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THE CHALLENGES OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AMONGST COLLEAGUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract:

Much has been written about the value of participating in the process of reflective practice as part of one's continuing professional development. Within the Higher Education (HE) sector, this practice can be used to help formally evidence an individual's impact on teaching and learning. While colleagues understand the benefits of critical reflection, there is sometimes a reluctance to participate in the process of formalised reflection amongst colleagues in HE. This formalised process involves having to put forth a written record of one's critical reflection as evidence that an individual has successfully engaged with the practice. While many university programmes and courses embed lessons and assessments focused around the topic of reflection, there remains a question around the extent to which academics themselves and colleagues in HE positively and productively participate in reflective practice regularly enough so that our encouragement of students to engage with this practice does not seem hypocritical.

This presentation considers a few common obstacles behind participating in reflective practice amongst colleagues in Higher Education and considers how reviewing one's general approach to engaging with activities and peers in the workplace can help in part to overcome these specific challenges. As well as considering how a change in approach to working dynamics may affect one's engagement with reflective practice, the presentation also considers a few practical suggestions which can be implemented at individual and departmental level to help encourage participation and commitment to reflective practice in HE institutions.

The recommendations made in this presentation are not put forth as 'new' ideas. Rather, the points and suggestions raised are based on informal discussions and observations with HE colleagues in a context in which reflective practice was the issue of focus. In this way, the points raised here are based on my own reflection. The examples discussed in this paper were selected as common issues that colleagues tend to grapple with when engaged in the process of reflective practice.

Keywords:

Higher Education, reflective writing, reflective practice, challenges

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In 'The role and effectiveness of reflective practices in programmes for new academic staff: a grounded practitioner review of the research literature', a Higher Education Academy funded project, 'reflective practice' is referred to as 'the extended consideration of problematic aspects of practice'.¹

The University of Reading states that reflective thinking 'helps you to:

- Develop a questioning attitude and new perspectives
- Identify areas for change and improvement
- Respond effectively to new challenges

¹ University of Manchester, Higher Education Academy funded project, 'The role and effectiveness of reflective practices in programmes for new academic staff: a grounded practitioner review of the research literature', The Higher Education Academy, October 2006, (https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/reflective_practice_full_report.pdf) Accessed: 25 May 2016, p. 10.

- Generalise and apply what you have learned from one situation to other situations'.²

This understanding of reflective thinking highlights the importance of evaluation and a transference of knowledge gained into other areas of one's work. This type of thinking encourages an individual to work towards continually improving themselves and their work, which is why reflective practice is valued as a vital aspect of a person's continuing professional development.

The University of Nottingham offers a similar explanation of reflective thinking by noting that:

'Reflection consists of thinking critically about an experience and learning from it by:

- Exploring that experience in terms of feelings and significant features
- Processing the significant features and identifying learning
- Finding new solutions to dilemmas
- Using the process as a tool to help develop future practice'.³

This second approach to reflective thinking has a greater emphasis on the personal and the emotions that the individual experiences.

Reflection amongst HE colleagues

Depending on the level of familiarity an individual has with reflective writing, this may affect how much they find the process of critical reflection and the recording of their notes to be a challenging task. Moon points out that 'Sometimes there are interdisciplinary issues in the understanding of reflection. The discourses of some subjects are, by nature, more likely to require reflective activity 'on paper'. In others, such as science subjects, the same activity is probably involved, but it occurs mentally and the written report may be the product but not the representation of reflection'.⁴ Moon continues to note that 'There may also be cultural issues to consider in the introduction of reflective activity. Some languages do not have a word for reflection. Without a word to label a concept, there may be considerable difficulties in grasping the concept itself'.⁵ Keeping the latter in mind when discussing the topic of reflective practice amongst HE colleagues, general guidance should therefore be offered to staff regarding reflective practice such as through continuing development workshops. There is often plenty of support given to students to help them engage in reflective tasks, this should be mirrored for staff in universities too. One should not assume that

² University of Reading, 'Reflective Thinking' (<https://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Practicebasedlearning/sta-reflectivethinking.aspx>) Accessed: 14th April 2016.

³ The University of Nottingham, 'Studying Effectively' (<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studyingeffectively/writing/writingtasks/reflective.aspx>) Accessed: 20th April 2016.

⁴ Jennifer A. Moon, *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* (Oxen: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), p. 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*

all colleagues in HE are confident with discussing, exploring and/or formally participating in the process of reflective practice.

Another aspect of familiarity that can affect whether a colleague in HE successfully engages with the process of reflective practice is the regularity of their participation in reflection. If we consider our personal daily, weekly, and/or monthly schedules of supporting learning and delivering classes, how much do we actively reflect upon each session? How much do we critically evaluate our own materials? Do we do this enough? The last question may raise another issue of how much is 'enough'? However, it may be suggested that if one's instinctive reaction to the above questions relating to reflective practice is that this is something currently rather alien and unfamiliar, this is probably indicative that the process is not being engaged with enough. Making an effort to schedule time to consider our current teaching approaches along with successes and limitations can help to regulate the levels in which we engage in the reflective thought process. For example, this could range from fifteen minutes after class or half an hour at the end of the week. The more time we allocate for this into our working diaries, the more we situate ourselves in a setting where reflective practice can take place. This is not a case of forcing ourselves to reflect, but carving out time to allow us to reflect thoughtfully.

Managers can also be pro-active in encouraging greater levels of reflective practice amongst their team. Team meetings often center on recent updates that have been achieved or are on-going. One agenda for a meeting could be focused on the discussion of informal and formalised reflective practice within the team in relation to continuing professional development. This point could then be tracked in future meetings to follow up on progresses made. Another way a manager could approach the topic in more detail would be to set a date for a team away-day in which colleagues could reflect and share their experiences of teaching and learning with one another. Action plans could be the aim of the retreat and personal development plans could also be formed with the manager. Such an activity could be used to help with the completion of fellowship applications as well as helping to connect individuals within a team. In addition, through the communication of these reflections, the manager also gets a more accurate understanding of the progress and experiences of their employees – an insight which would not normally be obtained through typical office conversations.

When planning activities for a reflective retreat, questions could be put forth to help focus the discussion. For example, the list of 'reflective questions' here by Ghaye could be used as a frame:

1. What are the strengths and limitations of your current practice?
2. What do you need to keep doing well?
3. What are the things you need to change?
4. What is the best way for you to move forward?

5. How can you learn from success, no matter how small?
6. What does the evidence of positive development look like, and how far is this evidence trustworthy?⁶

Whether discussing one's class with a colleague or reflecting upon a situation alone, there is sometimes a reluctance to delve deep into the process of critical reflection. A general response to the latter is that reflecting and praising oneself for doing something well seems like an arrogant trait. But as Bolton notes, 'We need to throw out a sense that reflection is merely indulgent [...] Reflective practice is not narcissistic because rather than falling in love with our own beauty, we bravely face the discomfort and uncertainty of attempting to perceive how things are'.⁷ However, to reflect on what did not go well and to consider what could be done to develop practice in future may seem to focus undesirably on the negative. Further, the importance of reflective practice is one's continued development going forward, and the idea of constantly revising and developing materials and teaching styles to enhance all areas of one's work can seem like a very daunting task when we begin to concentrate on such issues.

Another challenge that an individual may face when trying to engage with reflective practice is a detachment from colleagues, this can occur when a person's role prevents them from having regular opportunities to liaise with their peers. Personal reflection with nobody to engage with can make it more difficult to critically reflect and discuss ideas for further development. While managers are expected to help create a healthy and collegiate working environment for their team, it is also the responsibility of individual team members to understand the importance of both formal and informal pre/post-classroom conversations. These can be an opportunity to explore through discussion why things occurred the way they did, why certain things went well and how other aspects of the class can be improved. Asking colleagues to peer review written accounts of critical reflections can also help to share ideas and suggestions with one another.

Many colleagues discuss their classes with their peers. This may consist of the very simple conversation starter, 'how did it go'? At first, such a question may seem small and merely a polite enquiry from a colleague. However, without such conversation, our reflection may have no starting point. In order to turn a simple enquiry into a productive conversation, we must also engage more fully with the question being asked, and not offer a short 'fine' as a response. Take the time to briefly consider what in fact did go well or not well. Opening up these honest lines of communication with colleagues can help lead to helpful recommendations, suggestions and critical discussions.

⁶ Tony Ghaye, *Teaching and Learning Through Reflective Practice: A Practical Guide for Positive Action*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.

⁷ Gillie Bolton, *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*, Fourth Edition (London: SAGE, 2014), p. 17.

Even for those who have regular contact with their colleagues and discuss how their sessions went, how many of us continue this fruitful discussion by transforming our conversation into a written post-reflective plan for what could be improved for our next class? How many of the ideas that arise during these conversations are followed through with?

I have known quite a few colleagues over the years that keep a folder of positive feedback – a record of praise and successes that they have received from their peers, students, and managers in regards to work that has been carried out well. These are largely kept private. However, sharing these details with peers and managers may help to kick-start a discussion which can help develop one's reflective practice. While some colleagues keep a record of praise, I have yet to come across a colleague who keeps a record of constructive criticism. It is human nature to not want to focus on negative feedback, but when such feedback is discussed and evaluated with peers and managers, action plans can be formed and targets achieved. Thus, one is becoming engaged with reflective practice.

Successful reflection leads to pinpointing gaps and areas for development. With roles in HE becoming ever more demanding and firefighting becoming ever more regular, there seems to be little time and scope for successful reflection to take place at work. As Eraut comments, 'Little analysis is possible without deliberation and deliberation takes time, more time than most professionals can make available in quantity'.⁸ However, this concern can be alleviated if we emphasise that not all the aims and targets set out at the end of one's written or mental reflection need to be achieved immediately. These goals can be short term, long term, ongoing, and negotiated with line managers. With such pressure lightened, the process of engaging in formalised reflective practice becomes viewed as being less arduous. Finally, making contacts with services within one's institution that support the process of reflective practice and writing (such as writing support departments, educational development, and academic practice teams) can help to make use of the resources available in-house. Working with these departments can assist in developing networks across the university and help colleagues to obtain a more accurate understanding of other services within their institution.

⁸ M. Eraut, 'Schon shock: A case for reframing reflection in action', *Teachers and Teaching* (1995) 1, p. 20 quoted in Hilary Duckett, 'Smoke and mirrors? Evaluating the use of reflective practice as a management learning technique' LTA Assignment, *Education-line*, 23 December 2002 (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002316.htm>) Accessed: 25 April 2016.

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