

**DISCOVERING THE TEACHING SELF (THE VALUE OF A CAPSTONE
EXPERIENCE AS A REFLECTIVE TOOL FOR HERE AND THERE)**

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of capstone experiences on teaching practices and professional identities of teachers returning to work after a period of study abroad. In the capstone experience, we aimed to help students switch on the lights to illuminate the depth of their specialised knowledge in the area of TESOL as they moved on from their graduate studies. A light that shines on areas of their professional identities as teachers of English that exists, but rarely explored. Despite the logistical limitations that constrained data gathering from participants, the quality of the responses used for discussion demonstrated the value of the capstone experience as a reflective tool, an opportunity for students to enter a reflective space free of contextual constraints that so often impede effective professional learning. The reflective space offered by the capstone experience appeared to have a transformative effect on the participants' teaching practices and regenerated their professional identities. Further research is needed to explore the sustainability of this effect and to observe changes in professional behaviour and practice. It is one thing for the participants to say how they have changed, it is another to see the changes in their teaching practices and their interactions with others.

Keywords: *the impact of capstone experiences, teaching practices, professional identities, professional behavior.*

INTRODUCTION

Capstone experiences in undergraduate programmes provide students the opportunity to consolidate knowledge and skills learnt throughout their degree program and develop a clear understanding of professional identity within their chosen field of expertise. The core aim is

to enable students to move successfully into either graduate studies or employment in the workplace (Holdsworth, Watty, & Davies, 2009). Capstone experiences need to challenge the learners, extend their understanding and explore unfamiliar territory in the context of the familiar (Holdsworth et al., 2009; McNamara, Brown, Field, Kift, Butler, & Treloar, 2011; Thomas, Wong, & Li, 2014).

At the graduate level, however, a capstone's aims differ slightly with more focus on developing established professional skills, and deepening professional knowledge and expertise. At this level, it provides a process to self-assess and reflect on professional learning and growth as English language teachers (Schlichting & Fox, 2015). However, there is limited research that discusses the impact of a capstone experience on either professional identity or teaching practice at graduate level. The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of a capstone experience on regenerating the teaching practices and professional identities of a group of experienced English language teachers returning to their teaching roles in Japan.

The capstone experience discussed in this paper is a required course in the Master of Education (TESOL) programme at a large regional university in New South Wales, Australia. The course is generally taken towards the end of the master's program with the aim to draw on students' knowledge and skills developed throughout the programme. The main learning outcomes of the subject are to develop research skills that can be applied to TESOL teaching contexts, and to make connections between theory and content in TESOL-related teaching environments. Students are required to make meaning of the capstone experience through extensive critical reflective processes.

In order to meet the learning outcomes of the course, students conduct a qualitative research project in an area of English language teaching, informed largely by either ethnographic or action research approaches. Ethnography offers researchers an opportunity to explore specific cultural aspects of an educational setting (Gobo, 2008; McKay, 2006). Common methods for gathering data, such as observations, interviews, and document analysis, are conducive to regular teaching practices educators routinely engage in as professionals in a school community or for improving their individual pedagogy. However, due to time limitations, true ethnographic or action research projects within the subject timeframe are untenable. Instead, students develop projects that are more in the spirit of these approaches. In order to make the research projects meaningful, final reporting of their research focuses on students reflecting critically on the research process and its impact on their development as teachers. Through their written critical reflections, they explore the value of the research project for their own teaching practice and their professional identity

development as teachers of English. The capstone experience goes beyond being a mere assessment task, as is the case in many descriptions of capstone experiences (Mowbray, 2015; Schlichting & Fox, 2015; Thomas et al., 2014). Our capstone experience is designed to create a reflective space for significant regeneration of the teacher to take place.

Through analysis of interview data gathered from five Japanese teachers of English after returning to their teaching roles in Japan, this paper discusses the capstone projects' impact on their teaching practices and professional identity regeneration. In particular, the teachers' appreciation of the capstone's reflective space in which they explored the regeneration of their own professional identities and practices, an opportunity infrequently afforded them in their home contexts. This research aims to contribute to current thinking towards the impact of capstone experiences on the transformative learning practices of teachers of English well established in their careers and the value of research as a reflective practice (Adler, 1993).

While no discipline claims ownership over the design of capstone experiences, the teaching of sociology has provided some useful reference points for both definitions and key design principles. Durel (1993, p.223) defines a capstone as:

a crowning course or experience coming at the end of a sequence of courses with the specific objective of *integrating* a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole.

Here Durel alludes to the process of drawing together all that has been learnt, both content and general capabilities, demonstrated in a focused piece of work such as a research project. Durel also refers to the capstone experience as 'a rite of passage', whereby students reflect on their learning experiences throughout the course and begin to 'disengage (i.e., separate) from the undergraduate status and existential condition'. Students then 'reemerge (i.e., incorporate) as graduates prepared to assess critically and act responsibly in civil society', and, as a result, 'change their status'. They change from being a student, an agent for engagement with knowledge and development of skills, to an agent that begins to apply their knowledge and skills in the 'real world'. While this may reflect the process experienced by undergraduates, the same cannot be easily generalised to students at the graduate level. Instead of disengagement and re-emergence, the capstone experience is a process whereby the students become more strongly connected with the discipline, and regenerated as a result of the process that assesses and reflects upon professional growth (Schlichting & Fox, 2015).

Capstone experiences are comprised of several distinguishing characteristics: offered

in the final year of study, integrates and synthesises prior knowledge and learning, applies this reconstructed knowledge to unstructured and authentic problems, develops communication skills and other key graduate capabilities, engages students in a process of reflection on both key academic constructs and personal adjustments, and assists with the transition process from study to employment and beyond (Durel, 1993; Hauhart & Grahe, 2014; Holdsworth et al., 2009; McNamara et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2014; Wagenaar, 1993). In essence, capstone experiences are designed to bring together the knowledge of an academic discipline with the process of student transition to work (Holdsworth et al., 2009).

It is the culmination of an educational career (Schmid, 1993, p.219) that aims to ensure graduates move successfully into employment or graduate studies (Holdsworth et al., 2009), playing a vital role assisting students transition to their professional identities (McNamara et al., 2011). Wagenaar (1993) claims that a capstone experience has flexibility in its design, but needs to be accredited, involve discussions with other students, and reflects the overall goals of the course in which it is embedded. A capstone experience provides students the opportunity to learn more and demonstrate greater knowledge about the discipline through a structured approach. Above all a capstone experience needs a depth of study so that it provides 'a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate, extend, critique, and apply the knowledge gained in the major' (Wagenaar, 1993, p.209). It also provides teaching staff with the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the whole course or program (Schmid, 1993).

Thomas, Wong and Li.'s (2014) design framework embeds the capstone experience as an integral aspect of a higher education programme. They showed the years leading up to the capstone experience provides students with the formative, discipline focused learning, in preparation for the capstone experience that requires students to synthesise and apply knowledge and skills for real-world problems. However, their study is specific to undergraduate level courses, losing its suitability for graduate courses because of the transition characteristics.

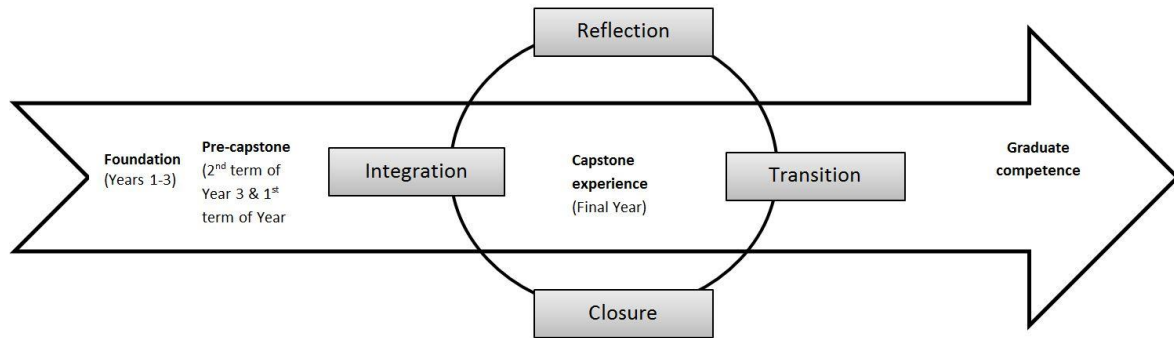


Diagram 1: A conceptual illustration of a capstone experience (Thomas et al., 2014, p.583)

At the undergraduate level, capstone experiences often include project based learning, case study analysis, service learning, work placements, internships, simulations, and immersion experiences (Holdsworth et al., 2009). While at graduate level, the assessment task of a capstone experience is often reflecting back on the graduate program, exploring meaning and value for professional growth (Schlichting & Fox, 2015). The issue of employability is less relevant for graduate level students, such as the participants in this study, as they usually undertake a capstone experience for professional growth while also employed (Schlichting & Fox, 2015). Exploring the characteristics of capstone design is beyond the scope of this paper, but further research is needed to identify the stages of a capstone experience specific to students enrolled in graduate studies.

Schlichting and Fox (2015) offer a thoughtful insight into capstone experience at graduate level, referring to it as an authentic assessment. Students in the programme present a reflective analysis on their learning experiences, required to draw connections between the content of their courses and application in the workplace. For the purpose of this paper, however, a 'capstone experience' is explored as a professional learning experience rather than an assessment task.

Durel (1993, p.223) refers to a capstone as a rite of passage where students disengage from the undergraduate status and existential condition and reemerge as graduates prepared to assess critically and act responsibly within their field. However, like most discussions in the literature, Durel refers to capstone courses offered as part of undergraduate majors. Students undertaking at graduate level would have already passed through this process of disengagement and re-emergence. Instead, a capstone at graduate level may reflect a process of regeneration: starting the course with one professional identity only to emerge with an enhanced but altered new professional identity upon completion.

The questions posed by Johnson and Glosemek (2002, p.1): 'what is knowledge?', and 'who holds it?', are important when designing a new subject because they reflect the

symbolic interactionist framework that the participants' world and their interpretations of it (Blumer, 1986) are core to qualitative research such as this one. As researchers, we need to be patient and listen to what our participants have to say about their experiences and their interpretation of interactions with objects in their world. Informed by a symbolic interactionist framework (Blumer, 1986) that focuses on the interpretations of objects within a specific social setting, five returning Japanese senior high school teachers were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview (Freebody, 2003) to discuss the impact of the capstone subject on their transition back into their workplaces as teachers of English.

The research was informed by the research question: How does a capstone experience impact English language teachers after their return to teaching in Japan?, and data collection was guided by the following sub questions:

- In what way did participants use the capstone experience as a reflective tool to explore their teaching practices?
- What characteristics of the capstone experience do participants reflect on when considering its impact on their teaching practice?

Five participants had been invited to share their experiences as detailed in table 1.

Participant	Participants' Research topics	Research approaches used in the projects	Data gathering tools used in their projects
Yuka	Improving teacher talk through lesson study	Lesson study	Observations, interviews
Aya	Teaching critical thinking in EAP writing at Japanese high school	Action research	Focus group, document analysis
Naomi	Autoethnography of an L2 English teacher in Japan	Autoethnography	Reflective journals, interviews, and feedback
Chie	Effect of content-based learning on secondary school students' language development	Action research	Classroom observations, interviews
Masahiro	Effectiveness of pronunciation teaching techniques for an adult migrant from Iraq	Action research	Casual interviews, observation, and pre/post test

All participants had been in regular contact with the researcher since their return to Japan, and expressed a willingness to participate in the research. At the time of this study, all of the participants had completed the Master of Education (TESOL) course, awaiting graduation, so there was no conflict of interest that needed to be addressed in this low-risk research project. All participants indicated to the researcher a willingness to participate in this research project, and appropriate ethical protocols were observed according to University policy. An introductory email was sent to the potential participants to outline the research aims, processes, expected outcomes, and key interview questions. Providing the interview questions allowed the participants to determine the degree of commitment to the project required. The interview responses drew on the participants' experiences of conducting their unique capstone research projects, which provided them with a greater depth of understanding of areas specific to TESOL. If they felt that the interview process may be too time consuming, they were free to decline the invitation to participate in the project without any ramification. As the researcher and participants have a close professional relationship, and are in regular contact by email, there was no ethical issue regarding accessing contact details of the participants.

Interviews were conducted by distance as the participants had all returned to work in Japan at the time, and limited financial assistance restricted the researcher from travelling to Japan to conduct the interviews in person. The intention was for participants to record their responses to key interview questions in a digital audio format, and upload the audio files to a folder stored in Google Drive. Each participant had their own folder which was only accessible by the respective participant and the researcher. This approach was taken to provide greater flexibility to the participants given their demanding work commitments and the difficulty of arranging times mutually convenient for both researcher and participants to speak via phone or other means. Of the five participants, only Chie and Masahiro chose to record their responses. They both responded entirely in English. The remaining three participants, Yuka, Aya and Naomi, decided to write their responses rather than provide audio recordings. A feeling that their levels of speaking proficiency in English would limit the depth of their responses and time constraints were the main reasons given for their response preferences. This in itself is interesting given they had just spent a year undertaking a masters level course in Australia. As a result, the responses from both Yuka and Aya were not sufficient enough for analysis and were not used. The recorded responses from Chie and Masahiro, and the written response from Naomi were used in the final analysis.

Although I received responses from all five participants, the quality given by Yuka and Aya were not sufficient for successful analysis. Chie and Masahiro both chose to audio record their responses which were more detailed in both explanations and descriptions. The freedom of ‘just talking’ perhaps allowed a freer flow of ideas as they reflected on their experiences. Follow up questions were sent and responded to in writing by both participants. Yuka and Aya chose to write their responses to the interview questions rather than complete audio recordings. Time, as indicated by the participants, was a major constraint in providing more detailed responses. Despite efforts to seek responses to follow up questions, these two participants were non-responsive. Naomi, despite experiencing similar constraints to Yuka and Aya, was able to provide sufficient responses to both the initial interview questions and follow-up questions. Therefore the recorded responses from Chie and Masahiro and Naomi’s written response will be used for analysis and discussion. This reflects one of the challenges of conducting research from a distance. There is a risk that even a well-designed research plan is subject to the availability and willingness of the participants.

The audio files were transcribed and the content of both sets of data were made available to the respective participants for clarification and the opportunity to add further comments or details. Naomi provided additional explanations that helped give greater depth to some of her written responses. The data was then analysed thematically (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) around three reflective themes: on preparedness and expectations for undertaking research, as a reflective tool that informs teaching practice, and appraisal of English language abilities.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The participants’ responses are comprised of their descriptions of their expectations before undertaking their research projects, and their perceptions of the impact of the research project after they returned to teaching in Japan. The capstone experience raised awareness of their own English language capabilities, contributed to developing greater confidence in their teaching practices, and increased awareness of their own identity as a teacher of English.

In general, participants felt understandably unprepared for undertaking a research project, though they had experienced some research-like activities in other subjects taken prior to the capstone experience within the programme.

If I had not had the opportunity to take EDGZ921 and EDGT984, I would have had no knowledge about the research methods and various theories in L2 learning and teaching. (Chie)

However they felt that their English language abilities would be the most significant impediment to success. Both Chie and Naomi were concerned about their perceived lack of abilities to write using appropriate academic English successfully.

I always had a feeling that I couldn't write an academic essay properly, um, that is in the proper way that, um....the teachers in the Western countries expected the students to write. So that was the biggest concern for me. (Chie)

Masahiro, on the other hand, was more positive about his English language abilities.

At the time, my English was relatively good, maybe, maybe not. I'm comparing to myself before I got to Australia or other Japanese students, maybe. But if I were to say something about concerns about English abilities, I would say, like, yeah, I had kind of concerns in, like, I had never read, like, sort of papers, any research proposal, or research papers, or.... I did not know how to write, sort of papers, so there was kind of concern, I reckon. (Masahiro)

Despite any concerns they may have had about their English language abilities, none of the participants indicated that their language abilities negatively impacted their capstone experience. The concerns seemed more around using language effectively in an unknown language context, namely academic English, rather than any deficiencies in their actual English language abilities.

The participants instead saw greater value in the capstone experience for their own teaching practices and deepening their knowledge of areas of interest within the field of TESOL. In particular, they were keen to explore the value of the masters programme in practical terms through their respective research projects. The capstone experience gave them the opportunity to explore in a very practical and direct way the connections between theory and practice. Naomi found it helped her link what she had learned in the masters programme to her teaching practices.

I used the practical ideas I wrote for the reports in TESOL subjects. For example, using the test I made for the Assessment subject, using the concept of suprasegmentals when giving advice to students in reading aloud in English, using some websites I learned of in the Materials and Technology class (e.g. Edmodo, Quizlet), and using the concept of genre writing in teaching writing. The fact that these things were backed up by theory gave me the confidence to try out new things in class. It also reinforced my belief that teaching should be backed up by theory. (Naomi)

Naomi is very explicit about the impact the course has had on her teaching,

drawing on a range of activities embedded in her teaching, such as the value of using digital technology to enhance language learning. While Naomi could have accessed these without undertaking the course, the case that each of the activities was backed by a theoretical understanding as a result of her engagement in the course demonstrates the unique impact the course had on her teaching and her identity as a teacher. It is an indication that she is still on her committed quest to become a better teacher.

Chie viewed the capstone experience as an opportunity to use her new knowledge and skills.

My research project was about the Webquest...whether the Webquest would be effective to provide students language learning, so while I was undertaking my research, ah, I had a chance to give an interview...have an interview with some of my students. And also I observed some lessons, and I modified my lesson plans afterwards. And, ah, those experiences, ah, were very good because I thought with research project would be a good start to change the way we teach English, ah, in our school. Ah, and also maybe this would be a good opportunity to inform other teachers, my colleagues, of new methods of teaching English. So I thought would give us some impacts whether small or large on teaching English through my research project.(Chie)

Masahiro responded similarly noticing the value of the subject in his own teaching practice.

As you know, I did an action research for the subject, so I could reflect on my teaching performance. And so, yeah, it could be applied to my teaching practice, which was really good. So, yeah, I've noticed the value of the subject very much during the process of undertaking the research.

It would appear that by researching their chosen topics for the capstone experience, the participants were able to personalise their own learning and find meaning and value of their learnt experiences for their teaching practices. They were able to perceive the classroom and their roles as English language teachers differently through their interactions with new interpretations and regenerated thinking towards English language teaching. Furthermore, through their research experiences they seemed to confirm their understanding of areas of learning. The research project allowed space to apply the new knowledge and skills on their terms and based on their own interpretations. It was an opportunity that may not be afforded them in their home contexts due to external constraints imposed by institutional expectations. Masahiro points reflects this in the following response:

My teaching practice [long pause] because of the experience of action research, I mean, the implementing the action research, I feel more aware of my performance in teaching, so which is really valuable. As for my identification as a teacher, hmmm...I do more [long pause] it's a little bit hard to answer, but not only as a teacher, as, I don't know, a prospective researcher, I do think of the methodology more to teach here. So which is one of the changes, actually. (Masahiro)

Although Masahiro is not explicitly referring to the local constraints, the capstone experience provided him the reflective space to explore the valuable connection between research and teaching which otherwise would not be available to him in his normal teaching practice.

Chie's responses to questions about the impact of the capstone experience on her teaching identity and teaching practice mirror the depth of reflection consistent throughout the whole experience and its intended effects. One of the core aims of the capstone was for students to explore the relationship between their graduate learning and applications in the workplace. Chie's action research project caught the eye of other teachers and the school's principal:

The reason why I made another Webquest is our school now is promoting the new way of teaching which is called 'Active learning'. Because student tend to be passive learners, they tend to memorise what they have learned and they are not more involved... they are not involved in the learning process. So last month and this month, our school set the special month to promote active learning in every subject, not only English

And I thought it would be a good opportunity to introduce the Webquest to other students..[corrects herself] to other teachers. Not only from the English department, but also some other subjects teachers. So last week many teachers observed my lesson in which I used another Webquest, and those teachers who observed my lessons made some comments on my Webquest. So everything should be done in English, and students have to use their English and they have to make an inquiry in topic they choose in English. All learning process was done in English, so other teachers who observed my lesson were very impressed by the way I taught my students. And this kind of observation and introducing new method to other teachers will be a good opportunity to improve our way of teaching at our school. (Chie)

From this, Chie comes realises that being a teacher is more than being the knower of all things and teaching is merely a process of passing on knowledge. Chie's story provides a glimpse into the impact of the capstone on her teaching. Chie's responses highlight the opportunities for many in her teaching context to draw on her knowledge of others, especially

those with similar overseas study experiences. The capstone experience provided a reflective space for her, as well as those who shared in her work, to explore the value of the project to teaching practice. The project empowered Chie in ways that significantly impacted the learning of her students, and the professional learning of her peers.

The value of the capstone experience evidenced in this research is echoed in many studies (Brown & Benson, 2005; McNamara et al., 2011; Schlichting & Fox, 2015; Thomas et al., 2014), but few discuss the value of those returning to their workplace from a period of graduate studies. This study's findings indicate that the capstone experience contributed to both the teachers' professional identities and teaching practices. While the capstone experience only played a marginal role in their overall graduate learning experience, the research processes and reflective practices students engaged within their own reflective spaces during their capstone experiences helped them to make meaning of their learning experiences, the return to work providing the junction where theoretical principles meets practical application. It was through this process that teachers were able to systematically reflect on their own teaching and their knowledge of teaching (Adler, 1993; Patton & Kinsella, 2018).

The role of graduate level teacher educators is to develop abilities and skills through active engagement with content knowledge. We expect our students to make meaning from these learning experiences that can then be applied in real-world contexts upon returning to their workplace. We assume that by association they will find the necessary reflective space to allow this learning process to have its full effect. However, if we neglect to create reflective space and the process of critical reflection that occurs within the space, the learning experience will not be maximised. Reflection needs time to work itself out. As graduate students, English language teachers well-established in their careers need time within a reflective space to play around with the meaningful parts of their learning experiences. Neglecting to provide these crucial elements of the reflective process results in superficial reflection minimising any opportunity to grow from the experience. Commitment to transforming behaviour or thinking is one key measure of the impact of critical reflection (Safari, 2018). The capstone experience provided that reflective space for at least these three students. The students in this study researched a topic that they viewed as being meaningful for their careers as well as being of general professional interest. They chose topics that they determined worth considerable investment of time and a valuable contribution to their own professional learning.

While this study was not focused on exploring the design features of the capstone

experience, it demonstrated that further research is needed to explore characteristics unique to a postgraduate level. At an undergraduate level, the transition stage (Thomas et al., 2014, p.582) refers to a deeper understanding of their field, identifying gaps in their current level of knowledge of the field, skills needed to be effective, and teaching practice. However, for students at the graduate level, especially those who already have a well-established career as teachers of English, the transitional stage is less relevant. In many respects, core to the capstone experience is critical reflection (Ryan, 2011). As a reflective tool, the capstone experience provides reflective space for students to explore concepts and theory relative to their own teaching environments without the constraints common to their teaching contexts. Instead of ‘transition’, the process of critical reflection brings about regeneration in both identity and teaching practice. A longitudinal study could focus on the benefits of the capstone experience and, more broadly, the research-like practices developed within the capstone to explore ways these practice become not just a part of the teacher’s teaching practice, but more deeply, part of the teacher’s natural teaching disposition (Pilonieta, Medina, & Hathaway, 2017).

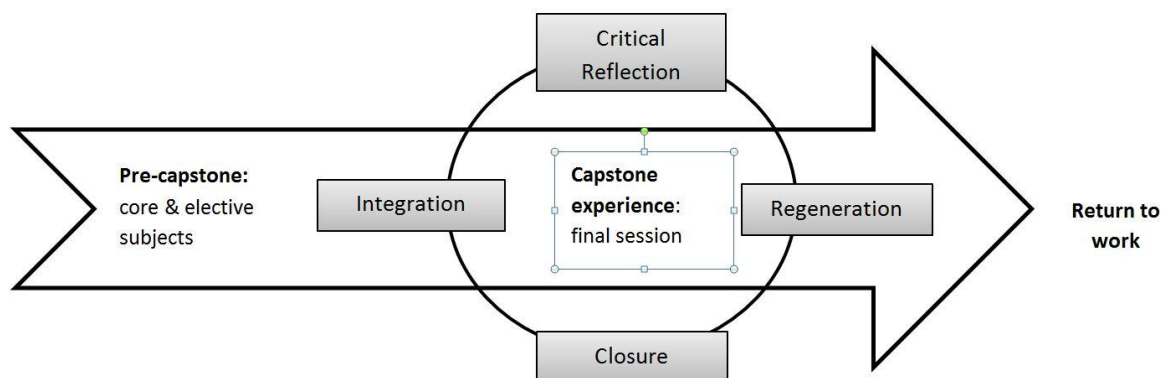


Diagram 2: A variation on the conceptual illustration proposed by Thomas et al. (2014, p.583)

Critical reflection is a process that engages teachers by confronting emotions, beliefs, and the consequences of their teaching practices (Rodgers, 2002, p.5). Through the process of inquiry, teachers recognise the influences of their beliefs, knowledge, and experiences on what and how they teach (p.5). Through this process of critical reflection within the reflective space, the participants in this study recognised who their students are, where their students have come from, what their students know, and what their students need to know (p.5). True for most participants, the project gave them a clearer understanding of their students, their teaching environment and their professional identities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of capstone experiences on teaching practices and professional identities of teachers returning to work after a period of study abroad. In the capstone experience, we aimed to help students switch on the lights to illuminate the depth of their specialised knowledge in the area of TESOL as they moved on from their graduate studies. A light that shines on areas of their professional identities as teachers of English that exists, but rarely explored.

Despite the logistical limitations that constrained data gathering from participants, the quality of the responses used for discussion demonstrated the value of the capstone experience as a reflective tool, an opportunity for students to enter a reflective space free of contextual constraints that so often impede effective professional learning. The reflective space offered by the capstone experience appeared to have a transformative effect on the participants' teaching practices and regenerated their professional identities. Further research is needed to explore the sustainability of this effect and to observe changes in professional behaviour and practice. It is one thing for the participants to say how they have changed, it is another to see the changes in their teaching practices and their interactions with others.

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