

THE DILEMMAS SORTED: A STORY OF BEING SUPERVISED

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Abstract: Writing is an important expression of human experiences. In this article, I try to (re)present my experience as a supervisee. I employ autobiographical or autoethnographical style to portray an incident within which my supervisor and I were involved in a meaningful interactive supervision processes. Some references quoted are not to frame the idea of my writing, but rather, as a referent which could justify, confirm, or criticize my experience. The use of the first single person style is legitimized and the question of whether this kind of writing is scientific or not, should be put aside when we were within the context of qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: *Supervision; Self-experience; Autobiography; Autoethnography*

Prologue

Writing is an important expression of human experiences through which, we can deeply explore the facets of our lived experiences. I am interested in writing my own experience of being supervised as, according to Greenhalgh (1999), writing—both process and product—may enhance and expand personal development in a variety of contexts and that writing has therapeutic benefits. That is because writing could be used for therapy, practical exercises, creativity, and self-expression, and for research on the writing process. The process of writing the self could be considered as a form of challenging emotional issues.

Wolfe (1993) calls attention to our need to re-examine everyday practices and assumptions about those practices. To do so, ethnography can serve as a critical tool for this kind of inquiry. Ethnography and

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biography have become a flashpoint of discussion in connecting critical pedagogy with writing. Ethnography and biography, involving multi-layered approach to seeing and understanding, call on us to re-examine the world surrounding, and to re-examine the academy in relation to the outside world, as well as to re-examine our sense of identity and culture.

Many still question whether writing self-life experience could be justified as being scientific. Those who pose such question are mainly from the school of quantitative, positivist research group. However, from the side of qualitative group, the representation of the process as well as the findings of an inquiry has many possibilities in terms of its form. Autobiography and autoethnography as genres of qualitative research representation can be considered as additional methods for the construction of knowledge through a reflexive and reflective focus on self (Breuer & Roth, 2005). Both genres raise the question of the special competencies and qualities that are required for self-observation and self-description (Pereira, Settelmaier & Taylor, 2005).

In the approach such as autoethnography and autobiography, the issue of validity turns to be other values, such as *trustworthiness*. As the representation is about the author himself, it is important to be aware of the careless subjectivity, or the worse one, being narcissistic. The thick enough description about the incident I present is to put more flesh for making the story more alive. Many issues related to the *validity* of qualitative research are not to be discussed here, but for those who are interested to read more could see Denzin and Lincoln (2000).

How this writing could be of benefit for the others—the readers? To respond to this doubtful question, in representing my experience, instead of asking, “Why would anybody be interested in my unimportant life?” I prefer to ask, “What is it, in what I say, that the others might recognize in themselves, and what experiences, issues, stories from my life can be of benefits for others?”

In this writing, being legitimized by van Maanen’s (1988) ideas with his three styles of storing the experience: realist, confessional, and impressionist, which I could not justify which style I use here—it might be the mixed of the three, I try to portray myself as being supervised by someone who is introduced later. Within the writing, I try to represent my

experience using first single person style—I. As the course goes, I occasionally quote some statement(s) not to frame my work, but rather, my reference to those experts are just to strengthen my comment as well as my statements. To outline, the writing is threefold: the introduction of myself as the supervisee, who my supervisor is, and the interaction which was built between the two parties.

WHO I AM

To be a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics, Makassar State University, Makassar Indonesia, I was not considered as a new comer in the department as it was my alma mater. It was merely a shift of position, a transformation from being a student to being a lecturer. They who used to be my lecturers, and I will always consider them as so, have become my colleagues. Such environment made the time I spent early in the department doing many adaptations as a young lecturer more enjoyable and exciting. This is the feeling I am still now having which sometimes situated me in challenging circumstances regarding positioning myself in any event of interaction in the campus academic environment.

As a young lecturer, I firstly functioned as an assistant to the senior lecturers whom I was working with in a lecturer-team to run certain subject. Being an assistant, I was in charge to provide assistance to students during the lecture and outside the class whenever they have problems related to the subject materials. Sometimes, when the senior lecturer was not able to come to the class, he asked me to take over the class as *filled-in lecturer* and give lecture. In other times, I was in charge to handle the class while the senior lecturer was still in the class. I thought that it was a sort of exchanging the roles, in which, the senior lecturer was positioning himself to provide assistance to students while they are working on the problems and I was in charge to give lecture. Finally, I realised that at such moment, I was situated, unconsciously, in a constant supervision state.

The first subject I was teaching was Calculus I. I was in a team with Mr. Muhammad Darwis¹. Within that team I did a so-called apprenticeship. It was a very good opportunity to be in a team with him as I knew that he had a very passionate style in teaching Calculus. I thought I would be able to observe

how he was running the class, though, my presence in the class was actually not only for that purpose. Formally, with a role as an assistant, I was there to run the class of Calculus together with him. However, I did not want to lose the opportunity to learn more about his way of teaching. Based on my experience being taught by him, and also according to other students, the bad image of certain topic we firstly created will change after being taught by him. In this sense, no matter how difficult the concept sometimes seems to us at the first glance, we will find ourself finally understand it. To this point, I would say that it was a kind of an *insisted-understanding*. The word *insited* is used here with the positive meaning.

THE SUPERVISOR

It was in 1997, when I was doing my field experience program including teaching at a state senior high school in Makassar, Indonesia, Mr. Darwis was appointed as my tutoring lecturer. From that moment, after being supervised for around two months, I then decided, with the approval from the head of the department, to choose him as my co-supervisor in conducting my research at the end of my undergraduate study. The first supervisor was a professor whom was appointed by the head of the department. At the end, I finally could finish my research and my study as well with distinction—cum laude.

Mr. Muhammad Darwis was the one who strongly recommended me to enrol as a lecturer, while, at the same time, he also promoted me in the department. Once he said to me that he was responsible morally to help me become a good lecturer. My relationship with him has been growing since my early years in undergraduate program. Mr. Darwis had taught me some subjects. Also, when I encountered some problems in other the subjects, I preferred to meet and consult with him. I acquired very helpful way to solve the problems after meeting him. It was not because he directly provided me with the solution, but he, instead, showed me the possible, alternative ways worth trying to finally find the solution by myself. Positioning him as a coach, Mr. Darwis is able to perform various characteristics of a good coach, namely, the ability to see the potential in the learner and being a source of encouragement to the learner (Tee, 2004).

In short, I consider myself as having a considerable, good relationship, which in turn, became a partnership, with him. His reputations were enough for me to feel happy being supervised by him.

THE INCIDENT

It was on Wednesday morning, a day in October 1999. I arrived at the campus and went into the class five minutes earlier. The class of Calculus I was started at 07.30 and Mr. Darwis came into the class on time. Within the class, as usual, I placed myself in the rear. When the class were ready for the lecture, he proceeded and asked me to give lecture. Even, he did not ask me whether or not I was ready to teach. However, it was not a problem for me because I had prepared my self. In an informal contract we agreed upon in advance, I was expected to be prepared all the time. It was all the time as he might assign me anytime he could not attend the class, or at any time he felt that it was my turn again to give lecture.

He stayed at the rear. He did not explain to the students why he was not teaching at that time. Then I came forward and stood in front the students. I found them with a big question of what was actually happening. Being on the stage, firstly, I explained the case to the students. It seemed to me that their curiosity has been answer, while, from my deepest heart, I hoped that they were happy for that I was in charge to teach them again.

It was not actually the first time I handled the class. However, for the two previous lectures I gave them, it was in the absence of Mr. Darwis. I hoped that the students would show the spirit and courage to actively involve in the lecture as it used to happen in the previous lectures. I expected them to involve in the dynamically warm discussion like I usually had when I gave them assistance; such a discussion contextualized within a non-formal relationship between them and me.

I started my explanation of the topic of limit by introducing an illustrative example. Even though all students had been exposed with such concept in their year 11 and some of them had been in the Calculus I class last year (they retook the unit as they failed or just wanted to have a better mark), I thought that was the crucial initiation of their understanding of the concept. I had chosen that example I considered as

an excellent one. I hoped that I brought something different and impressive for their initial real understanding. After explaining the example and ensuring that the students have caught the points, I moved to introducing the intuitive approach of the concept of limit.

So far, I still did not know why Mr. Darwis put me in charges to teach this very crucial concept. I questioned myself and tried to think of possible reasons. On the one hand, I thought this initial introduction to the concept of limit in undergraduate level should be performed by senior lecturer such as him. It was to ensure that students would not be led to misunderstanding. On the other hand, I was proud of myself that I was in charge to assume such important responsibility.

I felt a big burden put on my shoulder; lots of questions came up; why now? How if I failed to lead the students to understanding and found them with their misunderstanding because of my explanation? At the same time, however, I felt being fuelled with a huge spirit; "This is the time for me to show my potential, my capacity; the time for me to prove to Mr. Darwis and the students that they can count on me with regard to leading the students toward a firm understanding of the concept of limit." I gained a considerable confidence.

I thought the lecture was going well. I was sure that the students could catch the points in my explanation. I tried to engage them as much as possible in the explanation. More or less, I applied the spirit of constructivism. This epistemology had shown its strenght in my own learning endeavour and my teaching long before I had considerable time to explore it during my postgraduate study. I let them discuss with their peers regarding the concept. I performed all steps I had planned in advance including the assessment. Time went faster, and at the end, I was quite sure that in general, students had achieved the learning outcomes that I had set up. It was an exciting time. During the lecture, Mr. Darwis was completely acting as an assistant, the role that I always played whenever he gave a lecture in the unit. It was really an exchange of roles. There was a kind of satisfaction at the end of the lecture that Mr. Darwis and I had successfully run the class within which the students had been effectively facilitated to achieve the expected outcomes. We had set the subject to follow the outcome-based education, in which the learning

objectives were stated up front, the instructional processes were tuned to best meet them, and the assessments were implemented as a means for checking how well they have been met (Biggs & Tang, 2007). At least, that was what I thought, felt, and actually expected.

THE SUPERVISOR GOING FURTHER

When the class finished, Mr. Darwis asked me to discuss something. At the moment, I knew that the topic of the discussion would not be far from the ongoing of the lecture, its progress in particular and the subject of Calculus I in general. He asked me to go to his room.

When we were at his room, he started the discussion by a short, convincing utterance, "The students were very enthusiastic." I replied briefly, "It was very much challenging to teach that concept, Sir." He was satisfied with the outcomes the students had attained. Mr. Darwis complained about the constraint of limited time. I knew that this complain was not projected directly to me personally. It was not about my ability to manage the time. However, I knew that such conclusion was drawn from the fact encountered in the lecture I had given. He said that there should be longer time provided for such crucial concept introduction; students needed more time in the class. Within such important steps of concept learning, students needed not to rush which could result in weak understanding, if not misunderstanding. That was a very important episode in their mathematics learning. The strong foundation should be built from the concept of limit which was the foundation for more advanced concepts in Calculus and in the other advanced subjects. We were talking about the subject in general.

The discussion went on. He asked me whether I had identified any problems occurring in the lecture. He asked me whether I found some problems encountered by the students. When he asked the problems of mine, especially in the class which I had identified, I was surprised. I had many I thought but it was just hard to identify them explicitly. He was not positioning himself as an expert or a senior lecturer; rather I felt that he was my partner lecturer who was an effective listener and perceptive observer for me (Anderson, Major & Mitchell, 1992).

There was no judgement provided by the supervisor for what I had done whether it was incorrect or correct. All things emerged were discussed to find their solution. I felt I was not given another lecture of teaching methods and learning theories. Sometimes, I put forward something which I regarded as my mistakes or weaknesses. Mr. Darwis did not suddenly agree upon them; he even asked me to deeply reflect and to find out the roots of the problems. He said to me, "You are the one who best knows your own potentials."

One of many problems that I expressed to him was that I sometimes encountered the dilemma during the lecture. It resulted from the lack of confidence when I found something happened during the lecture which I did not expect or predict. For example, when I found the students frowned because of my explanation, I suddenly thought that it might be because my language. Maybe, the language I used was quite hard to understand, it could be because of the level of language which was a little bit sophisticated. I said to Mr. Darwis, "Language usage was one dilemma I experience in teaching. I realised that the language I was using was somewhat different to what I used when I gave assistance to the students." I had got a dilemma regarding my language. Being in the dilemma, my thought was whether I had to preserve my sophisticated language as it was a formal lecture context or I should turn into using daily language as I did when I gave assistance to students. Using the daily language during the assistance session enabled me to easily and freely explain the case to and discuss it with them. However, I thought that such language should not be used in the formal lecture. I was quite strict to myself, not because I wanted to be considered as a sophisticated-language lecturer, but in my view, daily language should not be used in such formal lecture. I hoped that the students could go along with my explanation, although I was using the sophisticated language.

Mr. Darwis did not blame me for using my language which was sophisticated. According to him, it is very good if I can preserve it. He suggested me to be more flexible. I tried to catch his points. Briefly he said, "The higher the years of students are, the more sophisticated language could be used, but again, being flexible is important." Mr. Darwis gave me further suggestions. He said, "It was okay to insert daily language in our explanation whenever needed. However, we were not to rely on it."

It is better when we have rich formal vocabulary, so that we would have a range of alternatives; when certain word could not convey our intention, we could use the other words.” He continued, “Sometimes, we need an alternative plan. It was helpful for that when we encountered some problems in the field which did not fit our first plan, we can implement the alternative one.”

MY EXPECTATION

We went on with the discussion. He asked me to list my weaknesses and strengths in teaching. It was another surprise for me. What I expected from him was that he would present such list of my performance to discuss. In fact, he did not directly show me a sort of list. It was not easy for me to make such a list. He asked me to reflect deeply on my teaching. After a little while, I put forward that list with some items and we discussed them. I knew that he had a list also, at least on his mind, unwritten. Several aspects of my weaknesses were agreed upon by him and he gave me some related suggestions. I did not consider his agreement to some of my weaknesses as a judgement. Also, his way of agreeing was not in the style of “yes, I think so.” Rather, he directly asked me to elaborate them together. When I reflected on them and found their roots, he sometimes added some of his thought. At the end, he said that the most important thing to do with our weaknesses was to find its root. Philosophically, he explained that when we found the roots of the problems and tried to solve them, if it is possible, we could turn them all to be our strengths. We did not talk much about my strengths. All he suggested me was that I had to preserve them all. Moreover, it was not usual to talk much about our own strengths; not in the context of Indonesian culture.

It was actually all right for me if I was reminded by giving me suggestions during my standing on the stage as long as it was done wisely. However, Mr. Darwis had chosen not to provide me with feedback directly. It seemed that he knew very much and was aware of the suggestion that “without a proper context, even well-intentioned feedback can result in shock and defensiveness” (Allen & Allen, 2004: 7). Earlier in the class, I had told the students that being involved in the

subject, I was still learning so that I was of the same intention with the students, that is, to learn. Given any problem which students and I could not solve, we had the senior lecturer to whom we could rely upon. I was in a high consciousness that I was still in the phase of training myself as a lecturer. Indeed, I had done my teaching practice in senior high school level through which I had gained some experiences, though still inadequate, regarding the world of teaching and being an educator. Moreover, teaching in undergraduate level was not the same with that in senior school level. Of course, I could not deny that some commonalities or similarities are prevailing, however, I realised that the undergraduate students were more independent; they had more, even absolute, autonomy of their own study.

The discussion finished and I felt such a relief. Indeed, I needed more and more. I had acquired a lot from the discussion. Mr. Darwis did not provide me with certain prescribed methods. He just expected me to continuously reflect on my own experiences and potentials, such as my experiences of being taught by him when I was in undergraduate program. He just said to me that various methods of teaching should be applied in appropriate context. He reminded me, "You had experienced many styles of teaching performed by all of your teachers and lecturers, including me; you are free to adopt and adapt them into the context you are facing. There is no prescribed-fixed method for certain concept and you have to flow along with the dynamic of the class. Flowing along doesn't mean that you are dissolved, but you are to be with your own self-control."

WHAT I FOUND/LEARNED

I recall that the supervision which was taking place at that moment carried out the essence of supervision (Blumberg, 1980). It had happened as the matter of giving and receiving assistance with regard to my performance. The major conditions were evident that I needed help for the sake of my professional development; Mr. Darwis was able to provide me and we had built an interpersonal relationship and partnership which enabled the event to take place in mutually satisfactory way.

To a great extent, in my view, I consider Mr. Darwis as my master lecturer who has possessed a great skill in giving advice and an ability to engage other lecturers in the improvement of teaching (Bird & Little, 1986). I was comfortable to be supervised by him because I knew that he would not do anything which could make my face lost or turned to be red. His wisdom, I believe, would prevent him to do so. To me, the one whose supervision I expect should be well known by me. My knowledge about the supervisor could be because we had known each other previously, or at least, I had acquired information about his reputations. My first, high preference to the one whom I have a good rapport with is based upon my belief that the giving and receiving advise, suggestions, feedback, are not merely to put forward some words that we consider needed by someone. There is a way of wisdom which should be involved in that action. Moreover, there should be a kind of mutual empowerment shared between all involved parties within the interaction (Grundy, 1991).

I do not prefer to a stranger from outside whom I know nothing about coming to supervise me. I do not expect someone who is not attuned to the course of teaching or the other matters he or she wants to supervise. I like to be supervised by someone who is able to recognize and communicate the complex characteristics of learning and teaching, to give criticism and praise in ways that make a positive contribution, know when to stand firm and when to bend and tread lightly (Anderson, Major, & Mitchell, 1992).

Regarding the model of supervision, I do not have any distinctive preference. To implement the model of positivist (i.e. clinical), phenomenological, or critical theorist perspective depends on the situation and the context of the supervision. In supervision I had experienced, the three perspectives were evident with their own proportion. In the sense of clinical, I was in the situation in need for improving my professionalism which required a diagnosis of my performance and all aspects of the environment within which I was situated. Of course I had already held a belief and perception regarding the world of my occupation, but they are still immature, meaning that they still need to be, to certain extent, reorganized and readjusted with the current situation. I need a sort of flexible guidance to follow, adjust,

and adapt in accordance with my need. It is not a kind of law or order which I must be embraced with. I need to find out what the meaning of being a member of a community is, within a minimum scope of a classroom, reflecting on the role that I should assume. I need to be empowered because I realized that some of my potentials have not been optimally utilized. Also I need to be emancipated so that I will be able to grow up and develop myself from now on. All of my potentials, weaknesses, and strengths should be reflected upon and I need an opportunity for doing so. Under the supervision of Mr. Darwis, I felt that all the three perspectives were mixed up together.

Reflecting on that supervision, what I like is how he positions himself in the discussion (supervision). His diction was very selective. Instead of using “you”, he always said “we” when he made certain suggestions. The openness we preserved during the discussion resulted in the increase of my confidence to express my own problems. I needed not to worry about being ridiculed, humiliated, or feeling ashamed.

Still regarding the openness, on the other side, in the contrary, Mr. Darwis did not show me the list of strengths and weaknesses of my performance he had surely noticed. He might not write them down but they could be stored in his mind. I needed such list which could be more objective regarding my performance. The case to this point was that even though there was a great degree of openness evident in the discussion and elaboration, but he still kept some parts in the box un-revealed. I just tried to convince myself that he certainly had a reason for not to list them all for me. I thought it was a kind of respecting me. The thing I was concerned with is the discussion. Mr. Darwis had chosen a more indirect way of agreement by elaborating the items in the serious discussion.

The essence of his suggestions was that I should not take something—such as incidents, events, phenomena, or cases—for granted. However, I should not exaggerate anything I was encountering. I should see something rationally so that I could figure it out and find its solution. I felt I was fully empowered. I was significantly encouraged and my confidence was growing positively. To a less extent, I felt such burden by such big trust he put on my shoulders.

In fact, I was not actually ready to be supervised. Should I say that? I do not agree with prior notice of supervision. Prior notice, in my view, could lead me to manipulate or fake my performance. I might be trying to have unusual preparation and employ all of my potentials and abilities in teaching while being supervised, in order to give the best images for the supervisor. I need to perform my original style; there should be no thing to be faked and there was no thing to be made up. All were going naturally.

I felt a sort of relief after being within a meaningful discussion with Mr. Darwis. I felt I had acquired new spirits and being fuelled with new energy. I was no longer experiencing a dilemma which sometimes occurs during my teaching. As he highly recommended me to keep reflecting on my own teaching, I had more awareness and consciousness of things prevailing in the class. I had more knowledge of my own potentials, which enabled me to select certain strategy, perspective, or approach which suited my own sake and that of students.

The meaningful discussion was the beginning of a row of subsequent discussions we had along with the ongoing of the lecture week by week. At many times, I positioned myself as a patient whom generated certain problem. Especially, when I encountered phenomena in the class in the absence of him, I tried hard to represent it as accurately as possible in the discussion to enable a holistic comprehension which would help us elaborate it.

At the end of the term, we were there seeing the accomplishment we had achieved. We realized that it would be impossible to have the students with equally, significant understanding of all the concepts we had taught. The success I had attained as a new lecturer and the growing, strong partnership I had built with the supervisor were invaluable. I was growing a high confidence and competence in handling the class, with or without the presence of Mr. Darwis.

Reflecting on the model we employed in the supervision, I finally recognized that the processes were, in some time, took place in the developmental model (Leddick, 1994), within which we each were continuously growing, in fits and starts, in growth spurts and patterns, and in combining our experience and hereditary predispositions we develop

strengths and growth areas. I strongly felt that he helped me maximize and identify growth needed for the future, continuously identify new areas of growth in a life-long learning process. I am sure that both of us changed, so did the supervisory relationship.

In some other time, I identify some evident which justified the supervision we were involved in as an integrated model of supervision (Leddick, 1994). As I have explained earlier, even though certain roles might not be evident in the incident I am storying about, the three roles of supervisor in this model have been played significantly by Mr. Darwis for the sake of mine. He is my *teacher* and *consultant*, and he had assisted me in noticing my own blind spot.

I was not blamed, I was not judged, but rather, I was empowered, encouraged, and I felt a great degree of enlightenment. I was grateful that I was there to experience them all.

EPILOGUE

I hope that reading this self-experience will be—as expected in the beginning—of benefit for the readers. However, for those who are still in doubt—or (quite) new to—the genre employed, I would like to quote statements of Breuer and Roth (2005) as follows:

... the book and journal formats limit how we can express ourselves, and therefore what aspects of our life experiences can be expressed. To me, this is one-sided approach just as it would be one-sided (and even foolish) for a physicists to claim that “everything is wave” or “everything is particle” while talking about light or other electromagnetic phenomena. In a dialectical approach, the unity of mutually exclusive forms of expression is presupposed—attempts to reduce a gesture or photographic image to words will lose exactly the special contributions to knowing and understanding these other expressive forms contribute (p. 436).

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