Chapter 2

**Contextualizing** the New Teaching Environment

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# Introduction

This chapter focuses on how lecturers might work to rationalize some of the challenges they face as they move from one teaching environment to another. This is done through reflection on my own experiences of living and teaching in Trinidad and Tobago and examining how I tried to understand my role in a new teaching environment. Before moving overseas, I had taught in the UK for almost twenty years. I had worked in different institutions: schools, colleges and universities, and, in the years before my move, I had felt somewhat established in my university lecturing role. However, the move to Trinidad and Tobago caused me to look afresh at how I conceptualized and enacted my teaching.

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first part focuses on the shock of entering a foreign university. The second part uses Schön’s concept of the ‘Reflective Conversation with the Situation’ to frame my discussion on how I worked to understand, adjust and reconceptualize my teaching in my new environment. The final part draws together my experiences in this new environment with my ontological and epistemological perspectives and discusses how developing a contextualized understanding of the situation helped me work to overcome some of the challenges I encountered.

# The enigma of arrival

It was January when I arrived in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The ten-hour flight from Britain had left on a cold, rainy, windy morning, and I now walked out into bright sunshine and heat that told me I was wearing the wrong clothes. Everything was new, green, bright and nothing seemed ‘normal’. My interview for the post had been through a combination of application, curriculum vitae and Skype, so this was my first time in Trinidad and Tobago. I had visited the Caribbean before on holiday, but this was different. On holiday, you expect the unfamiliar and you put your normal life on hold – here, I had to consider this to be the new norm and I had to try and make sense of things. Two days later I headed off to work. The walk from the apartment to campus was less than one mile and the sun was baking the morning streets. I walked through the hot morning and watched the hustle of traffic – even the flow of traffic seemed different. I had an established idea about how traffic should flow – which vehicles had priority; what horns were for, and the segregation of vehicles and pedestrians – but the traffic here seemed to move in a very different, almost pulsating, way, and this caused me to question something that I had long taken for granted. Upon arriving, I was shown to my windowless office and told that my boss was on study leave for three months. No-one quite knew what I was supposed to be doing and there was no schedule for my induction.

I spent my first morning trying to get answers to my many questions: What was I to teach? Who were my students? Did I have a timetable? Where did I get lunch? How did I log on to my computer? Where was the toilet? No one seemed flustered by the fact that there was no structure and that there was a lack of clarity. No one seemed to be in a rush to get things sorted out. No one seemed to be guiding/mentoring me. No one seemed to want to ask me questions or bother me. Soon I would realise that this was normal for life in Trinidad and Tobago!

The features of my new environment were familiar to me but my initial experience, like my experience of the traffic, was that a university department in Trinidad and Tobago had a very different character. Like most governmental institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, the education system is hierarchical and few decisions are made at the local level (Brown & Conrad 2007). This structure means that autonomy is limited and individuals have learned to await instruction rather than make decisions for themselves (Alfred 2003). Some might see this as the workforce having a poor attitude to labour (Artana et al. 2007) but, in a nation where bosses frequently scold their workers, it is often thought best to do nothing rather than make the wrong decision. Sitting in my office, I did not know all this. I had an expectation that people would want to help me get through my first day. But, as the boss was out of the office, my new colleagues preferred not to make any decisions for fear of being ‘bouffed’ (told off).

All universities have an educational purpose, but contextual factors flavour them and flavour the epistemological assumptions of those who develop within them. The university I had left and the university I now entered had a shared ancestor but had taken different paths in 1962. This meant that, as I entered the university system of Trinidad and Tobago, I found myself in a system that I could recognize, yet it felt out of date and out of place. I was able to see ‘the unfamiliar, unique situation as both similar to and different from the familiar one, without at first being able to say similar or different with respect to what’ (Schön 1983: 138).

European universities have their roots in ‘The Enlightenment’ and were conceptualised as spaces for scholarly enquiry that led to self- and societal-actualization (de Ridder-Symoens 2003). This scholarly foundation still exists today and creates tension as British universities attempt to maintain their learned nature while simultaneously meeting the needs of the job market (Knight & Yorke 2003). However, this tension is not evident in the university system of Trinidad and Tobago. While the debate about the purpose of higher education in Britain has swung between functionalism and philosophy, and pedagogy has moved from lecturer- to learner-centred, the form and function of higher education in Trinidad and Tobago has remained relatively static and relatively unquestioned. Government after government invested in education but they did so from a position of number – more schools, more teachers and more students. More students were university educated but the format of their education was not too dissimilar to that of previous generations (Artana et al. 2007) There was never time to debate the purpose of higher education in Trinidad and Tobago; instead, there was a drive for wealth creation, with the university seen as a source of human capital (Tewarie 2011).

The twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago is a ‘multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that has emerged from a historical background of slavery and colonialism’ (James 2010: 387). In 1962, Trinidad and Tobago became an independent state, but before that it endured a history of colonization by the French, Spanish, Dutch and British. Colonialism brought enslaved people from Africa and, later, indentureship brought labourers from India – both groups worked the land and made others rich. Through emancipation, self-governance and independence, the multi-form nation of Trinidad and Tobago was born, and its history now shows itself in phenotype, ideology, music, food and, the nation’s biggest event, Carnival. As a new nation, Trinidad and Tobago spent its formative years focused on nation-building with an emphasis on functionality. Palmer (2006) describes how the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams, set about the intellectual decolonization of the nation and how the early university curriculum focused on the training of workers. But the scars of history have left governmental institutions characterized by colonialism and shrouded in mystery (George, Mohammed & Quamina-Aiyejina 2003), and the education system has been cultivated by a history of centralized and highly partisan politics.

Some of my early frustrations with higher education practice in Trinidad and Tobago were connected with my habituated expectations. Education reinforces social structures and codes of being (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), and the reciprocal nature of education means that cultural perspectives inform the higher education context and the learning outcomes that are generated inform future social norms (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). Because I had never stood outside my own educational journey, I had never realized I had been socialized by the system, and it was not until I encountered this new situation that my academic identity was made explicit.

Initially, I felt a shock. I had come from a higher education environment in the UK where the general movement was towards openness – of data, of systems, of working and learning relationships. Everyone was expected to have a basic understanding of the photocopier and everyone was expected to complete their own paperwork. I had been conditioned into believing a specific set of expectations and norms of the teaching and learning environment and had an idea about what pedagogy, management, teamwork and university life should look like. However, the cultural and historical factors that informed the institution I now entered led to some tension as I tried to combine the old with the new. The established hierarchies of Trinidad and Tobago meant that management was not used to being questioned; teaching was content-heavy, and students were expected to be passive note-takers (Watson 2013). While I felt that I should do my own photocopying, my administrative colleagues felt that in doing so I was slighting them – so I learned to resist the urge to print, photocopy and staple resources and worked to become comfortable asking for documents that I was capable of finding for myself.

# Understanding the new situation

Understanding practice in relation to the space within which it exists is something Schön (1992) calls having a ‘Reflective Conversation with the Situation’. Schön drew on the work of John Dewey – seeing reflection as a creative process where the ‘inquirer does not stand outside the problematic situation, like a spectator; he is *in* it and *in transaction with* it’ (Dewey 1992: 122, original emphasis). I was drawn to this perspective as it suggested a practical approach to understanding my new situation aimed at development through making tacit knowledge explicit. Through having a reflective conversation with the situation I was able to examine my previous assumptions and use these as a means of making sense of my new environment. Schön suggests that individuals cultivate their understanding of contextualized teaching through involvement, rehearsal, consideration and deliberation. Here, I use these four concepts as a framework for examining my development within this new teaching environment.

## Involvement

The first stage of having a reflective conversation with the situation is considering your relationship with the space. This means engaging with the new environment and seeing yourself as part of the context rather than attempting to be an objective outsider. To understand the new teaching environment I had to consider my role within the situation and seek to understand my practice through making explicit the many implicit codes of my new context.

Trinidad and Tobago is a humid, tropical nation with two seasons - the wet season and the dry season. The temperature does not vary much over the course of the year. Most shops and businesses close on Sundays and many religious and domestic holidays lead to a total national shutdown. Except for the odd earthquake, life is steady. But the political machinations since independence have not been so steady. Each election brings heated debate on the need for good governance. Promises of transparency and excellence are made by each new government but the people rarely put their faith in such promises and instead place their trust in the regularities of life – festivals, religion, alcohol, sport and Carnival. For me to know what it was to teach in higher education in Trinidad and Tobago involved getting to know what it was like to live in Trinidad and Tobago: understanding the context and its impact on people.

The concept ‘identity’ encompasses how an individual conceptualizes and presents their many facets and how these are interpreted by others (Gee 2000). I had arrived with a conditioned academic identity and now realized that this identity was context specific. Previously, I had felt that my epistemological and pedagogical assumptions were broadly aligned with curricular aims, the way students were conceptualized, and the relationships within my academic community but, in my effort to make sense of my new environment, I found that I began to question how I could be effective in a situation that was structurally similar but operated in such a different way. Questions of legitimacy are central to the formation of academic identity. We might consider this legitimacy in two forms – intra-legitimacy and extra-legitimacy. In the former an individual can recognize and value their role and purpose. In the latter an individual’s role and purpose are validated by others. For me to be effective I needed to feel that I fitted in, and I needed others to consider that I was committed to working in a way that was local, specific and useful. I realised that, if I wanted to reduce the tension I felt, I had to stop thinking of myself as a spectator and start conceptualizing myself as part of my environment.

By considering my role within my new situation, I was able to purposively localize my practice. Getting to know, and becoming involved in, the customs, ways and manners of the people of Trinidad and Tobago meant that I became enculturated. This process did not lead to me becoming a different type of academic nor did it lead to fundamental changes in how I conceptualized teaching and learning, but I was able to fine-tune my practice so that it became more relevant to my new teaching environment.

## Rehearsal

Once you have become ‘involved’ with the new situation, the next stage in having a reflective conversation with the situation is to work out what can be taken from your previous context and used in the new one. This is a reimaging, rather than a re-use, of previous working practices in light of the new environment. This means developing a new contextualized practice through synthesizing initial reflections about the new context and making sense of the environment in relation to what you already know. In my previous context, there was a broadly learner-centred approach and learning was conceptualized as joint enterprise, but my first reactions to teaching in Trinidad and Tobago revolved around communication.

Trinidad and Tobago has a semi-established hierarchy of honorifics, such that only those judged to be at the same level dare use someone’s actual name. This system has its roots in the colonial past but is now seen as an everyday form of politeness and is mainly used to show social position (Mühleisen 2011). Students addressed my Trinbagonian colleagues by their titles – Dr Inniss, Professor Phillips, etc. I was not used to being addressed in this way and found it somewhat uncomfortable, but when I asked students to call me ‘Erik’, the best I could get was ‘Dr Erik’. I had felt that using first names would create an interactive atmosphere but, on reflection, I realized that I was actually making my students feel uncomfortable and creating a barrier to communication. Since it was important for me to encourage interaction, I decided my students would be more at ease within a familiar framework of communication and that I should learn to adapt to the local norm.

I worked hard to maintain my belief that teaching should enhance learning rather than supply the answers for a test, but I began to realize that students did not feel comfortable leaving a lecture without having something tangible that they could keep ready for their next assessment. The education system of Trinidad and Tobago broadly embraces rote learning with an eye on summative evaluation; therefore, my students tended to want concrete answers and I found it difficult to persuade them that sometimes there were no clear answers. Teaching for me is about connections, generating ideas and challenging understanding – I enjoy being challenged by students, but students in Trinidad and Tobago are a little more deferential and the system does not expect challenge. There is an expectation in the Caribbean that students should be passive and that learning is about transmission rather than interaction or interrogation, and students can feel a sense of dissonance if they are asked to study in new ways (Alfred 2003). In action, this meant that I had to be blatant in signposting how aspects of a taught session might relate to future assessment and I found myself saying things like, “Great point Marc – keep that in mind when you are doing assignment two.” I was familiar with such signposting in the UK teaching environment, but the traditions of higher education in the UK meant that concepts such as ‘teaching for the test’ were a source of tension. In Trinidad and Tobago there was no such tension as the curriculum had been deliberately crafted since independence as a means of human resource management. Previously, I had felt that learning was central and that examinations were a necessary device; in Trinidad and Tobago, this relationship was reversed.

Relating my established way of teaching to my new environment meant adapting to meet the needs of my students (something that was aligned with my perspective on education anyway). My process was simple – I learned about the history and culture of the nation; I learned what was contextually significant; I considered what would best enhance student learning; I adapted aspects of my pedagogy, and I reflected on how well adaptations were received. None of this involved fundamental change; I still tried to challenge, inspire and motivate, and I still felt that my teaching practice was rigorous and valid, but I made pragmatic changes in my sign-posting of learning so as to make my practice contextually student-friendly.

## Consideration

The third stage of having a reflective conversation with the situation involves seeing differences in the old and new environment but not judging one to be better than the other. Through consideration of these differences individuals can work out what the best method might be at any given moment. For me, this meant that I expanded my repertoire – and could actively decide to use old, new or blended pedagogical approaches.

An example of how I came to see difference without judging one way to be better than the other comes from my reflections on language use. The language of Trinidad and Tobago is English and I am a native English speaker; however, as in all places, day-to-day language was not Standard English but localized English – Trini. Over the years my language changed as my colleagues osmotically transferred some of the unique local terms, diction and cadence that make up Trini. Knowing (and adopting aspects of) Trinbagonian syntax and grammar was useful as it meant that I could learn to distinguish statements from questions – in Trinidad and Tobago the question ‘Can I?’ is usually reversed, ‘I can?’, so my UK students would interrupt, “Can I ask a question?”, and my Trinbagonian students would interrupt, “I can ask a question?” Learning this subtle difference meant that my initial confused look was soon replaced with a more open facial expression that encouraged further dialogue.

Reflections on language and figures of speech had two outcomes. Firstly, having a relative understanding of Trini meant a reduction in barriers to communication. Secondly, my reflections led me to step back and gain a wider appreciation of the role of language in the educational environment. Since I had grown up and taught in the UK, I took many things for granted. Now, at a distance, I could see that the metaphors, similes, ironies and idioms that I had used in the UK may have been barriers to students from other nations, classes, cultures and socio-economic groups, as well as students with specific learning disorders or disabilities.

My consideration highlighted the importance of adopting a contextualized approach, allowed me to see the specificity of education, encouraged me to be active in deciding which aspects of the two cultures (my old and new environments) were best suited to particular instances, encouraged me to use a more nuanced/blended pedagogy, and helped me see the bigger picture.

## Deliberation

The final phase in having a reflective conversation with the situation is ‘deliberation’. This involves taking a holistic perspective and examining the new environment alongside the activity that takes place in it. Once I had started to understand the history and the people of Trinidad and Tobago and I had experienced life in my new homeland, I could better comprehend my professional identity. From having a better understanding of my context, I could better understand and better fulfil my role. From this holistic deliberation of my practice in alignment with my new context, I was able to move away from a simple dualistic conception of ‘normal’ and ‘other’.

Through having a more nuanced understanding of the educational context and through seeing myself as part of that context, I began to reconceptualize myself. I was no longer an outsider, I was now a member of a particular tribe within my institution. For me, the process of understanding my role and function within this new context took time and effort. People in Trinidad and Tobago do not easily give out personal information and asking too many questions is considered macocious (nosey). This cultural bias towards privacy meant that there was very little transparency in the workplace and, therefore, information always seemed at a distance. I began to realize that the many questions I asked on my first day were culturally unusual; I had been a little too forward and may have come across as rather demanding. I learned that, to be effective in my workplace, I had to avoid conflict and seek alliances, avoid being too direct, and work to be more relaxed about the national trend towards lateness. Through deliberation, I was better able to appreciate the contextual nature of identity (Clegg 2008) and adapt my conceptualization of teaching to my new environment. I could see that I had been shaped by my previous experiences and that the same was true of my new colleagues. Through having a reflective conversation with the situation, my feelings of otherness reduced, I felt more at home, and I was better able to perform the job I was employed to do.

# Developing a contextualized understanding of the situation

Through active involvement in the day-to-day life of my new country and engagement with my university colleagues, I worked to recognize the differences between my old and new environments, and, in making these differences explicit to myself, reduced my feelings of otherness. I got to know some of the key social, cultural, political and historical debates that would form the cornerstones of discussion in general day-to-day life and within the learning environment. Exploring and accepting my new context meant that my teaching was more relevant and my examples were contextualized. Food, festivals, holidays, music and national icons form cultural reference points. These reference points become shorthand techniques and are useful tools for making a point or establishing an ontological perspective. For example, when we say ‘The Rolling Stones’, ‘The Eifel Tower’ or ‘The Mona Lisa’, we use shared icons to quickly establish a premise or position. In Trinidad and Tobago, my shorthand teaching tools involved reference to Mas,[[1]](#footnote-2) doubles,[[2]](#footnote-3) parang[[3]](#footnote-4) and liming.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Åkerlind (2007) reports that developing as a university teacher is not just about becoming familiar with what to teach but also becoming familiar with how to teach. I would fine-tune Åkerlind’s point and suggest that it is about how to teach in relation to the space in which you find yourself. Until this point, the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpinned my teaching had been largely unexamined. I had a philosophical understanding about what I thought was the purpose of education but, in examining education at the contextual level, I could better see the significance of the individual in relation to educational outcomes. I began to examine what I thought my role was in this new environment, and I began to see that investigation into student learning should be grounded in contextualized inquiry into the methodology of teaching (Felten 2013).

My experience of settling into my new environment highlighted the importance of academics being scholarly about their practice and the place in which their practice takes place. This scholarship of teaching and learning seeks to discover how teaching can best support learning and for Cranton (2011: 76) this must include reflection on ‘the social and institutional norms and expectations that inform and constrain teaching’. In coming to understand my new teaching environment I had gone through such a process – moving to Trinidad and Tobago had started with me questioning my new environment but eventually led to me examining my established practice and adapting my pedagogy to better suit my new understanding of myself as a practitioner. My adapted practice involved respecting the established communication methods and social graces, signposting learning, building alliances, limiting my use of questioning, using culturally-relevant examples in my teaching, and reflecting on how my professional development was enhanced through a heightened awareness of the difference in context. I am not saying that this was a life-altering existential experience – it was more of a thoughtful adaptation.

# Conclusion

I had developed my academic identity through studying and working in the UK education system. This had happened in such a way and over such a period of time that I did not notice how my environment had sculpted me. But such assumptions were brought to the fore under the hot sun of Trinidad and Tobago. Moving to this new teaching environment had a threefold impact on my pedagogy. Initially, my established ways were highlighted due to the contrast between the old and new contexts. I then worked to make sense of my practice by trying to understand it in relation to the lived experiences of my students and colleagues. Finally, through considered reflection with my situation, I was able to adopt a more scholarly approach to my teaching that questioned my underlying assumptions and helped me understand how I saw myself as an educator.

When I was leaving the UK I did not have a plan for how I would teach in Trinidad and Tobago. I naively thought that I would simply be doing the job that I already knew but in a different environment. However, over time, as I embraced life and came to know more of the history, culture, politics and day-to-day life of my host nation, I began to notice how I had gone through a staged development. I am not sure that I would call this a strategy but I was certainly deliberate in my attempts to understand my new environment. There will always be a difference between those born and brought up in a place and those who arrive later, and there can be no shortcut to experience. However, if the new arrival simply accepts this otherness, then a disconnect may form between themselves and their new context. For me, the best way to overcome this was to embrace life in Trinidad and Tobago. Getting involved, synthesizing my old and new experiences, accepting differences, and working to understand my place in my new situation led me to develop a contextualized understanding of my new teaching environment. When I first arrived in Trinidad and Tobago, I felt I knew how to do my job, but I soon learned that teaching is a contextualized activity and that knowing about your environment helps you know about yourself.

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1. A shorthand term for masquerade (Carnival) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Common street food made from fried flour pancakes with chickpea filling [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Christmas music with Spanish/Latin American origins [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Relaxing, hanging out, spending time with friends [↑](#footnote-ref-5)