

Tales of an Educator, an Administrator and a Writer amidst COVID 19: An Autoethnography

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Abstract— This is a reflexive article that documents my experience of being an educator, while also embracing the role of a head of department and a writer, in a university in Malaysia during the first Movement Control Order (MCO) amidst the COVID 19 pandemic. Like other educators all around the world, I was thrown into the grey area of online learning which I had to prepare myself with. To take up all three responsibilities and be efficient at each one left me experiencing fear, emotional and mental exhaustion. However, supportive comments from some good friends, reading good books, and the analysis of videos I undertook for my little research stopped my lament. I then realised that I had to rise amidst the pandemic moment and be grateful for having these responsibilities as opposed to many others who had lost their jobs in the trying times. With regards to method, I documented my experiences from the day the MCO started through note making in a diary and WhatsApp messages sent to friends. I also kept the university correspondence materials in respect to the pandemic. The notes and materials helped in the process of writing this article. Through this autoethnographic exploration, the coping strategies taken to ease the struggle and the meaning of being grateful transpired. I hope that others who shoulder the roles of educators, administrators and writers are inspired to soon share their voices and add meanings to the complexity of these responsibilities, especially during the unusual times in human history.

Keywords—autoethnography, COVID 19, Malaysia, online learning, coping strategies, diary, WhatsApp messages.

I. INTRODUCTION

I am a lecturer with a PhD in Educational Psychology who teaches English Language skills in a university in Malaysia, and have done so for many years. I love being an educator since it has given me the chance to meet and share my knowledge with students. Besides teaching, I am entrusted with spearheading a department in my university. This appointment is not permanent and is made on a rotation basis among a few chosen lecturers. Usually an administrator holds this position between two and four years. Also, with the university's vision to become a world-renowned university by 2025, all lecturers, myself included, are encouraged to write and publish profusely.

At the time of writing, Malaysia has once again gone into her third Movement Control Order (MCO). Almost one and a half years now amidst the pandemic, the peculiar and chaotic

experiences I underwent during the first MCO have been somewhat normalized. It was during these peculiarities and chaos that I embraced Ellis' (2004) autoethnographic view, and my daily personal experiences were recorded as they could provide me with some kind of reference in the future.

The first MCO in Malaysia started on the 18th of March, 2020. It inevitably led to the closure of educational institutions and cessation of face-to-face classes. Since no one knew when these closures would end, an immediate decision made by many higher education institutions had been to resort to full-scale online learning mode (IESALC, 2020). My university included. Although unprepared, I was thrown into the lurch of online learning for all my undergraduate and postgraduate students. I must admit that I faced this with fear since my skills with technology were limited although there were endless platforms accessible, such as Microsoft Teams, Webex and Google Meet. In the limited time available before online classes started on a full-scale basis, I struggled to find good practices in online delivery. This struggle, however, is faced by other educators too across the globe (Divolle & Moore, 2020; Irizarry Ramos, 2020) and I was not alone.

Besides the fear, I had to also be aware of the limitations of my students' internet data and make sensible decisions of the platforms we were to use. The university was also cognizant of this issue and instructed us to conduct necessary actions to reach all our students and kept reminding us that none of them shall be left out. Questionnaires were quickly distributed to all my students and their responses on the chosen platforms were WhatsApp and Google Meet. The matter on the chosen platforms was soon resolved.

The pandemic also landed me in an emotional exhaustion. With it, there were new and unexpected disruptions to my routine. In a nicer word, those disruptions were called 'unprecedented'. Being an educator, I had always been complacent with the way I handled and took charge of things. However, those were no longer the case when I was required to change activities that had been planned beforehand. Being the head of department, there were various university circulars to read, memos to write, long meetings to attend and dissemination of top-down instructions to my department members during this time. Though well-intentioned by the

university as they wanted to create clear goals and expectations for all the staff, this might not be well-received by a few of my subordinates. Perhaps, they themselves were suffering from the 'new-normal' and adversity in their own lives. Many times, my announcements in our department WhatsApp group were replied with remarks that irritated me. The remarks may or may not be sarcastic. Because I was too tired to think clearly, my emotions had possibly gotten the better of me. I could not help but to feel exhausted, worthless and almost wanting to give up. What I experienced was probably burnout which is widespread among the academia due to COVID 19 (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer; 2020; Pressley, 2021).

However, with the challenges, there came opportunities. During this time, there were various free webinars writers could be engaged in to learn about carrying out research from experts within and outside the university. I spent time listening intently to them. Among others, an alternative idea about conducting research was analysing available texts or contents, especially when grants were scant during the pandemic. Since I was interested in listening to Muslim scholars preaching on YouTube videos, I started analysing their advice with a hope to turn them into a research project. What I attained was more than that. I was reminded to be grateful.

I write not to lament but to rejoice my experiences during the pandemic which made its mark in global history. Reflecting on and systematically analysing my own experiences in teaching, heading a department and writing in the time of Covid 19 pandemic, this article, thus, is aimed at providing knowledge about the challenges and coping mechanisms taken to relieve them. These may be personalized but they are universally experienced by others in the academia. By documenting these in an autoethnographic sketch, readers may want to use what they read to further reflect on, understand, and deal with their own (Ellis, 2004) struggle in managing work-related stress during the present or other future disruptions.

II. METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method. According to Adams, Ellis and Jones (2017), it is made up of the words "auto" which means personal experience, "ethno" practices, and "graphy" texts, experiences and beliefs. Autoethnographers rigorously interpret and describe their personal experiences which are ingrained with cultural norms and societal expectations in order to understand the connection between the self and social life. This act, called reflexivity or reflection, aims to make others understand the autoethnographers' struggles, experiences, thoughts and feelings in day-to-day settings.

Two values of autoethnography are storytelling and providing alternatives to others (Adams, Ellis & Jones, 2017). Thus, the present article was written in a storytelling mode in which I wrote what I passionately felt about my fear and exhaustion which in turn converted into a sense of gratefulness -- a process and exploration I felt important in order to relieve and prevent negative feelings in the future. In

addition, it aimed to share and offer choices to readers to cast away their own exhaustion, and as an alternative to come up with practical solutions to face the pandemic.

My experiences were documented from the first day of the first MCO in Malaysia through accompanying note making in a diary and messages sent and received through WhatsApp. I also kept the university correspondence materials in respect to the pandemic. The notes and materials helped in the process of writing this article.

III. EXPERIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC

A. As an Educator

At the time of writing in late May 2021, more than 148 million people had been inflicted with Covid-19 and more than three million people had died worldwide (WHO, 2021). The pandemic had forced Malaysia to implement its first MCO from the 18th of March till the 1st of August, 2020. This inevitably led to the temporary closure of my university although the semester was in session. Since nobody knew when this ferocious pandemic would last and face-to-face classes were no longer an option, the best decision was to rely fully on online learning mode (IESALC, 2020). My university decided to resume its interrupted session on the 13th of April, 2020 by implementing the online learning mode.

Educators were given around three weeks to get themselves equipped with the knowledge and skills needed before online classes resumed. There were tutorials provided by the university and each department was to also deploy its tech-savvy staff to help brief the others. Some of the platforms they introduced were Microsoft Teams, Webex and Google Meet. Since they were too proficient in the usage of the platforms, I felt left behind as this was the first time I was being exposed to using them in full-scale. I needed more time to internalise their lectures besides having my own hands-on sessions. Sometimes, the only words I caught were, "*You go here, and then here, and you press this.*" My concern was what if I could not be good at utilising even one of these. More training sessions were needed. This is also supported by Cummings et al. (2020) that educators need training resources to be available to facilitate them deliver the online learning.

Since my students said that they wanted to learn through WhatsApp and Google Meet, I resorted to finding Youtube videos on these so that I could learn to utilise the platforms well. They came in handy as they could be stopped or rewinded many times for certain features to be learned. The explanations given in a series of videos entitled "How to use Google Classroom for Beginners 2020" produced by Jamie from Teacher's Tech were very helpful. His explanation was very clear and concise, his voice calm. The learning atmosphere he exuded was a comforting and trusting one. A teacher who can create a trusting and calm atmosphere for learners to learn is a successful teacher (Bakar & Bakar, 2021). Learning through these videos and having lots of hands-on sessions slowly restored my confidence.

I was also very thankful to my students who gave their best cooperation when our classes resumed. I would lecture over the Google Meet and be calling their names at the start of the classes to ensure they were present. Some preferred to switch on their cameras while some others would switch theirs off to save mobile data. Those who had issues with the internet connection or lacking mobile data would send me personal messages explaining their struggles. I understood those problems or more accurately frustration very well since I myself was using limited mobile data before I could finally switch that to unifi for some bureaucracy reason. To them, I sent my written notes, telling them I could be contacted for personal coaching.

B. As a Head of Department

During the first few weeks of MCO, all the heads of departments were required to report on the lecturers' readiness to begin utilising specific online learning platforms. There were overabundant and frequent circulars, emails, memos and WhatsApp messages sent to be read by us and all the lecturers too so that specific actions could be taken. At the same time, we were required to carry out many surveys to understand students' internet connection, their readiness for online learning and their household income. This information was important for the lecturers to decide on the suitable platform for the online classes. If students did not have stable internet connection and were underprivileged, the university needed to send lecture notes to them via postal service. Since this information was urgently needed, every lecturer was asked to attain it from their students.

Being the head of department, I needed to convey the university instructions to all. However, since each of us was experiencing a different set of conditions in our lives during the pandemic, not everyone would necessarily follow the instructions given.

Some lecturers might have felt that these instructions were not smart because the same questions would be addressed to the same students repeatedly by the many lecturers teaching different subjects. They were also right when they said that not having internet access was due to infrastructure and not because of the low household income.

I remember reading my diary entries that listed all the frequent and long meetings held among the administrators during the first few weeks of the first MCO. These important meetings must be carried out because the university had to determine the best services to the students who were in various situations: those who were at home with good or poor internet connection, and those who were stranded in the hostel, in rented houses or places where they carried out their internship. Meetings were also executed to resolve matters of classes and practical sessions being halted, and issues of some students feeling too lonely to the point of inflicting harm to themselves, and others. These meetings usually lasted for hours in a day, and not surprisingly they could go on till late evening. In short, we were facing a real crisis. The feeling of being overwhelmed and exhausted soon crept in. Head, neck, arm and shoulder pain too made its presence on

me after working for long hours in front of a computer. Collie (2021) names it as a somatic burden faced by many in the academia during the COVID 19 pandemic. In fact, one late evening on the 10th of April, 2020, I was experiencing the sensation of tightness across my forehead and the sides of my head before I actually threw up. I was rushed to a clinic and the symptom was confirmed as stress related. I was advised to take things easy.

I was so fatigued that I wanted to just stop facing this. However, some good friends' remarks and advice eased the pain a little. An image written in Malay about a leader being the one clearing the path, however difficult it is, for others to easily and safely follow behind was sent to me through WhatsApp to alleviate my morale. The image is depicted in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. An image taken from 'Pusat Rawatan Islam Terapi bil Quran, Malaysia' and circulated in many WhatsApp groups. It is an image of a snow wolf leading its pack in the thick snow, symbolising the hardship a leader has to face and pave the way for the rest.

Then, simple yet powerful WhatsApp messages like the ones below sent by motivating friends brought relief to my sad soul:

"You may not know that you've inspired them. You've pushed the department to achieve the KPI (key performance index). May God bless you."

"You can do it!"

"Relax, we can do this together!"

In my diary entries, I also realized that to take my mind off the stress, I re-visited a few books written by Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah or fondly known as Hamka, a well-known Islamic scholar. His books entitled 'Memoirs', 'The Modern Tasawuf' and 'The Sinking of the van der Wijck' which were written in the Indonesian language had always comforted me. Reading his uncomplicated sentences yet flowery and powerful messages about moderation, social justice and Sufism is very comforting. As I was reading the books, I

sometimes imagined being the characters in the book and the feeling was just uplifting.

C. As a Writer

I love writing and getting engaged in small-scale research projects. During the MCO, fortunately, there were many free webinars by residence and world experts helping writers to improve their skills. Among the tips given were those on content analysis writing especially when grants were scarce for social science studies.

Since I was into listening to the preaching of Muslim experts on YouTube videos, such as of Mufti Menk and Omar Suleiman, I crafted their guidance into an analysis of advice given to others about COVID 19: mourn not but recognize the gift of life, the availability of job, and the safety of home that many were enjoying when others were fighting for their lives when being inflicted with the disease. Ultimately, all possessions are only temporary and submitting to Allah in both good and bad times is unmatched to any (Aboo Bakar, 2021). Thus, what more could I ask for when I was breathing all right, owned a good job, a house, and had food on my table?

Beyond everything, my struggle could never match the struggle of those who had fallen into the trap of unemployment. My readings about them made me realise that their struggle was even harder. Some even took their own lives out of desperation (Kawohl & Nordt, 2020), whereas my emotional and mental exhaustion could be eased if I could adapt, rest for a while, and react well to the inevitable changes amidst the pandemic. Being a Muslim, how can I forget what Allah has repeated in His verses of Surah Ar-Rahman (The Most Gracious), "So which of the favors of your Lord would you deny?" My lament had to stop!

IV. CONCLUSION

I presented at the beginning of this article that there was a struggle I faced being an educator during the first MCO. The struggle mainly arose because of the unfamiliarity with the platforms of online learning I had to embrace. However, I understand that learning from YouTube videos recorded by an expert who gives clear guidance and is 'sympathetic' enough to explain from the very basics about a platform helps me to have confidence using the platform. Learning from YouTube videos during the time of COVID 19 is essential and has facilitated learners to self-learn (Habes, et al., 2020).

I also mentioned that being an administrator during the first MCO presented some challenges that forced me to think about letting go of being the head of department. My reflection, however, tells me that it was the exhaustion and the overwhelming odds that were taking the toll on me. Having supportive words from good friends, fortunately, gives much sense of relief. As suggested by Tanoue et al.

(2020), the role of friends in offering psychosocial support can never be undermined; this is heightened by the availability of WhatsApp support groups (Bakar & Bakar, 2019; Berg-Weger & Morley, 2020). Reading good books is another stress-reliever. Alex-Nmecha, and Horsfall (2019) has found that reading gives so much pleasure and relaxation. Thus, reading good books is very much a relevant activity during the pandemic.

Reading about other people's job loss and the desperation that leads to their suicidal thoughts and termination of lives tells me that my struggle is only a fragment of the real obstacles the entire world is facing. Reading this reminds me of the importance of being grateful for the life and possessions I have. Yet, Polizzi, Lynn, & Perry (2020) recommend that allowing oneself time to express what is felt is all right and important too as this can help him or her notice the challenges felt. They urge that it is normal to feel overwhelmed and stressed in the current situation, and as a coping strategy, one can do something positive.

I had allowed myself to express my personal challenges in a diary. At that point, little that I knew it could act as my coping strategy although I was sure it could be a point of reference. Another coping strategy was to listen to webinars in which experts shared their tips on writing and conducting research. Undertaking a small-scale research unknowingly reminded me again to embrace the concept of being grateful in the time of pandemic.

Sketching this autoethnographic study has helped me to make meaning of the struggle I experienced as an educator and administrator. However, it is the role of the writer cum autoethnographer that allows me to further understand that the struggle is normal and shared by many others around the world. Accepting one's underdeveloped skills but wanting to learn to function well in online learning, reaching to good friends for human support and interconnectedness, reading good books and being grateful for everything are the coping strategies that have been taken. This autoethnography is a clear manifestation of struggle acknowledged and curbed. They are my tales amidst the COVID 19 pandemic, and beyond.

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