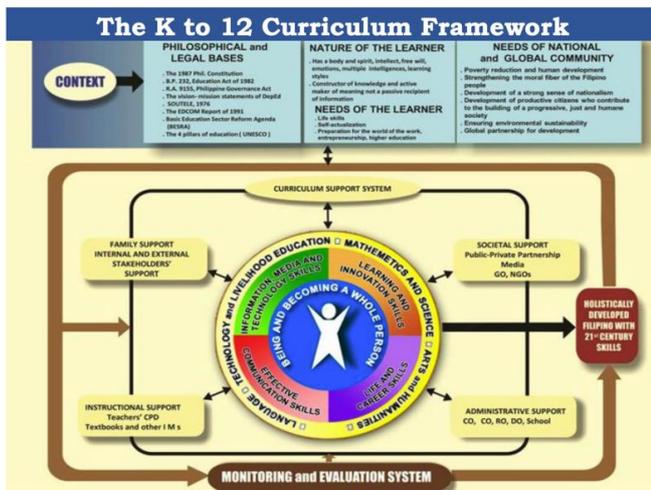
The national system of education in Brunei has undergone various reforms since formal schooling began in 1912. Though Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) was first introduced in the 15th century by Brunei's first Sultan, Awang Alak Betatar (Thoriquttyas et al., 2021), it was only in 1984 when Brunei achieved full independence that MIB was standardized as a national philosophy (bin Muhd Sahari, 2019; Muriadi et al., 2018; Sahari, 2018). The structure and management of the education system in Brunei cannot be separated from its national philosophy which puts emphasis on its Malay heritage, Islamic religion, and the preservation of the monarchy. This is evidenced through the curriculum model of Brunei's SPN21 or the National Education System for the 21st century. This model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. SPN21 Curriculum Model



On the other hand, the education system in the Philippines has also undergone reforms. The most recent is the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (EBEC), locally known as the K to 12 curriculum. Its most distinctive feature is the addition of senior high school which entails an additional two years of basic education for Filipino students. EBEC's curriculum model is presented in Figure 2. Both SPN21 and EBEC aim to produce globally competitive citizens. Also, both models put the learners at the center of teaching and learning. However, since SPN21 adheres to MIB, how the learners are seen differs in each curriculum model. Learners in SPN21 are seen as subjects who must be loyal and obedient to the monarchy, whereas learners in EBEC are seen as autonomous constructor of knowledge and active maker of meaning.

Figure 2. EBEC Curriculum Model



It is within the difference in how learners are viewed that I will present my review. The comparison of my teaching experiences between the Philippines and Brunei must be in the context of its governing education systems. Though the presented discussions above are within the context of basic education, and my teaching experiences in both countries are solely in tertiary education, it must be made clear that the basic education systems of both countries influence higher education institutions. In the Philippines, general education (GE) courses offered in colleges and universities changed after the first batch of K to 12 graduates entered their tertiary level. This is because what used to be GE courses offered in the university level were brought down to senior high school at the advent of EBEC. Hence, new courses that are interdisciplinary now comprise the GE courses in Philippine colleges and universities. In Brunei, all educational institutions, regardless of level, are required to adhere to MIB. These variations are central to my experience in my first year of teaching in Brunei.

JCHS and FEU Partnership

Jerudong Park Medical Centre College of Health Sciences (JCHS) is a partnership between Jerudong Park Medical Centre (JPMC) and Far Eastern University (FEU). This partnership arose out of Brunei's need for competent healthcare workers. FEU, as one of the leading universities in the Philippines when it comes to nursing education, partnered with JPMC in order for the school to materialize. The partnership between FEU and JPMC stipulates that FEU must provide teaching personnel. I was one of the four faculty members who were offered secondment contract to teach in Brunei. The faculty members are divided into GE faculty and health sciences faculty. I am one of the two GE faculty members who will handle the GE courses in the Foundation of Science certificate course of JCHS. The courses JCHS offer are similar to some of what FEU offers. These courses are College Academic Skills in English, Mathematics in the Modern World, Speech Communication, Purposeful Communication, Applied Ethics in Contemporary Times, Culture, Society,

Ideas, and Innovation, Science, Technology and Society, and Scholarly Inquiry. JCHS's opened its first year of operation last October of 2022 with 60 students as its first intake. These students are enrolled in the Foundation of Science Certificate which run for two semesters and upon successful completion, they may proceed to the nursing degree program. Students must complete this course successfully before they can be eligible for the nursing program.

At the onset, the instruction was for us to deliver the lessons in the same manner that we originally do in FEU – in a liberal and student-centered way. However, halfway through the first semester was when I encountered a problem precisely for delivering the lessons in the same manner that I usually did in FEU. This problem will further be discussed in the findings part of this paper.

Purpose Of The Study

This paper critically reviews MIB vis-a-vis student-centered learning (SCL). This is in no way an attempt to disparage or to promote any educational system or institution, instead, I presented my experiences with the goal of opening further discussions that will contribute to improving pedagogy, alignment of beliefs and practices, improvement of assessment practices, and the preservation of academic freedom. I utilized Ralph Tyler's (2013) *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* in my analysis of MIB. This analysis is in relation to my own educational leanings. Having come from a progressive university in the Philippines, I was exposed to various teacher training and retooling seminars. One of the staple reading materials is Barr and Tagg's (1995) *From Teaching to Learning*. This material, along with the trainings and seminars, are what allowed me to form my own understanding of what SCL should be. This recognition of presuppositions is what I will use in driving reflexivity as my primary method for this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ralph Tyler's Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction

Ralph Tyler proposed four fundamental questions that must be answered in analyzing and interpreting the curriculum and instructional program of an educational institution. These questions are:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

I will use the first two questions in my analysis of MIB and SCL. I opted to not include the third and fourth question since this paper is not concerned with the evaluation of both MIB and SCL. Though MIB is more of a national philosophy than an educational program, one cannot separate MIB and the management of the education system of Brunei since it is closely related to the presence and development of Islam in the country (Thoriquttyas et al., 2021). Furthermore, Johns (1975), states that the educational model trajectory of a country is akin to its national ideology and philosophy. Seeing MIB as a unit of analysis, in relation to SCL, will allow for me to compare the two paradigms and more clearly present MIB's implications to education.

MIB as a Basis for the National Education System for the 21st Century in Brunei

MIB is claimed to have been first introduced by Sultan Awang Alak Betatar, Brunei's first Sultan, in the 15th century (Melayong, 2016; bin Awang Juned et al., 2017). It was only when Brunei, achieved full independence from the British protectorate that MIB was realized as the national philosophy (bin Muhd Sahari, 2019; Muriadi et al., 2018; Sahari, 2018). Hence, all educational institutions in Brunei, from primary

to tertiary, are required to integrate the values of MIB in their instructional programs (Thoriquttyas et al., 2021). Furthermore, in the same study, Thoriquttyas et al. (2021) makes the connection between MIB and two other educational philosophies namely perennialism and progressivism. MIB is a perennial educational philosophy in the sense that it aims to preserve the Malay and Islamic values that MIB is based on. The evidence that they used to support the claim that MIB is progressivist is its openness to foreign languages (English, Arabic), and the requirement that instructors must wear coats when teaching. However, Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested that there is some danger in trying to mix two belief systems i.e., perennialism and progressivism, as these beliefs systems would have different assumptions when it comes to how they see the learners, the subject matter, the teacher's role, and the aims of education. Mixing belief systems, therefore, could lead us into counter-productive actions inside the classroom.

There is evidence, however, that MIB and the Brunei education system in general, is open to modernity in terms of subject matter and instructional materials. The National Education System for the 21st Century (SPN21) recognizes the rapidly changing global economy and society and there is admission that what is relevant today might not be relevant in the future. Hence, SPN21 prepares its students to be lifelong learners who are equipped with thinking skills that are relevant to 21st century needs. As presented in the SPN21 curriculum model, the learner is at the center of teaching and learning activities, however, how the learner is viewed through the lens of MIB is different from how learners are viewed in other learner-centered curricula. In the Philippines, one of the goals of education is so students can achieve self-actualization. In MIB, students should be obedient and loyal to the monarchy (Sahari, 2018; Saunders, 2013). Following Tyler's fundamental questions, I should, therefore, look into how this particular goal is being achieved by SPN21.

SPN21 states that the delivery of instruction should be more 'student-centered' (p. 86). In comparison with the pre-SPN21 curriculum, pedagogy in SPN21 is directed towards diverse methods and techniques that are based on 'Fun, Play, and Learn More' teaching approach. This change is a move away from the traditional teaching method where teachers are seen as the sole source of knowledge in the classroom and a step towards seeing students as co-constructors of knowledge (Weimer, 2002). However, since MIB socializes students into Brunei's highly stratified society, it risks promoting student passivity (Burns, 1998; Clynes & Henry, 2004; Saxena, 2009; Barry, 2011).

The goals of education based on MIB and the pedagogy by which they are being achieved will be compared to their counterparts in the Philippines, this is so I can provide a more complete picture of my teaching experiences in both Brunei and the Philippines.

Barr and Tagg's From Teaching to Learning

The learning paradigm by Barr and Tagg (1995) challenged the traditional instructional paradigm. It offers different assumptions on how learners are viewed, the role of the teacher, the role of the institution, and the role of the subject matter. The learner is seen as an active participant and co-constructor of knowledge. This is different in the traditional view of the student where the student is seen as a passive recipient of knowledge that will be transferred from the teacher to the student. In the traditional paradigm, the teacher's role is to be the source of knowledge whereas in the learning paradigm, the teacher is a designer of learning materials, and their primary role is to be the facilitator of the construction of knowledge. The institution itself is seen to learn from its students in the learning paradigm, this allows for the continued possibility of improvement after each batch of students graduate. The content, or the subject matter is also seen differently as the learning paradigm has different epistemological assumptions compared to the traditional paradigm. Content is seen as a vehicle to learning and not the end all be all of the teaching and learning process. Content, therefore, becomes the means to an end instead of being an end in itself (Weimer, 2002).

SCL, is also seen as a liberating pedagogy as it takes power away solely from the teacher and distribute it

equally in the classroom between the students and the teacher (Weimer, 2002). This is a move away from the traditional view that teachers are liberators of students from idiocy (Culala & De Leon, 2019). The goal of SCL is to produce graduates equipped with skills that will allow them to be independent and autonomous learners (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This goal is achieved through pedagogies that allow for the learners to construct their own knowledge and be active participants in the process (Weimer, 2002).

The K to 12 curriculum of the Philippines is constitutionally mandated to be learner-centered and constructivist through Republic Act No. 10533 (RA 10533). Ideally, this should entail eliminating practices that do not align with the view that learners are co-constructors of knowledge. For instance, since in an SCL view, students are not seen as empty receptacles to be filled with knowledge by the teacher. Therefore, the lecture method is not an effective way of teaching since lectures require students to be passive listeners to whatever their teacher is lecturing. This is in line with what Barr and Tagg’s (1995) warning that we should not integrate old practices if we are trying to shift to the new paradigm.

Though Brunei’s SPN21 and the Philippines’ EBEC both put the learner at the center of the teaching and learning process, how the learners are viewed spells the difference between the two curricula. The alignment of assumptions and practices is more visible in EBEC compared to SPN2. This is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. View of the Learners SPN21 and EBEC

View of the learners:	EBEC	SPN21
How learners are seen	independent, autonomous, has free will	subjects of the monarchy
How learners should be taught	Constructivist, learner-centered pedagogy	
What learners should be at the end	Equipped with 21st century skills	
	Independent, capable of self-actualization	Loyal and obedient to the king

Censorship, Taboos, and Student-centered Learning in Brunei Darussalam

MIB is claimed to have been Brunei’s national philosophy since the fourteenth century (Melayong, 2016; bin Awang Juned et al., 2017). However, western scholars contest that MIB is a recent and fictitious construct that was designed by Brunei’s elite to maintain royal power and silence dissent (Horton, 1994; Gunn, 1997; Talib, 2002; Cleary & Wong, 2016). According to Black (2020), there is a variety of laws and regulations that ensures no negative statements are made against the Sultan, his family, the national religion, the government, or MIB itself. Apart from this, debates and alternative views are also discouraged (Black, 2020). Further, the state’s monopoly over Islam, is perhaps, its most powerful tool in maintaining the status quo (Müller, 2015). This monopoly allows for the state to dictate which topics can and should be taught and which topics teachers should strive for their best to stay away from.

Apart from censorship laws, the state’s monopoly over Islam also allows for them to decide which topics are taboo and which topics are not. In the context of liberal education – on which the GE program of JCHS is based, taboos are in direct contradiction. The liberal thought that freedom of expression is paramount, and that the classroom should be a marketplace of ideas is only plausible if all points of view have the same opportunities to be heard (Applebaum, 2003). Also, if there is a monopoly on who should identify and assign which knowledge is essential and must be learned, power is not shared – this is, in turn, a teacher-centered practice (Culala & De Leon, 2019).

This is in no way an endorsement of EBEC and a put down of SPN21 and/or MIB. This is not an evaluation

of their implementation, instead, this is a review of what they are claiming to be. Adherence to censorship laws and by extension to MIB, allows for private institutions such as JCHS to exist and provide education to students. It also helps, in my experience, for teachers to stick to each lesson's intended learning outcomes. On the other hand, although EBEC is a welcome change for progressive educators, a significant number of teacher practices can still be considered as teacher-centric (Paras, 2020). However, in terms of alignment of espoused beliefs and practices, EBEC is more aligned to the tenets of SCL.

Reflexivity as a Method

Reflexivity has grown important in the world of research (Fook, 1999). From being a mere 'consideration' to be aware of to guarantee that the researchers' interpretation of data is not too 'subjective' (Fook, 1999), reflexivity is now, at least for qualitative researchers, not conceived as a shortcoming for a research's lack of objectivity, instead it is now seen as rooted in respect for and valuing a research's subjectivity (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019).

Part of the challenges in conducting reflexive research is the ambiguity that comes with exactly what reflexivity is (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019). Even those who write about reflexivity as a legitimate research method admitted that they used to conflate reflexivity with reflectivity (Fook, 1999). Fook (1999) offers a simple explanation regarding the difference of the two wherein she described reflexivity as a position and reflectivity as a process. Reflectivity as a process is when a practitioner reflects upon the influences of their assumptions and actions in a given situation, and the result of this whole process should be a change in a professional's practice (Carter, 1976). This process allows reflectivity to become a research method that allows a professional to look into their own practice in order to improve it. Reflexivity, on the other hand, is all about the researcher but not just the researcher. Rosaldo (1993), states that knowing involves the whole self, research, then, involves the whole self. The self, however, cannot be alone in an island. I, as a researcher 'experience in context' (Fook, 1999). Reflexivity, therefore, is whatever effects I have on the context in which I am, and that context affects my research. Reflexivity is all about me, but not just me.

Reflexivity has many purposes which includes minimizing a researcher's subjectivity, recognizing it, justifying it, capitalizing on it (Gentles et al., 2014). It is my goal to capitalize on my subjectivity as this paper is using my teaching experiences in two different institutions. However, doing so is not without its challenges, and I have taken measures in order to address these challenges by following Finlay's (2002) advice to find the right balance between personal disclosures and other voices. Following the idea that reflexivity is not just about me, I also included, apart from my background and training, my personal experiences and motivations as a way of explaining the decisions and actions I made during the entire research process, as suggested by Finlay (2002). I, therefore, reflected on my expectations, assumptions, and conscious and unconscious reactions to contexts and data (Walsh, 2003; Dowling, 2006; Gentles et al., 2014).

METHODOLOGY

In presenting my research findings, I provided a reflexive account of my experiences. First as a student in a teacher-centric classroom, then as a student in a learner-centered classroom, as a teacher in a progressive university, then lastly, as a seconded employee in newly inaugurated higher education institution in another country. I used these experiences to explain my assumptions and motivations as suggested by various reflexivity advocates (Walsh, 2003; Dowling, 2006; Gentles et al., 2014). These experiences also served as a justification for the lens that I used in critically reviewing the MIB as a national philosophy and its implications to liberal education. I also turned to these experiences in putting forward my claim that SCL is a belief system, rather than a mere classroom approach, therefore, it should not be mixed with other belief systems as this mixture will be counter-productive in teaching and learning transactions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From a Student in a Teacher-centric classroom to a Teacher in a Learner-centered Environment

In 2009, I was in my second attempt of finishing my fourth year in high school. At that time, a student's fourth year is the last year of high school, and everyone must complete it in order to be eligible for college admission. This was my fifth school in 3 years. I used to bounce around government schools because each school seemed to have a problem with my behavior. During this time, I thought that schooling and I will never have a harmonious relationship. Not to brag, but I never had any problems with academics but for some reason, I never got along with most of my high school teachers. As a student, I was very inquisitive and whatever pops in my mind, I had to speak up about it. For some teachers, this was disruptive and disrespectful. I would be told to stay quiet until the end of the lesson, and whatever questions I may have about it, I have to ask until the teacher allows me to. Most of the time, my questions would not be entertained and the reason for this would either be that there is not enough time for the teacher to answer my question, or the teacher deems my question irrelevant to what they are trying to teach. Over time, being told to wait until the end of the lesson only to be refused became too much to bear for me so I resorted to speaking out of turn. This led to being ostracized by most of my teachers with one even going as far as offering to exempt me from all class activities and giving me a passing grade so long as I don't attend their classes anymore. I would frequently be commanded to go out of the classroom because I am being 'disruptive'. This experience spells out most of my high school student life. My second attempt of finishing my fourth year in high school was only successful because I had to transfer from a public school to a private school. In my experience, teachers are more accommodating in private schools probably because students are seen as paying customers instead of someone availing of free government services. This led me to internalize the belief that I will never be a successful student in a formal school setting.

After a brief stint in the service industry, I decided to give education another try. This was when I enrolled in, ironically, the teacher education program of FEU. To say that I was culturally shocked would be an understatement. I have never experienced being around a student-centered environment before, so I was expecting my college experience to be pretty much the same as my high school experience. However, I could not be more mistaken. My whole view of the educative process changed as my interactions with my college teachers grew. I did not change from being an inquisitive student, and some of the bad habits I developed in high school such as speaking out of turn was still with me. However, for the similar things that I was being punished for in high school, I was being praised for in college. My college teachers were actually celebrating the type of 'disruptive' student that I was. For the first time in my student life, I was given an equal platform to share my ideas and there is an actual exchange of opinions between me and my classmates, and me and my teachers. Also, instead of outrightly rejecting my questions as irrelevant and out of topic, my teachers were actively processing my train of thought as to why I think my questions are related to the topic.

It is worth noting, however, that during this period, I have no knowledge of the existence of different educational paradigms, so my view was limited to thinking that the world of education is split between good teachers and bad teachers. That is why at the onset, my only motivation in wanting to become a teacher is that I did not want to be like some of my high school teachers. As I interacted with my college teachers, I then had different role models that I look up to until now. It is not until I graduated that I became exposed to reading materials about educational paradigms. Right after graduation in 2018, I was offered a teaching assistant position in FEU. The GE director at the time was one of my professors. In short, I was only exposed to reading materials about how to become a better teacher, and I was only offered a teaching assistantship in the university because one of my professors believed that a 'disruptive' student can be an effective educator. This is also the year when the SCL philosophy of teaching became a university policy for GE courses. Before this year, it was only at the discretion of each teacher if they want to teach within a certain paradigm.

A teaching assistant's job include facilitating GE courses and assessing students' outputs. This is my first experience of FEU's liberal education philosophy and student-centered way of teaching. Before our deployment, all teaching assistants were required to undergo a training program where we were trained to be effective facilitators and where we were discouraged to resort to lecturing as a teaching method. The reading materials for this training sessions included Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Weimer's *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, Barr and Tagg's *From Teaching to Learning*, Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School?*, and Doyle's *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-centered Environment*. I attribute my formation of beliefs regarding SCL to these materials and to the various training sessions and retooling seminars that I had to attend as a faculty member of FEU Manila. My conception of what SCL should be, therefore, is heavily leaning towards the Western tradition.

Right after obtaining my master's degree, I was offered the position of coordinator for students' academic concerns. I consider this a complete turnaround from being the 'problem student' in high school to being the one who listens to students' academic concerns.

Teaching General Education – Philippine Experience

The GE experience of FEU is anchored on the liberal idea that “*No one gets to be a human unaided. There is not enough time in a single lifetime to invent for oneself everything one needs to know in order to be a civilized human*” (Ciardi, 1976). In FEU, I always introduce GE courses as platforms on which students can learn, relearn, and unlearn previously held assumptions. GE courses are focused on skills such as idea generation, reflection, question formulation, synthesis, contextualization, responsible technology use, responsible inquiry, and citizenship. Apart from this, all FEU courses, GE or professional are supposed to be integrated with FEU's core competencies which are consisted of soft and hard skills like critical thinking, collaboration, creative thinking, problem solving skills, life-long learning, communication skills, discipline-specific knowledge, and digital skills. In short, FEU GE being focused on skills development sees content as vehicle to arrive at developing skills (Weimer, 2002). As a teaching assistant, I was exposed to these courses through the facilitation of learning material under the supervision of a seasoned faculty.

After obtaining my master's degree, I was afforded the same luxury that all higher education teachers in the Philippines enjoy – academic freedom. This entails the privilege of choosing course content and assessment methods at my total discretion so long as the courses' materials and assessment activities achieve the expected learning outcomes that are recommended by the Philippines' Commission on Higher Education (CHED). I present in Table 1, the learning outcomes of the two courses that I was able to teach both in the Philippines and in my first semester of teaching in Brunei.

Table 1 CASE and MWM Learning Outcomes

College Academic Skills in English (CASE) Learning Outcomes	Mathematics in the Modern World (MWM) Learning Outcomes
1. Organize ideas in processing diverse genres of reading materials.	1. Describe the nature of mathematics through various forms of communication.
2. Critique print, broadcast, and social media resources through argumentation and reflection.	2. Criticize and formulate arguments using mathematical concepts and reasoning.
3. Evaluate arguments embedded in multimodal texts based on truthfulness and validity of claims.	3. Recognize the importance of mathematics in other areas by utilizing mathematical concepts to solve real-life problems.
4. Defend a position about an issue through written and oral communication.	4. Appreciate mathematics and its nature by relating its uses in everyday experiences.

5. Formulate thought-provoking questions based on schema and presented information.	
6. Gather information as a means to support assertions and reflections.	
7. Apply argumentation skills in academic thinking and writing and reflect on one's thinking skills as they progress in the course.	

Teaching GE in FEU is not without its challenges. In every beginning of the semester, I have found myself repeatedly explaining the student-centered philosophy of teaching to students whose faces tell me that they do not understand everything that I am saying. Patiently, I bring them along the journey of shifting to a new paradigm, my explanations usually start with me telling them that this is an adjustment that they will have to embrace, and it is not going to be an easy one since most of their schooling experience have been in the instructional paradigm. I emphasize the importance of perpetuating a reading culture in their university experience so that all our classroom engagements will be that of a discussion where we can freely exchange ideas. These explanations usually end with me saying that the teaching and learning process in a student-centered environment is a shared responsibility between the teacher and all the students. However, even with these explanations, some students still resist the learning paradigm, and in cases that some of my students do not read or do not participate in the class discussions, I am very grateful to have a fall back on what Freire (1996) said about the students as the oppressed group in the classroom. I present an image to those students that they have been oppressed for too long and this is the reason why they are now afraid of freedom and freedom would require for them to be autonomous and responsible for their own learning (Freire, 1996). Sometimes this strategy worked, sometimes it did not but this would always lead me to reflect and find ways on how I can emphasize the importance of participating in the discussions without me imposing my will to my students.

At first, I found it difficult to engage students in the classroom because I was very firm that class participation is an expectation, and therefore it should not be graded (Doyle, 2008) so I had to come up with various strategies in getting my students to read the assigned materials and participate in class discussions. First, I set a rule that to be able to participate in the discussions, students must read the materials first. I very quickly moved away from this strategy because I realized that this is not inclusive, and I am at risk of turning into some of my high school teachers. The only difference is I do not ask my students to leave the room. Second is, to emphasize the importance of reading, I drew on Ciardi's (1976) *Another School Year – Why?* and illustrated the difference of university education from technical education, at the risk of invalidating the importance of the latter. I tell my students that if they find the assigned reading materials unnecessary, they should have opted for a technical/vocational course instead. I have found this to be an effective comparison because university tuition is lot more expensive in the Philippines. However, I have since limited the use of this strategy at the beginning of each semester as I have found this to be a potentially alienating strategy.

My 'aha' moments, described as 'opening a window' in the classroom (Capan et al., 2020) usually come during the midterm consultation period. In FEU, it is instituted that at every 10th week of the semester, all instruction is to be suspended to give way to the consultation period where students can meet their teachers to discuss their standing the class. For underperforming students, this is an ideal environment for me to show them the consequences of their actions, as well as an effective way for me to collaboratively set goals with my students so that they can pull their grades up during the finals period. For students who are doing good, this is also an ideal time for me to reemphasize that they are responsible for the good grades they have been receiving as teaching and learning is not only my responsibility but theirs as well. I present to them the course expected learning outcomes (CELOs) again because I have already presented these at the beginning of the semester and ask each one of them if they think the activities in the course are helping them achieve the CELOs. This helps me stick to Biggs and Tang's (2010) constructive alignment, where CELOs, materials, method, and assessment activities must be aligned and transparent to the students to ensure

maximum learning. In my experience, I have found that students are more willing participants in class activities if they are aware of the purpose and what goals these activities are trying to achieve.

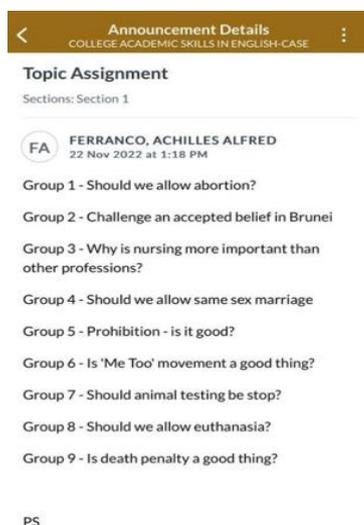
After 7 semesters of facilitating GE courses, I finished my master's degree and was assigned professional education courses. In FEU, the course offerings are structured in a way that the first two years are consisted of GE courses and the last two years are solely professional courses. I have found it easier to engage students after they have been exposed to the SCL philosophy of teaching for two years, compared to freshmen and sophomore who are relatively new to the learning paradigm.

Teaching General Education – Brunei Experience

In July of 2022, the dean approached me with the offer of being seconded in Brunei. The offer was for me to teach for a minimum of one semester and a maximum of four semesters, in exchange I would be automatically tenured in FEU with all the benefits of a tenured faculty to be monetized plus a 40% premium as my salary in my Brunei, and the possibility of exploring scholarship options for me to take my doctorate. The choice was easy for me to make. An international teaching stint will surely look good in my resume, plus I was also offered an officer position to handle student affairs and concerns, this is not too far from my usual responsibilities in FEU. I said yes to the offer and by September 21, I am already in Brunei because JCHS had to open and accept its first intake by October.

As I have previously mentioned, the directive for us was to deliver the courses in the same manner that we do in FEU, and this is what I initially did. My teaching practice was still guided by my FEU training and the reading materials. The CELOs were still the same, therefore, I assigned assessment activities that were similar to what I assigned to my FEU students. For context, we were not oriented in terms of cultural sensitivity, there was just the general directive that topics about Sultan and the royal family are not to be discussed, in or outside the classroom. This instruction, I did my best to follow, and so far, I have been successful. I also took it upon myself to not include sensitive topics in classroom discussions. However, I was not informed that there are topics that I cannot assign as reading materials. Embarrassing as it may be to admit, I have very limited knowledge regarding Brunei prior to agreeing to be seconded. When it was finalized that I will be one of the teachers to be sent in Brunei, I did my best in the limited time that I had to learn as much as I could about the country but the knowledge that I was able to gather was limited to YouTube videos about what daily life is in Brunei so for the midterm summative output, I have, after negotiating with my students, assigned an argumentative paper for both CASE and MWM. The instruction was that they would have the same topic for each of the course, but they have to take a for position in CASE and an against position in MWM. This instruction was given verbally while the topics were posted in our learning management system. See Figure 4 for the topics.

Figure 4. Topic Assignment for CASE and MWM



Announcement Details
COLLEGE ACADEMIC SKILLS IN ENGLISH-CASE

Topic Assignment

Sections: Section 1

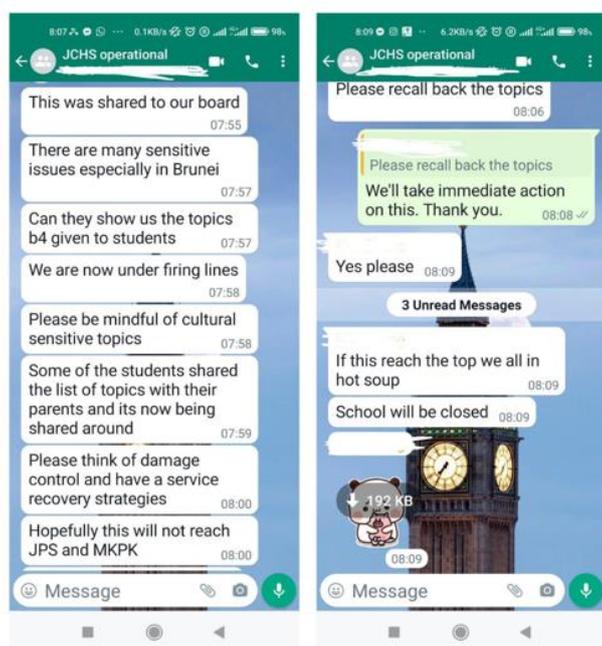
FA FERRANCO, ACHILLES ALFRED
22 Nov 2022 at 1:18 PM

- Group 1 - Should we allow abortion?
- Group 2 - Challenge an accepted belief in Brunei
- Group 3 - Why is nursing more important than other professions?
- Group 4 - Should we allow same sex marriage
- Group 5 - Prohibition - is it good?
- Group 6 - Is 'Me Too' movement a good thing?
- Group 7 - Should animal testing be stop?
- Group 8 - Should we allow euthanasia?
- Group 9 - Is death penalty a good thing?

PS

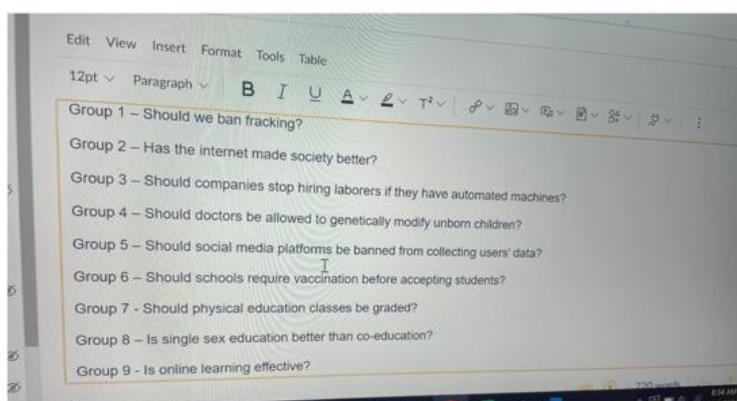
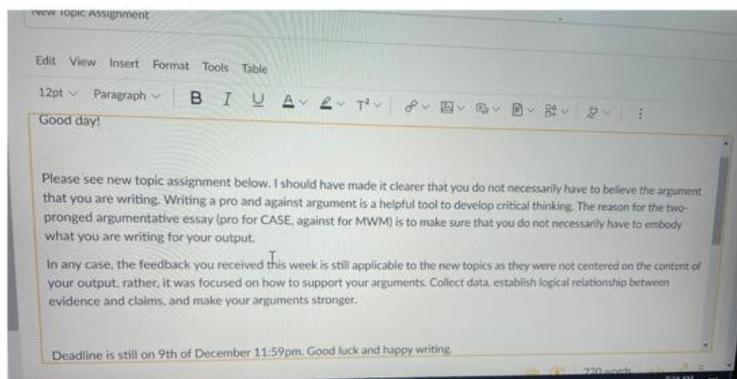
These topics were given one week in advance so that the students can have time to write a draft first before submitting the final output. During the feedback session, I noticed that most of the drafts did not have a structure that is logical, and I conducted another negotiation with my students as regards the structure of the argumentative paper. We came to an agreement that they need to structure their paper in the Aristotelian way of writing an argumentative paper in which they need to both sides of the argument first before writing their own claims. It was the morning after this consultation that I received an alarmed call from one of my Bruneian colleagues asking me about what topics I assigned in my classes. This colleague of mine urged me to recall the topics that I have assigned and assign different topics before things get out of hand. At first, I was reluctant to do so, not only because of my assumed academic freedom, but also because the deadline for the submission of the output is only four days away. I thought that this would put my students at a very disadvantageous and unfair position because we have an ironclad agreement that deadlines cannot be extended if not for valid reasons. At this point, I did not see any valid reason to extend the deadline. It was only when another colleague of mine sent me screenshots of administration group chat that I realized the magnitude of the situation. See Figure 5 for the screenshots.

Figure 5. Screenshots of the Recall Order



After seeing the screenshots, this is when I recalled, albeit still reluctantly, the topics. I was instructed not to make any explanations for the topic recall and just tell my students that 'it was done for a reason'. I recognize that in my ten semesters of teaching, here and there might have been some remnants of teacher-centric conditioning (Doyle, 2008), that I may have been guilty of unintentionally being teacher-centric, but this has been the very first time that I became not transparent with my students when it comes to classroom decisions. This is also the first time that I reneged on an agreed upon classroom negotiation. And this is the very instance that led me to question if SCL as I know it is possible in Brunei. See Figure 6 for my attempt at damage control.

Figure 6. Damage Control Screenshots



The feeling that I had when I met my students in the classroom after posting this announcement, was the worst that I have ever felt as a teacher. I did not only feel that I was letting down my role models, but I also felt that I have turned into some of my high school teachers who have neither the time nor the desire to answer student questions. Subsequently, I also feared for my job as I learned that there is a very real possibility that I will have to say goodbye to the premiums that I have been receiving in Brunei when I read about what happened to Geoffrey Gunn (Kershaw, 2013).

DISCUSSIONS

The meaning of learning is contingent upon presuppositions (Mezirow, 1996). In the same study, it was suggested that educational paradigms, when being examined in relation to one another, must be done so in light of their tenets, assumptions, and presuppositions. In SCL, learning is constructivist – prior knowledges used to construct new knowledge and learning is always situated, reality is not apart from the individual therefore, learning should always be localized because that is where the individual is always residing (Merizow, 1996). Was I mistaken in making no adjustments to my CELOs, facilitating techniques, topic assignment, and assessment activities? My Western-influenced training tells me that the topics I assigned are universal issues that need to be talked about. This perceived universality could be at the core of my predicament. However, for a week, the students did not express any problems regarding the topics assigned to them. It was only after a parent sent the topics to the board that an issue arose.

The prohibition of certain topics curtails my academic freedom and undermines the democratic principles of liberal education. Censorship is only possible through a culture of power (Applebaum, 2003), and if one group is more powerful than the other the balance of power is not achieved, rendering SCL impossible

(Weimer, 2002). I still hold the assigned topics as universal, however, I recognize that I needed to recall them in respect to MIB so the school can remain open, and I can keep my job. In this sense, the question needs to be asked – can SCL co-exist with another belief system such as MIB? SCL, by putting the learner at the center of the teaching and learning process, takes into account the learners' needs and interests. This is manifested by both SPN21 and EBEC in claiming that each curriculum equips its learners with 21st century skills. Both curricula are culturally relevant through their own definition of who Bruneian and Filipino students are. However, since SCL must accommodate MIB in Brunei, contradictions between the goals of SCL and MIB arise. When the topics were negotiated between me and my students, my only condition was that the topics as well as the argumentative paper should be selected to achieve the CELOs. One could argue that the CELOs can be achieved by any topic, and this is also the reason why I assigned new topics for the activity and not change the activity altogether. However, SCL's paradigmatic goal of creating new knowledge instead of reifying existing cultural structures (Mezirow, 1996) cannot be achieved if there are certain topics that students cannot access. SCL, therefore, is not possible if it must always adhere to MIB. CELOs, facilitating techniques, topic assignment, and assessment activities must be constructively aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2010) for SCL to work. One of the main points of debate whenever Barr and Tagg (1995) is brought up in a training session is about their statement on lecture as a teaching method. They say that SCL does not prohibit lecturing, instead it becomes another method through which learning can be achieved. However, the lecture method is rooted on the assumption that it is the teacher's job, being the wise person in the classroom, to transmit knowledge to their students who do not know anything. Lecturing, therefore, goes against the SCL assumption that knowledge is in each individual, therefore, it is not to be transmitted, rather knowledge is to be constructed.

Apart from constructive alignment, classroom practices must be aligned with the paradigmatic assumptions of an educational curriculum. I lift a direct quote from Mezirow (1996) to further illustrate the importance of the alignment of beliefs and actions. According to him:

“A belief is a habit that guides action. Beliefs become crystallized in concepts. Any action guided by a belief is also a test of that belief. When the actions dictated by beliefs (and the interpretations articulating them) fail in practice or become problematic through changing circumstances, our frames of reference may be transformed through critical reflection on their assumptions.” (1996, p. 163)

In this paper's case, my frame of reference is my Western-influenced conception of SCL. This particular orientation of mine allows me to give value judgments on my instructional decisions. The act of assigning 'culturally sensitive' topics became problematic as I shifted from the Philippines to Brunei. The choice of transforming my frame of reference of SCL is up to me, and that is all that I can change because its paradigmatic assumptions will remain the same. If I do so, I run the risk of reducing SCL to merely classroom techniques and strategies instead of it being an entirely independent belief system. This would entail employing student-centered strategies that adhere to MIB instead of SCL. This practice of integrating elements of the new paradigm to an existing one is bound to fail (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Is there a work around for SCL to co-exist with MIB? The MIB ideology was designed to justify current practices on the basis that MIB has historical foundation that stretches back 600 years (Black, 2020). Setting aside whether this claim is true or not, old practices and tradition cannot be the sole basis of institutions' policy and professionals' practices of today. If they were, Brunei's progress would not have been possible. There would still be slaves in Brunei, it would still be under the British Protectorate, Islamic law would not be recognized, and no one apart from the royal family would be allowed to own land. Its lauded free health care, free education would also not be possible. This shows that MIB is open to changes in the name of progress. I tried to accommodate MIB within my SCL frame of reference and it worked for a little while until I assigned the topics. If MIB could accommodate SCL then there is a possibility that the two could co-exist.

CONCLUSION

SCL is rooted on the democratic principles of fairness, equality, and freedom. These principles must be upheld by both the teacher and the students. The teacher must be free in exercising these principles. There should be no threat to his freedom, and job security in order to carry out their capacity. If this is the case, SCL might be able to co-exist with any belief system. Further, this opens up the possibility that SCL can be localized and educators like me might not need to depend on Western practices as much as we do now.

Fook (1999) suggests that the critical edge of reflexivity should be maintained. Authors who use reflexivity as a research method must do so in order to raise awareness power dynamics and hegemonic structures and make suggestions on how injustices can be addressed. Having said this, it is my firm belief that educational institutions should transform its students. Students should know more by the time they leave a school compared to the time they entered it. Educational institution must be free in exercising this function. No educational institution, and by extension, no teacher should fear for their survival in providing education for their students. If the censorship laws and regulations of MIB is not a blanket policy, and if it could make accommodations and exceptions for academic discourse, SCL and MIB can have a successful co-existence.

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to all my teachers. Most specially to Glenda Trinidad, Edith Angeles, and Nang Destura. As an SCL advocate, I believe that experience is the best teacher and I had the best experiences as your student. Thank you.

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