

From the Other Side of the World: A Collective Stories of an International Student via Reflections of Paradigms

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Abstract

These self-collected stories were reflected in different theories. It is the story of an international student who experienced a different education, learning, and lifestyle between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. The stories and their reflections on theories aimed to inspire other international students about what they might face during their studying abroad journey, and presented another way, as I might call it, of an explanation of theories in education via real-life events.

Keywords: Epistemology, Ontology, constructivist, positivist, Saudi Arabia, United States

Thinking about myself, where I was, where I am now, and how much I grew up in all different domains of my life. Studying abroad has been always a priority for me to achieve. I was always thinking; how, when, where can I really do it, is it right for me, is it fine to lose or leave thing for another thing, what next, and more of thoughts and events that I have been through and experienced. Strength and believing in myself were always in me, and still with me. Many obstacles that I had have been through alone helped me in some ways in re-creating my personality, gave me more strength, opened my eyes widely, and made me think in more depth. However, I believe that those obstacles were very crucial not just on building my personality, but also to tell me that the road of success is not always clear and easy, and I am fully ready for it (With God Willing). Additionally, my thinking has been shifted and developed, especially now in my journey of studying for the Ph.D. I become thinking more like a scholar, even though that I am still at the beginning of the road. As a constructivist, my ontology perspective had grown and still growing. Dealing with reality, communicating with pupils, and interacting with many social events had make me understand more of the nature of what is reality looks like. Also, that is reality can be differ depending on the events that I am in, and depending on the society. Moreover, my epistemology as a constructivist is that the more, I think, the more interaction with the outside world will occur. Thus, my knowledge will increase, and more questions and thoughts will be shown resulting from my interacting with others. D.C. Phillips (1995) said that “all of us these days are constructivists.” (p.5), which means that we learn and grow from each other. If you think deeply about it, you will agree that we are all constructivists as long as we are still living.

Growing up and starting the beginning of my childhood dream which is studying abroad. I strongly believe that the knowledge and experiences that I am gaining now are differ from what I have learned in my own country, and this is the real beauty of it. Beside gaining different knowledge and having different education in another language and in another country, personal skills have also been emerging on me. They say that every day is a new beginning, and I can also say that every day is carrying a new skill and knowledge for me. Pallas (2001) argued about how important as a novice researcher to be active with different societies. Pallas (2001) believed that by being involved in different communities, the novice researchers will have the chance to develop and gain different perspectives. Graduate students need to develop their epistemologies and practice their potentials. Pallas (2001) emphasized on the importance of practicing the epistemological believes that every new researcher has to break-down the confusion. No matter the paradigm that we have or adapt, practicing the epistemology is necessary.

My first journey of studying abroad started on Fall 2014. On one hand, I was a very young girl who for the first time in her life be alone with her brother, without her whole family. On the other hand, it was a great 3 years of adventure with my brother, as I can call it. However, I will be focusing more in this paper on my second

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journey of studying abroad that have been started on Fall 2018. This journey was very unique and special to me because I have started completely alone. Different state, and different educational level which was the journey of my Ph.D studying. As a positivist, my ontology from these two experiences was that I have had experienced and observed three different lives: one with my whole family, one with my sibling, and one completely independently alone.

In my culture, family is always a priority. We always travel, eat, celebrate, and do everything in life together. However, studying abroad required me to leave what I used to have and build and live a new different experiences independently, which I really liked. Noticing, living, and feeling the differences from what I used to have with my family, and with what I had have alone, opened a new perspective of life to me. With my family, I have nothing to worry about, no electricity and water bills, apartment rental bill, grocery budget, and more of life essentials that we all have in similar and cannot be limited in this paper. Thus, all these life essentials, now, I have had to think about and pay them independently. I strongly believed that it is crucial for everyone in this life to feel the blessing of what they have, and appreciate them more before losing them. My epistemology as a post-positivist, is that I constructed information about life when I have been through and experienced some events that needed a physical effort beside knowledge. Furthermore, my behavior has changed and developed because of my life experiences and conditions. As Demirezen (1988) mentioned in his behavioral article, human behaviors resulted from the interaction with people and with the environment. Bronfenbrenner (1986) described human developmental process using the Mesosystem models, linkages with their school setting, home peers, family, and holy places. Consequently, our reactions resulted from our environment and interactions.

Spring 2019 was my second semester, and I had the chance to take Philosophy of Inquiry course with Dr.Jones. This great course had opened my eyes and brain very wide and shifted me. Marvelous perspectives and paradigms which I had been introduced too some were new, and some were familiar to me. By knowing these different paradigms, I can know why I did and acted like that in the past, and same for the future. Knowing the paradigms of; critical theory, behaviorism, positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, post-structuralism, and more, have make me understand why and how scholars and scientists think and what are their reasons. Additionally, I have learned to expand my understanding on epistemology, ontology, methodology, and values. This course had shifted my perspectives in knowledge and made me want to seek more. Pallas (2001) illustrated that in our educational world, it is critical to prepare the next generation of scholars on a way that make them move from being novice scholars to experts. As a result, the way we prepare the future researchers, would help them with breaking the boundaries of knowledge and widen their epistemological perspectives (Pallas, 2001).

Being introduced to the world of research through this course Philosophy of Inquiry, had make me realize that knowledge is like an ocean. It is big, wide, deep, and no end of it. Methods and theories can be continually developed by multiple scholars and scientists over the years. Moreover, I can be or adapt many perspectives and paradigms in different topics and events, where I feel that I am close too and believe in. Additionally, as a graduate student and humble researcher in the field of early childhood education who prefer using qualitative and/or mix methods approach, I believe that reality can be seen and described in a narrative detail, and some details might need additional tool to proven. Many events in our lives need to be described in details because these events might be a result of human power of actions and relations. Paul and Marfo (2001) in their article *Preparation of Educational Researchers in Philosophical Foundations of Inquiry* illustrated how educational inquiry and the philosophy of education have changed and developed over the years. Based on the knowledge and the orientations of the researcher, the nature of his/her philosophical perspective would vary (Paul & Marfo, 2001). Quantitative methods lack of answers to the questions of practices, in spite of qualitative inquiries, where descriptions of answers are provided (Paul & Marfo, 2001). According to Paul and Marfo (2001), researchers prefer to participate with the communities to evolve their knowledge and practices. Hence, because of the changes in the research of philosophy of education and to understand it, studying the history of research is crucial (Paul & Marfo, 2001). Moreover, under my realism paradigm, my epistemology is that results are possibly true, and scholars need to divide the notions, thus, the reality would be probably real after investigation using various sources to fulfil the ontology of the realism as well (Sobh & Perry, 2006). Furthermore, Sobh and Perry, (2006) indicated that realism research aims to characterize the external world. "The real decisions are made in the world outside" (Sobh & Perry, 2006, p.1199). Importantly, realists need to understand and distinguish between their own point of view and the reality of the world and build different judgments in this reality (Sobh & Perry, 2006).

For me, it was not easy to choose one paradigm. I confidentially can say that I saw myself addressing some paradigms in the past without knowing, and also now after I academically had been introduced to philosophy of inquiry, I can say that I would recognize what paradigms to refer too when I want to describe things or events, personally and academically. As I mentioned before as a constructivist, the more I interact with the outside world of its people and environments, my ontology will continue to be constructed.

I had the great chance to visit the Dali Museum with my classmates in Sarasota, Florida. Being introduced to the work of the great artist Salvador Dali had made me realize in-depth the hidden reasons of his sensational paintings. Therefore, the experience from visiting Dali Museum benefited me in my understanding of the readings, paradigms, and how scholars and scientists think. I believe that it is essential to practice, see, and/or do an activity like visiting a museum beside studying, searching, and/or reading about these paradigms of philosophy. Experiencing and living the readings, would be reflected on my understanding of the paradigms, and I would be able to recognize why and how. In arts-based paradigm, my ontology of reality would be reconfigured after doing an interpretation of the presented work. Thus, my epistemology would be shown after doing an in-depth reflection of the painting or art work. Under my critical pedagogy in arts, arts deliver strong messages to the world. Yokley (1999) said that educators should advise their students to use critical theory to make them understand the influence and the strength of arts. Also, Yokley (1999) mentioned that with critical theory a reflection of; values, beliefs, attitudes, cultures, religions, and historical events could be seen and discovered.

We did a great activity in this course which was role playing. The main point from this activity was to address the personality of the scholar/scientist and think like him/her. Each student assigned different scholar/scientist, every week we came with an information about the scholar and talk like him/her. The role plays benefited us not just on understanding our own scholar, but also on understanding other scholars who had been represented by other students. Beside the understanding of the paradigms, the role play made it easy for us to recognize what scholar/scientist we might additionally like and feel that we agree or have some similarities with them. Using the motivational theory of the role modeling gave us a clear understanding of the theories and made it easier for us to address the character of the theorists. According to Morgenroth, K. Ryan, and Peters (2015), role modeling serves as a motivational behavior to fulfil a specific goal. Role modeling helps with the adaption of behaviors and skills (Morgenroth et al., 2015). Moreover, educational settings use role modeling to influence their students and make the adaption of the behaviors easier (Morgenroth et al., 2015).

Another great activity that we did in the class was to bring something that we have a personal relation or memory to. At the beginning of the course, I was wondering why and what was the real point from this activity. I knew that there was a point of it, but what was it! Every student brought something totally different like: old perfume, ring, bracelet, childhood toy, traditional food, spoon, clothes, and more. After that, we started talking about what we had brought, and why was it important for each of us. At the beginning, I was wondering why this person brought what he/she brought, and why was it special to him/her. Listening to their reasons and explanations of why they appreciate what they brought, made me appreciate it with them as well, and knew the hidden reasons of why they specialized these things. Different perspectives had occurred after this activity. This simple activity was like a call of the differences among us and the differences of our own perspectives. Through practices and social actions, we can negotiate the meanings (Pallas, 2001). However, in the preparation of a new scholar through introducing them to the diversity of the epistemologies, a crucial individual assistance was needed on finding personal identity of epistemologies for each (Pallas, 2001).

Going back to 2014, when I was learning English language in my (ELI) English Language Institute at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, different attitudes had raised at that time of my learning and development. The formal learning of teaching was to study, practice, and then be tested. No doubt that these formal routines of teaching were helpful, however, learning from my own mistakes taught me deeper. By learning from my own mistakes and corrections, the adaption of the language was unforgotten, and I believe on practice makes perfect. In addition, the assistance from my teachers and professors was also important for me to learn in all of my educational levels. Clearly, as a novice scholar who still learning and developing the assistance of my professors, would always be crucial. Illustrating the behavioral theory on language, Demirezen (1988) indicated that the development of the foreign language is connected to the development of the native language. Also, Demirezen (1988) said that by trial and error and living in the community of the spoken language, the adaption of the language would increase. Hence, every person can learn when the learning and social conditions take place (Demirezen, 1988).

Another experience that I was living as an international student in the United States of America which was using the university bus to commute every day to my college of education at the University of South Florida-Tampa. This might be something not new or interested to some people, however, it was interested to me to use a bus with mixed gender students. I came from an Islamic country, and where some educational settings are separated between females and males. Due to, the buses are totally separated, buses for girls and buses for boys. I used to use the bus, where we all are girls. In the U.S.A, I had to use the bus where mixed genders ride together. Cannot deny that I did not feel the difference, however, I totally felt comfortable like if I were in my own country using the bus! Moreover, the only difference that I could describe was that in the U.S.A, the university buses have different routes, so I am not limited with one time. In spite of my country buses, I was limited with only three routes. One route in the morning, one in the afternoon, and one in the early evening. Reflecting the feminism theory on my experience of using the university bus and benefiting from Jones and Hughes (2016) article, I can

say that if I did not experience the university bus, my questions would never be answered. Jones and Hughes (2016) mentioned that using the university bus can help with understanding and knowing the community that we will be live or work in, which I agree with as well.

In contrast, moving from a graduate student to a lecturer. I worked as a lecturer at prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in my country, Saudi Arabia. I have been always thinking about different ways of teaching, how to be creative with my students, how to stimulate my students learning, and have the best from them. Also, when teaching a thick or difficult subject or curriculum to my students. I always wanted to make sure that my students will not dislike the subject, be able to understand, and be able to be creative. I believe that every subject no matter how difficult or easy it is, my teaching strategy will have the biggest impact on my students' adaption of the content. The variety of teaching strategies will benefit me as well as my students. Knowledge is sharing, when I share with my students and introduce a new information to them, they will respond to me and share their amazing thoughts too. Creativity can be raised in a situation like this. Also, as I mentioned earlier that learning and knowledge are continuous, now I can say that creativity and teaching strategies are also continuous. Thus, we develop and continue each other over times. Walker and Shore (2015) described the social constructivism and role diversification in a classroom setting in their article. Walker and Shore (2015) believed that with assigning different roles to the students, the teacher can recognize each student strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, Walker and Shore (2015) indicated that to meet students learning interests, inquiry education is needed while applying the curriculum. Therefore, using inquiry-based curricula, the role shifting among the students can be established (Walker & Shore, 2015).

In Saudi Arabia, I live in Riyadh which is the capital of the kingdom. Yet, I work in another city which is almost far away from the capital and where my university (Prince Sattam University) is located in. However, different community and different learning environment were required for me to adapt and respect in this new place. Saudi Arabia is divided into five regions: north, south, east, west, and the middle. Hence, each region has its own tradition. We share one culture, however, we have differences among us. In Riyadh, we are more open with each other in everything, different traditions and cultures can be easily seen, and I can say that all regions can be found in the capital. While my new work environment is almost limited to their own people and tradition, which is the opposite from what I used too. I believe that when a person be open-minded and accept the differences among us as human, he/she will see the beauty of being different. Situations like these can make us gain more perspectives, and this consider one of life experiences that I also liked and shifted my perception. My ontology under the lens of race, ethnicity, and gender perspectives is that reality is created, and because of social-cultural communications: race, ethnicity, and gender are also constructed. From sharing with you a small part of my experience in my new working environment, I can now refer to the great book by Wenger, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, and Wenger-Trayner, 2014, *Learning in Landscapes of Practice*. The book provides similar stories like mine and different stories as well in our huge landscapes and explains theoretical perspectives that are connected to some social theories. Reading this book had made me understand how we live in a big landscape of differences.

To sum up, and in addition to the above paradigms and theories which have impacted me as a scholar, religion has the biggest impact on me. I can summarize or shed the light on how my religion which is Islam helped me and impacted me in my educational journey on the way I think and reflect and accept new learnings and perspectives. My religion always calls for knowledge, continuous learning, be open, appreciate life and health, respect other people differences in religions and colors, and more that cannot be limited in this paper. Hence, I am thriving to seek more in knowledge, meet people from different backgrounds and cultures, and exchange knowledge among us. Most importantly, communicating and contacting with professors and other scholars who can heighten my knowledge and understanding. To sum up, a quote from the Holy Quran that I would like to share, and has a deep meaning for all humanity:

“Allah will exalt in degree those of you who believe,
and those who have been granted knowledge.” (Surah Al-Mujadilah, Verse 11, p.543).

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