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Striving to Practise What We Preach: Academics reflecting on teaching reflective practice

Stream 11: Scholarly Practitioner Research

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Abstract

That reflection is part of the HRD academics' continuing professional development is a powerful rhetoric. But to what extent are we guilty of hypocrisy? Inspired by the title and theme of the conference '*HRD: Reflecting upon the Past, Shaping the Future*' this paper seeks to make a critically reflective statement on our own practice as HRD academics teaching and researching reflective practice. Researching 'practising what we preach', in the context of reflective practice, raises difficult questions but offers the potential for valuable insight into the HRD academics' professional practice.

Introduction

The idea of looking back to make sense of learning and to plan for future/sustainable learning is a central notion in HRD which is articulated via theories of reflective practice. Reflection is now enshrined in most professional and postgraduate management programmes. There is a growing body of literature which has explored the challenges of teaching reflective practice and the issues of reflexivity.

However, Bell & Thorpe (2013: 105) highlight that despite this: 'elaborate theorising, there is relatively little published research in which reflexivity, or even reflection appears to be practised to any significant extent'. Our working paper will respond to this challenge and is a considered development of research already undertaken. In this paper it is not our intention to debate the differences between potentially competing definitions of reflection, we have discussed these elsewhere (Griggs et al. 2014). Our aim in this paper is to turn the critical lens on ourselves as educators and researchers as we reflect on our collaborative insider research. In doing so we contribute to the identified gap as we share our ongoing journey and explore the following questions:

1. What is the role of reflection and reflexivity within the context of insider research?
2. To what extent do we practise what we preach?

Insider Research

It is increasingly common in academic programmes of study, particularly part time programmes, for students to select their own organizational setting as a site for their research. (Coghlan 2001; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry 2002). This insider research is a key feature of many taught postgraduate and Doctoral programmes. A key feature of this type of research is that the research is undertaken by complete members of organizational systems and communities in and on their own organisations. This type of research can also be undertaken as collaboration between insiders and outsiders (Alder et al 2004; Bartunek & Louis 1996). A key consideration for insider researchers is to reflect and be reflexive about how they can, as complete members 'undertake academic research in their own organizations while retaining the choice of remaining a member within a desired career path when the research is complete': (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007:59). The pre-requisite to remain employed and employable foregrounds the issues we discuss in this paper as we are also insider researchers, teaching students how to become insider researchers.

Our collaboration originated in a conversation and a concern which brought us together. This conversation caused us to surface an 'unease' with current approaches to teaching and assessing reflective practice with a focus on Masters level programmes accredited by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). We agreed to undertake a collaborative research project to explore the challenge of teaching reflective learning and the transferability and sustainability of reflective practice from Higher Education (HE) to the workplace.

Insider researchers are warned of the dangers of being too close and not attaining the distance and objectivity deemed to be necessary for valid research as they have a personal stake and potentially considerable emotional involvement in the setting (Alvesson 2003; Anderson & Herr 1999; Herr & Nihlen 1994). However, others argue that there is no inherent reason why being native is an issue and that the value of insider research is worth reaffirming (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) while proceeding with caution (Alvesson, 2009; Trowler, 2012). Despite this rise in popularity insider academic research has received relatively little consideration and seldom gets published. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) postulate that this is because academic research is primarily focused on theory development and not necessarily concerned about actions or practice. However, (Welch, Plakoyiannaki, Piekkari, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013) in undertaking a rhetorical analysis of two leading management journals demonstrate how methodological traditions change, evolve and undergo reassessment. In doing so they draw attention to the need for greater reflexivity about how, as a community of scholars, we present, justify and legitimize the theoretical contributions of qualitative studies.

Reflexivity

Considerable attention has been devoted to constructing models of reflexivity in management research. For example, Johnson & Duberley (2003) discuss three different kinds of reflexivity: methodological, deconstructive and epistemic reflexivity. They associate methodological reflexivity with positivistic research as it is concerned with monitoring how the presence and actions of the researcher impacts on the research setting. Deconstructive reflexivity is associated with interpretative research as it is concerned with the researcher questioning their methodological and theoretical assumptions in order to understand how

research participants see their situation. Epistemic reflexivity focuses on the researchers' belief systems and is a process for analysing and challenging taken-for-granted metatheoretical assumptions. This form of reflexivity involves seeking out collaborative research relations as the basis of knowledge creation. Therefore, reflexivity involves both an openness and honesty about our own position (Davey & Liefvooghe, 2004) and this requires serious reflection on our responsibility as researchers. This implies a deliberate ongoing commitment to seeing self and identity as central to the process of research (Coffey, 1999) and calls into question what can be really known through management research.

Others draw attention to the role of talk in reflexivity. Cunliffe (2002) views reflexivity as a radical, dialogical enterprise and advocates that researchers must analyse their own ways of speaking and writing if they are to understand how knowledge is created through language. Alvesson (2008) also focuses on the implications for research writing highlighting that there are distinct sets of practices that arise from reflexivity which impact on the representation of multiple perspectives. However, these multiple perspectives are often written out in published management research primarily due to cultural definitions of research as a rational-objectivist and masculine activity (Brannan, 2011). It has been argued that acknowledging emotion and embodied experience is a crucial aspect of 'ethical reflexivity' as it 'involves acknowledging and working with those aspects of human social experience in a way which recognises their unavoidability and seeks to work constructively with them' (Bell & Thorpe 2013: 107).

Reflexivity challenges the idea that research data can provide an accurate representation of reality and highlights the inevitably partiality of knowledge claims (Bell & Thorpe, 2013). This partiality may not rest easy with insider researchers who may be under pressure to provide 'easy answers' and recommendations to employing and sponsoring organisations.

The collaborative research: insiders

As stated earlier we are also insider researchers interested in researching reflective practice. Our teaching and research interests are aligned in that we teach and research reflective practice at a variety of levels, from undergraduate to Doctoral, including Human Resource (HR) students at masters level. Since 2012 we have sought to pursue an agenda addressing the impact of our efforts to teach reflective practice and the transfer of critical reflection from the classroom to the workplace.

Reflective practice has an established history in management education and research. From a research perspective Hibbert et al. (2010) provides a useful distinction. They discuss reflection as a process of observing how we do research, described by the idea of holding up a mirror to see how research is done. Reflexivity is viewed as a process of self-reflection based on questioning how research is done. Therefore reflexivity involves the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions and is aligned with critical reflection (Reynolds, 1998). Epistemic reflexivity and critical reflection share common features in that they both question taken-for-granted assumptions within a social and political context. In addition, critical reflection is concerned with an emancipatory agenda and is aligned with a critical research agenda.

Reflexivity can enable the exploration of uncomfortable truths (Bell and Bryman, 2007) and in doing so develop greater reciprocity generating research which is of mutual benefit to participants and the researcher(s). Despite the espoused benefits of reflexivity Bell and Thorpe (2013) highlight that it is still a 'minority sport' which is talked about much more in abstract terms than it is actually practiced.

Within this developmental paper we examine our collaborative research journey and our attempts at practising what we preach. In doing so we provide a rare reflexive account and open a discussion on why reflexivity is still a 'minority sport' (Bell and Thorpe, 2013).

Striving to practice what we preach: How are we doing?

Researching our practice is an important aspect of our shared values and approach. As teachers and researchers we had concerns regarding the teaching and assessment of reflective learning (Holden & Griggs, 2012; Lawless et al. 2012; Rae & Rowland, 2012). It was this initial 'concern' which brought us together and the opportunity to put together a collaborative bid for the HE Academy. During our initial meeting we surfaced some of our taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the teaching of reflective practice and our desire to research it.

All four researchers have met face to face on three occasions but the majority of our conversations have been by e mail, with some individual phone calls. Our e mail correspondence has focused on sending reading material to each other and crafting outputs. We have also shared reading material which has challenged our metatheoretical assumptions. We have, on occasion, paired up to present outputs at conferences.

The reading and writing process has enabled us to share and challenge some of our taken-for-granted assumptions. The use of track comments has proved particularly useful and we are beginning to develop conversations for understanding as we read and comment on emerging work. It is unlikely that these 'track comment' conversations would have occurred without the face to face meetings. We have used the face to face meetings to progress the project while getting to know each other better. After the 2nd meeting we agreed to circulate a written reflective account focusing on our collaborative research experience and these reflective accounts will provide a focus for this developmental paper as we question whether we practise what we preach.

The lead author of this paper agreed to co-ordinate this and had to send friendly reminders to some colleagues before receiving their written accounts. Indeed, she had been very slow in producing her own account and had been prompted by the arrival of one reflective account in her in-box. When all the accounts had been received they were circulated to everyone and they formed the basis of a discussion at our 3rd meeting. We all acknowledged that we had found it difficult to write the reflective account as we were very aware of the audience who would read it and unsure of the focus. This is illustrated by a quote from one of the accounts. For clarity, we have labelled the accounts 1 – 4 but this numbering does not relate to the ordering of the authors' names in the paper.

Feel nervous in these notes about being very personal...other than in relation to myself. I could do a strengths and weaknesses for each of the three other partners vis the collaboration but am pulling back from committing this to paper. But does a strong collaboration need a greater level of opening up and honesty with each other?
(Account 1)

This acknowledgement of the emotional experience of writing a reflective account 'feel nervous...about being personal ...pulling back from committing this to paper' was reflected in other accounts.

This is a difficult section to write and I hope that sense emerges as my fingers hit key boards. (Account 2).

Interestingly, this 'difficult section' focused on 'other' colleagues who were not directly involved in the collaboration. As authors of reflective learning accounts we demonstrated a willingness to put a mirror of reflection in front of themselves:

Being, in terms of research and publications, the most junior of the group, I didn't always feel I was adding value to the proceedings – this certainly didn't come from the group, more of my own perceptions. (Account 4)

However, there appeared to be an initial hesitation in critiquing the collaboration. The critiques of the collaboration were written in a tentative and questioning genre as illustrated by the following extract:

Looking back, I think we all came to it with a level of enthusiasm but I'm not sure we explored in sufficient depth what we expected from the project or how we saw the collaboration working. Yes, we set project aims and agreed some initial stages for the project, but did we really confirm we have a common understanding? You could say this doesn't matter as a team can evolve organically and I suppose that is how I would see our progress but perhaps it would have been worth exploring roles and expectations in more depth. (Account 3)

The key themes which emerged from the written accounts were discussed at our 3rd meeting. During this meeting we 'aired' many of our concerns which had been 'hinted at' within the written accounts. This draws attention to the problematic issues of just relying on a written reflective account and the need for ongoing dialogue if learning is to emerge. However, it is not our intention in this paper to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of writing reflective learning accounts or indeed the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative working.

It is our intention to illustrate how we are striving to practise what we preach and to illustrate how collaborative working can enhance reflection and reflexivity. We have a skype meeting planned prior to the UFHRD conference and we are all attending the conference. These face to face meetings will be supplemented by 'track comment' conversations. Reflexivity requires that we analyse our ways of speaking and writing in order to understand how knowledge is created through language.

As insider researchers within a HE environment a key driver for our collaboration is produce better quality management research which is publishable. Arguably reading and writing (for a variety of audiences) is the social practice which we aim to improve as we strive to become a community of critically reflective practitioners.

Conclusion

As teachers and researchers we share a social constructionist perspective on learning. This starts from the assumption that learning occurs, and knowledge is created, mainly through conversations and interactions between people (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Cook & Yanow, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). As insider researchers we recognise that we are all insiders of many systems. The knowledge we have of these systems is rich and

complex. Our paper provides a first step at playing the 'minority sport' of reflexivity as we discuss how through a process of reflexive conversations we can articulate tacit knowledge that has become deeply segmented due to socialisation and reframe it.

This reframing can lead to theoretical knowledge which is publishable. However, therein rests another story which may explain why reflexivity continues to be a 'minority sport'. We welcome discussion and the opportunity to continue our learning conversations.

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