
CDTL Spotlight: Conversation with Kiruthika Ragupathi

Question #1

Tell us about what led you to pursue a doctoral degree in education.

(0:10)

Kiruthika Ragupathi (KDR): “Of the many reasons that led me to finally pursuing a doctoral degree, First and foremost was that I was looking to break away from the monotony of my work routine and immerse myself in a challenging and intellectually stimulating environment. I relish the thought of being intellectually challenged and knowing that the rigorous demands of a doctoral program would push me to my limits but would also help me grow. And I should say, I had an amazing journey, and thoroughly enjoyed it! But what was surprising was that it actually turned out to be a huge stress reliever.

The second reason was that I was eager to contribute to the world of higher education, in particular to academic development, and make a meaningful impact in the field. Third, I was also looking to give back to the NUS teaching and learning community that I have been part for the last two decades by using the new insights and knowledge to enhance my own work and those of my team members so that we can make a positive impact on the many colleagues that we serve.”

Question #2

Share the focus of your research—what were some key findings or insights that you gained from it?

(1:36)

KDR: “My research sought to understand the ways in which educational beliefs and ideologies influence the conceptualisation and enactment of teaching, learning and assessment practices, and the factors and structures conditioning academic subjectivities in a hybrid graded/gradeless education context, which was very unique to NUS. Using social practice theory, I took a processual, relational, and interactive construction of social order to illuminate enactment of practices and conditioning towards grades and gradelessness in the nine course-sites that I observed as part of my study.

The first significant finding is that there is **no simple binary between graded and gradeless and neither is superior in all circumstances**. My data and analysis revealed a complex and nuanced picture in which many contextual conditioning factors have an impact on students’ and teachers’ understandings and practices. Be it graded or gradeless, students in the course-sites demonstrated the pursuit of learning as an intellectual pursuit—participating determinedly in learning and assessment practices, consistently giving their best to succeed, participated with a sense of self and purpose in becoming self-directed and competent. This occurred not merely because of a graded, a gradeless or a hybrid gradeless environment but was due to multitude other arrangements within the course-site such as the academic subjectivities of teachers and students, their ideological positionings, the meaningful relationships, emotional connections to people, the spaces they live and learn in, the resources available both within and outside the classroom, and the institutional and residential college environments.

The second, and a related significant finding, is the **entangled and mutually-influencing nature of assessment and teaching and learning practices**. That is, the practices of assessment always occur in complex relationships with different practices of learning and teaching in different teaching-learning regimes or TLRs as we call it, so that gradeless, graded, and hybrid gradeless assessment produce different outcomes for learning and teaching, and for

learners and teachers, when they are embedded in those different TLRs. Some authors writing on this topic seem to come to some version of this conclusion, but rarely has it been demonstrated so clearly, as I have in my thesis that assessment practice is intimately and deeply embedded and are inevitably entangled and entwined, within the teaching and learning practices of a course-site.

There are six other findings that came out of my study which you may read from my thesis:

Ragupathi, K. (2022). *Illuminating the interactions between ideologies, academic subjectivities, and practices in a hybrid graded/gradeless learning environment: An ethnographic study deploying the practice lens*. [Doctoral Thesis, Lancaster University]. Lancaster University. <https://doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/thesis/1889>."

Question #3

Share how you managed to juggle the demands of your doctoral studies with your professional and personal responsibilities, including your family obligations.

(5:29)

KDR: “Juggling the demands was indeed challenging, no doubt about it. What helped me in balancing to make it work was a bit of planning and discipline. To start with, I carved out two hours of dedicated time in the early mornings from 5-7 to focus on reading and writing every day, and over the weekends I added in a little extra time. Even if it was just a short little paragraph, I made sure to write regularly. I followed this routine almost every day during the four years!

I also learned to be realistic with the limited time I had. On weekends and on some evenings, whenever possible, I took long walks with my husband. I also always ended my day catching up on my favorite Netflix shows before bed. This relaxation and self-care were so important to keep me focused, energized and productive.

Lastly, Communication with my supervisor was crucial, especially since he was in a different time zone, so we agreed on a working structure that worked for both of us. At this point, I should also mention my family whose support was so critical, and at times they became my reviewers who would spend time looking at my chapter drafts!”

Question #4

What were some of the most rewarding and/or challenging moments of your academic journey, and how did you navigate them?

(7:07)

KDR: “The most rewarding time was going into the classrooms at these nine different course-sites. The insights I gained in observing each of those classes, the numerous conversations with teachers and students before and after the classes, the opportunity to interact with students, which I rarely get in my role as an educational developer—they were so rewarding and memorable. I could have simply stopped with the observations for just a few classes, but I kept going back into almost every one of their classes for all of the 13 weeks. These colleagues and students were generous with their time, and this provided me with rich detailed data.

What was challenging yet rewarding was the process of summarizing that rich data that I gathered, weaving and writing them into stories and turning the complexities of the data and analysis and mapping them as “ecologies of practices” summary diagrams for each of the course sites.

Of course, I can never forget the exciting conversations that I had with my supervisor, Professor Paul Trowler from Lancaster University. Paul was incredibly generous, patient, and super-fast in providing guidance and in giving feedback to my drafts. He has been the best supervisor one can ever have, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to work with such an accomplished and dedicated individual.”

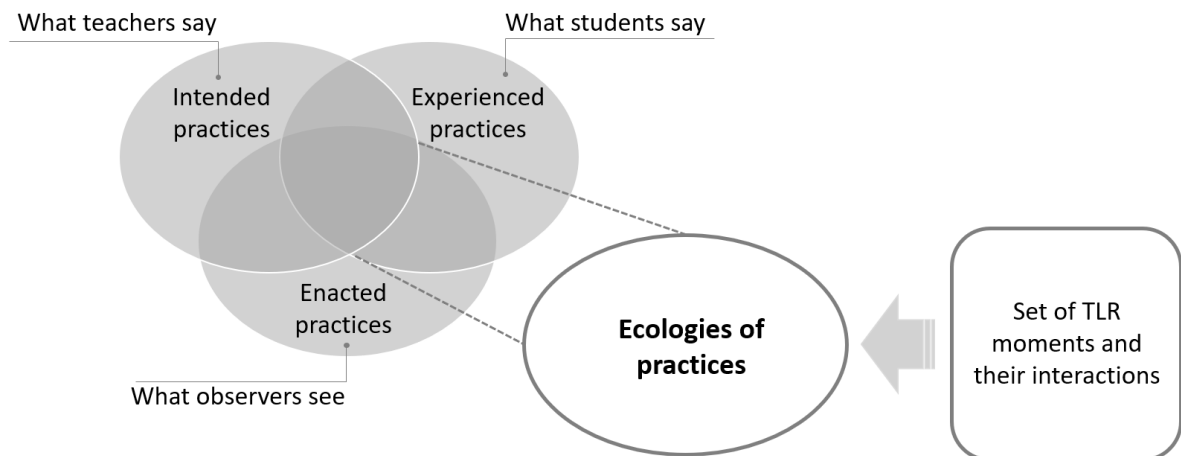
Question #5

How do you see your research contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning at NUS, based on key findings/insights gained?

(9:18)

KDR: “First is the significant timely contribution to contemporary knowledge about graded versus ungraded (and hybrid gradeless) assessment that can open up discussions on a very topical issue in assessment theory, policy, and practice at NUS.

The second, arising out of my research is also a model that I developed to illustrate the conceptualisations and enactments of practice-based-knowing (PBK) in the course-sites. What this model does is that it maps the intended practices, the experienced practices, the enacted practices and the set of significant TLR moments within a course site. Using this mapping from the model, one can easily develop a detailed descriptive, narrative, and explanatory insights into conceptualisation and enactment of practices.”



And thus, for improving teaching and learning at NUS:

1. this model can be used as a tool for understanding educational practices in our classrooms.
2. It can be used by university leadership to comprehend and reimagine educational practices.

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3. It can be a tool for reflexive academic practitioners as a way to self-reflect and track teaching practices over time. At the same time, they can easily explore and learn from each other's model mappings to critically reflect on the shared understandings and practices and grow as a learning community.
 4. Finally, academic developers can use it to initiate significant conversations with colleagues and share good practices with the community.

Additional Findings

The study's utilisation of a SPT analytical lens has further established six other overarching findings within a HGLE context related to the research questions:

- 1) the partial approach to gradelessness did not demand a significant change in the choice of practices but necessitated a change in conceptualisation and enactment of practices compared to that in a traditional graded context;
 - 2) workgroup communities, structures and interactions impact the conceptualisation and enactment of practices but this impact is moderated by an individual's agentic and ideological positionings;
 - 3) individual agency and their articulation of ideological positionings play a key role in the way in which practices are enacted;
 - 4) practices are enmeshed with each course-site's practice architectures, and thus 'sayings, doings, and relatings' of a practice draw on the cultural, discursive, material, and social arrangements that exist within or brought into the course-site to make a practice possible;
 - 5) practices are interconnected and inter-related, and so learning in and across practices occurs;
 - 6) no definitive validated approach to effective practice exist and are generally determined by significant moments of TLR that operate within specific contexts.
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