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The transfer of reflective learning: an impact study

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Introduction

Reflection and reflective practice are regarded by many as essential components of professional practice (see for example, Bradbury et al, 2010; Finlay, 2008). It follows that reflective learning is seen as an essential underpinning of both initial and continuous professional development (cpd). This is widely recognised and consequently taught and assessed on many professional post-graduate programmes e.g. nursing, social work and increasingly in more recent years within management (see, for example, Gray, 2006).

However it is far from un-problematic. Fundamentally, the evidence of the extent and nature of the transfer of learning into the workplace and the sustainability of such within ongoing professional development is both patchy and indicative of impoverished and prescriptive outcomes (Woodall, 2006; Mann et al, 2007; Thompson and Pascal, 2012). Simply put there is a lack of empirical data which addresses the impact of efforts within an academic context to teach reflective practice.

This working paper reports on the development of a research initiative to address such concerns by investigating the transfer of reflective learning. It explores the impact of our efforts to teach, formally, reflective learning and reflective practice and the nature and extent of reflective practice beyond the classroom. It is a collaborative project involving three universities: Leeds Metropolitan University, Liverpool John Moores University and London South Bank University. The collaboration enables a project which will exploit and integrate expertise in teaching reflective practice with that of researching such practice and also generate a greater depth than a study based on only one institution. The research has commenced but is not complete. This paper discusses progress to date.

The transfer of reflective learning

Increasingly the teaching of reflection is recognised as problematic and challenging, both within the professions generally (e.g. Bradbury et al, 2010; Thompson and Pascall, 2010; Russell, 2006) and more specifically within the HR and management fields (e.g. Corley and Eades, 2004; Betts, 2004; Rigg et al, 2007; Holden & Griggs, 2011; Rae and Rowland, 2012). Despite the rhetoric, reflective learning is not always perceived as relevant (Samkin and Francis, 2008; Grant, 2006). It may take learners into uncomfortable areas (Halton, 2007; Turner, 2006). A manifestation of engagement difficulties may be a propensity to ‘fake’ the outcomes (Hobbs, 2007). Indeed, assessment sits uneasily with reflective learning, captured by tensions in relation to whether the focus of teaching is content or skill (Bourner, 2003). Betts’s (2004) warns that as educators we do not have the authority to determine if a piece of formal reflective writing passes or fails as this takes us beyond the mechanics of assessment and into questions about ethics and ownership (see also Brockbank and McGill, 2007). Interestingly, Holden and Griggs (2011) note that the challenges of teaching reflective practice, whilst not peculiar to the HR profession, assume a poignancy given HRDs unique interest and stake in workplace learning.

Lurking under the surface of the specific manifestations of such issues lie questions of what is meant by reflective practice. Boud and Hager (2010) identify a type of practice which they label ‘technical’ or instrumental reflection and locate this in an acquisition and transfer model of cpd. Professional bodies, or indeed workplaces, which require little more than a yearly update on courses attended hardly provides the context or encouragement for the application and transfer of a more demanding and, potentially more valuable, form of

reflective practice . Working through similar tensions Rigg and Trehan (2008) ask if critical reflection in the workplace is it just too difficult. Whilst the focus of their research is teaching reflective practice in a corporate context, the research findings are nonetheless important for highlighting such issues as organisational power relations and culture as significant constraints relating to application and transfer.

Russell (2006), working through similar tensions, asks whether indeed reflective practice can be taught ? He concludes “The results of explicit instruction seem far more productive than simply advocating reflective practice.....”. However the important word here is ‘seems’. Our evidence base is thin and anecdotal. From a health care perspective Mann et al, (2007), for example, note that the evidence to support and inform ‘reflective practice’ curriculum interventions “remains largely theoretical”, whilst Cole (2010, p129) is emphatic in his identification of research failings:

At a time when the discourse of evidence based practice holds such sway there is very little in the way of research that robustly demonstrates its effectiveness.

Methodology and Methods

The research is set within the professional education provision of ‘HR’ and ‘HRD’ within the three universities. As such our focus is upon working, part-time students. Importantly, we are both teachers and researchers; we are not separate or independent from the problem . An action research enquiry enables us to pursue a collaborative research study where ultimately we are seeking practical solutions to issues of concern. The recent work of Brown et al

(2011) is also influential in terms of both approach and the particular methods of data collection employed. Working in a broadly similar field the authors suggest reflective tools such as reflective learning journals, can provide an “engaging (qualitative) methodology for researchers to use for training evaluation and transfer research” (p465). Whilst use of such tools varies somewhat between the three universities nonetheless a sound basis exists from which to draw data for comparative research and analysis. Our initial research has included an explorative open – ended questionnaire, with students (N= 57), a series of critical research conversations between the collaborating researchers and a detailed analysis of formal course documentation.

It is anticipated subsequent phases of the research will see research data drawn from specific interventions within the curriculum, an analysis of assessed student work and a number of exploratory interviews with a wider range of stakeholders.

Research to date

Here we report on outcomes from the research to date under two main headings:

- positioning practice and
- student discourse about reflective practice

It is followed by a brief discussion of the implications of our findings thus far and deliberation on the future development of the research.

Positioning practice

All three institutions operate largely blind to the extent and nature of any transfer of reflective learning beyond the classroom. Formal module and programme evaluation provides very little by way of meaningful data on this particular issue and, not uncommonly, none of the institutions engage in any post programme evaluation.

In all three universities endeavours to address a reflective learning curriculum, see the CIPD figure prominently. As the guardians of professional standards the CIPD is influential in curriculum design and development. Reflective learning is located within the Business Skills part of the professional curriculum. Importantly also reflective learning underpins the CIPD notion of cpd (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/cpd/aboutcpd/reflectlearn.htm>), where a distinctly ‘business’ orientation is evident. Whilst each course team has a degree of freedom to determine how best to meet curriculum objectives we acknowledge the challenge of teaching reflective learning within a primarily functionalist management curriculum and in the context of a professional body perspective which may implicitly discourage and restrict critical reflection.

Potentially important differences are evident in how the curriculum is delivered; week by week or day long workshops, over one semester or over two years. More specifically teaching and learning strategies reflect an attempt to develop the skill of reflection, not just theories about or an understanding of, reflection. Models, for example, Gibbs (1988) underpin teaching but with a clear focus upon the development of practice skills rather than simply knowledge acquisition. The particular mix of teaching and learning strategies, coaching, group work, role-play ,etc varies university by university, as does the relative emphasis

placed on techniques of or instruments of reflection (learning log, diary, critical incident etc). Our dialogic discussions suggest opportunities for students to practice engaging in reflection (e.g. critical friend) has impact, this remains tentative and unsubstantiated. We remain unclear if students prefer to work with (and learn more from) teaching and learning and materials which maintain a distance between themselves and reflective practice (e.g. examining the reflective accounts of others not their own) (see also Student Discourse, below).

Whilst some authors question if we should even seek to assess such practice (see above) the positioning vis the CIPD ensures this to happen. All three universities use a variation on the requirement for students to produce a reflective portfolio. Specificity of instructions may differ as with length. An important common feature, though, is that students are required to engage in reflection and produce evidence of this; it is not sufficient for a student to simply regurgitate 6 different models of reflective learning in order pass the assignment. In most cases, and following the assignment brief, the content of the portfolio is reflection using their work experience as context. Importantly we note differences in the outcomes of assessment; pass fail used in one institution , graded marks in the other two. Also we note variation in interpretation within course teams responsible for marking. Clarity is required a) about what it is we are looking for and b) what constitutes 'good' work vis poor, or work which is deemed not to meet module objectives. Acknowledging and learning from this profile of practice is of importance in providing the basis for us to consider the development of some sort of proxy measure of transfer (see also Discussion).

Critically, and in part drawing further on points above, our collective discussions to date reveal subtle but important differences in our own perspectives on reflection and reflective

practice. This is compounded by some evident tensions within course teams as to what we are teaching and how best to develop appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Rhetorically at least, all institutions aspire to develop depth in student's reflective learning. The specific frameworks, however, differ. So, for example, one course team utilise a framework with five levels (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning and reconstruction) (Bain et al, 1999) whilst another use that developed by Reynolds (1998) distinguishing three levels: technical, consensual and critical reflection

Further illustration of this 'problem' is gleaned from our initial sounding of the student voice to which we now turn.

Student discourse about reflection and reflective practice

Reflective Practice: the idea

We were interested to learn how students, in each of the three universities, were beginning to think about, frame and understand reflective learning and reflective practice. In response to 'what does the term 'reflective practice' mean to you?' a wide range of responses resulted. Illustrated in the wordle figure below (Figure 1) we see: looking back, what went well, do differently, practice, future and situations) are the most common terms used.

Yes, when we have had issues with recruitment, we've resolved to identify what could be done next time and if any practices need to be introduced to prevent problem arising again

A clear issue to follow up in terms of the development of our research agenda thus emerges and which we discuss further in the Discussion below.

Enablers and barriers to reflection

Student perspectives on enablers to reflective practice provides some limited feedback to help us sharpen the subsequent research vis specific teaching and learning strategies. Figure 2 illustrates the combined student responses to the question “What techniques have you used to reflect on your work/learning?”

There was confirmation also that for at least some students there are issues at work upon which they feel they can apply such learning, Discipline and grievance issues were mentioned, along with meetings, and project work. One student noted:

Large-scale projects whereby coordination of business/other teams is key and can often be dealt with more efficiently if reviewed properly i.e. salary review 1400 staff.

Also, we note the sorts of work place practices where students consider reflection is most appropriately positioned i.e. appraisals, pdrs, project management meetings etc). However, to an extent this is a double edged sword. Some students identified tensions within the workplace presenting difficulty in applying their learning:

other things need to be completed following meetings i.e. letters, action plans

I find it hard to analyse feelings at work...it's just difficult

I've reflected on work situations but mainly in my own time

Interestingly, at one of the universities, for some students the response to the question about barriers to reflective learning indicated that they interpreted this question as being solely related to the development of their assessed reflection, This would suggest that they viewed reflection as being an 'academic' exercise for the purposes of assessment. Thus, while they valued the skills development, and would transfer those skills back to the workplace, the process of learning about reflection was of less significance.

Discussion

The recording of the key outcomes from our own critique of practice combined with an initial sounding from students at each of the three universities represents a process of problematising; a critical initial phase in this research. Perhaps foremost it highlights the complexity of what we are dealing with. This problematising helps surface the slippery and complex nature of what we are dealing with in this research. Reflective learning for reflective practice is not straightforward. There are important implications in terms of the identification and subsequent evaluation of this 'reflective practice' that we are engaged in as both teachers and researchers. Any impact study requires some sort of assessment of change. Acknowledging such complexity and drawing upon both the literature and our initial findings we are constructing a research tool that provides a clear sense of the outcomes to which our teaching is geared.. This takes us beyond the individualistic self improvement pathway and towards a construct that enables us to assess, however crudely and imperfectly, reflective practice which is integrative of a personal therapy and improvement with that of a practice which takes critical thinking outside of and beyond the personal paradigm. Whilst assessment provides one vehicle in which such a construct may be utilised in some proxy measurement of transfer, we must first ensure assessment briefs are sufficiently harmonised to facilitate a degree of comparative rigour.

Any assessment of impact and transfer must recognise the context of such transfer. Whilst our focus is with students who are in HR work this only removes two variables. The range of contexts in which our students work, e.g. size, sector, seniority, etc all provide varying scenarios into which the skill of reflective practice is brought. Figure 3 above, indicates the difficulty with which some students perceived reflection. Our research needs to explore

whether such difficulties are principally ones that alternative teaching and learning strategies might address or whether cultures which deny the value of reflection, or work which denies reflective opportunities, are major constraints. We need to explore the extent to which our exhortations to develop reflective practice skills are doomed to fail because a level of routinised and highly prescriptive HR practice may remove the legitimacy of our teaching aspirations. The extent to which time becomes the easy target for a raft of other more complex difficulties as regards transfer is a feature of our deliberations for the development of the research.

Conclusion

In sum, therefore, we are working towards a number of ends in the next phase of the research. Firstly, a clearer sense of the scale of the problem we are addressing. Secondly, and inextricably inter-related with this, is a stronger sense of the nature and character of transfer problems. As regards both of these a more detailed analysis of data, institution by institution, is required. This will enable the surfacing and subsequent preparation of a workable research construct as regards reflective practice. A remaining intention is to proceed with a curriculum intervention across the three institutions, followed by clear and rigorous monitoring (evaluative) processes, but once again this has to be premised on the basis of clarity as regards the nature of the beast which provides our central research question. Whilst our aspiration is to extend the research beyond ‘current’ students to past students and other key stakeholders this will be influenced by available resource.

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