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Connecting theory and practice: Exploring the use of personal experiences in programme design

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Anyone who has been confronted with practical programme design situations is likely to have experienced that people draw on personal experiences to inform their decisions. Is this an issue?

This paper investigates the use and role of personal experiences in programme design considerations and decision-making in the context of a polytechnic in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It explores the kinds of experiences decision-makers draw on and seeks an explanation for their application. Mapping of the experiences alongside a framework for human learning suggests that decision-makers are at different stages in their development of expertise in programme design. However, many decision-makers, and particularly people in management positions, are shown to use experiences from their own immediate context to inform their decision-making, with limited theoretical grounding or reflection on the idiosyncrasies of the situation at hand. It is argued, that such an approach is likely to continue to recreate the past and form barriers to innovation. Professional development to connect decision-makers’ practices with research and established knowledge in programme design may be a way to bring people’s expertise to the next stage.

Keywords: curriculum design, decision-making, reflective practice

Introduction

Many novice teachers tend to recreate their own educational experiences (Lankard Brown, 2003) possibly because these are the only experiences on which they can build their practice (Goodyear, Markauskaite, & Kali, 2009). Programme design decision-makers seem to do the same, as suggested by the following answer from a decision-maker in my own institution to the question why a programme should include assessments:

Assessment is one form of feedback to a student to encourage them to keep on learning, that they have achieved and it is a very tangible thing to get an assessment result. It is probably quite personal to people. It certainly was to me.

This answer shows how the continued practice of assessment is supported and confirmed by the decision-maker’s personal experience as a student of receiving an assessment result. Probably anyone involved in programme design will acknowledge that they occasionally draw on their personal experiences when making decisions.

There is a vast collection of knowledge, models, guidelines and systems available in the scholarly literature, in policy documents, and in quality assurance systems to help make decisions in programme design practice. Yet, personal experiences are used all the time and play a valuable role in programme design practice, and it would be unfair to say that the use of these experiences is a problem. However, this does raise some questions for exploration:
Who exactly uses personal experiences in programme design? What kind of experiences do they use? Why do people use these experiences? What are the implications for the programmes that are developed?

This paper uses the context of a polytechnic in Aotearoa/New Zealand to seek answers to these questions. For reasons of clarity, ‘programme design’ as referred to in this paper consists of all considerations and decisions regarding the intentions of an educational programme and its components (referred to as courses), their structure and teaching methods, their administration and management, assessment, evaluation, as well as the process of consultation and development. This paper further embraces the idea of “design-in-advance” and “design-in-action” (Barnett & Coate, 2005, pp. 50-51), that is, that a programme is always in a process of design during its entire lifespan.

**Literature overview**

Programme design policies and practice in polytechnics in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and across other tertiary education contexts, seem strongly influenced by models that are grounded in the Tyler Rationale (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Sork & Newman, 2004; Tyler, 1949). As such, they provide many research-based guidelines to help decide on programme intentions, structure, teaching strategies, administration, resources, assessment, evaluation, development process, and analyse contextual influences.

There are limitations to these instrumentalist models. They seldom, if ever, acknowledge that decisions are made by people, who have their own subjective experiences and interpretations. For example, national programme development guidelines in Aotearoa/New Zealand focus on evidence of support from industry, community groups, students, the tertiary organisation, but not from the decision-maker’s view, let alone their expertise (e.g. NZQA, 2011). In my own institution, the programme development approach described in the quality assurance system is aligned with the national guidelines, and also assumes the programme design decision-maker as being external to the process. The importance of the people involved in programme design decision-making has been highlighted by Cervero and Wilson (1994, 1998), who raised awareness of the social and political context of programme design. Several other explorations acknowledging the complexity of programme design as a social practice are found in the literature (e.g. Barnett & Coate, 2005; Slaughter, 1997; Sloane-Seale, 1997).

In other words, the practice of programme design appears much more messy and indeterminate than the instrumentalist models make believe and are able to deal with (Schön, 1983). Organisational contexts are often too complex and never have enough data available to make decisions on technical rational grounds only, making the use of personal experiences and informal sources in decision-making essential (Schmidtlein, 2004). However, how personal experiences are used seems to depend, at least partially, on a person’s expertise with the situation under consideration. Building on a model for human learning developed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1988), Flyvbjerg (2001) describes how novices in a particular field, in this case programme design, tend to rely on objective rules that can be generalised to all similar situations. The models, systems and guidelines as referred to earlier can be considered examples of such rules. They tend to provide confidence and security to decision-makers. As people develop their expertise they start using experiences from situations they consider sufficiently similar and transfer these to new situations. The further people develop their professional expertise, the more they use reflection on their experiences to inform their practice (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Simultaneously, the process of
reflecting on their experiences for making decisions helps people to develop their professional expertise even further (Schön, 1987). These higher levels of expertise resonate with discourses of intuition and wisdom (e.g. Dane & Pratt, 2007; Rowley & Slack, 2009), explaining how highly experienced people use their experiences to make decisions in complex situations. In these situations decision-making is often intuitive, implying that personal experiences are used but may not be expressed explicitly.

This brief literature overview suggests that personal experiences are expected to play an essential part in programme design decision-making. They may guide people in making decisions in unfamiliar situations, and therefore aid in programme design situations that are unable to be addressed by existing models. They may also assist people in reflecting on their practices, in order to develop their expertise in programme design. These ideas will be used in the exploration of the use of personal experiences in programme design practice in this paper.

Methodology

This study formed part of a bigger research project into understanding programme design practice at a polytechnic in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Polytechnics are tertiary education organisations which teach a wide range of vocationally oriented study programmes. The length of most programmes varies from twelve weeks to three years, and they range from foundation studies to undergraduate degrees and sometimes postgraduate programmes.

The project was carried out as an interpretive case study of one institution. The study explored how practitioners’ understandings of programme design shaped and were shaped by their contexts (Bloome & Clark, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). It examined both what information practitioners provided and how they provided the information. The understanding of practice followed from analysing the interplay between the what and the how (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008).

To generate the data for this study, decision-makers across the institution were interviewed about their programme design practices. This included eight decision-makers at the institutional level (ID), including members of the Academic Board and the Senior Management Team, and twenty-two across a selection of five programmes: managers (M), teachers (T), programme co-ordinators/teachers (P), and a programme design advisor (A). The scope of the project was limited to certificate and diploma programmes, as these are considered typical for a polytechnic.

The interviews were semi-structured and covered participants’ considerations and decisions regarding the intentions of the programmes and their courses under consideration, the programmes’ structure and teaching methods, their administration and management, assessment, evaluation, and the processes of consultation and development. For each aspect, participants were asked what they found important when making decisions, and why. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were approved by participants before they were used for analysis.

Focusing on the research questions: 1) Who exactly uses personal experiences in programme design?; 2) What kind of experiences do they use?; 3) Why do people use these experiences?; and, 4) What are the implications for the programmes that are developed?, all extracts expressing the use of personal experiences in considerations and decisions were identified from the transcripts. Using NVivo®, the extracts were grouped according to the sources from which the personal experiences appeared to have been drawn. Within these sources, themes
were identified that indicated how people used the experiences. The sources and themes are presented in the following section. Subsequently the sources and themes are discussed in order to find an answer to the research questions posed in the introduction.

**Sources of personal experiences**

In using personal experiences to consider programme design decisions participants appeared to draw on six sources:

- The role in which they were interviewed;
- Other roles they have within the institution;
- Design practice in programmes outside the scope of this study;
- Decision-makers’ previous professional roles outside the institution;
- Their previous lives as a student; and,
- Their personal lives.

Table I and Table II provide quantitative overviews of the identified references to each source in two different ways. It must be noted that any quantitative analysis of the data in this study has severe limitations and should be done with great care. This study involves only one case with a small number of participants. Furthermore, the data gathering process was semi-structured, implying that interviews were different in length and did not cover exactly the same topics. Therefore only the most striking observations from the quantitative data are highlighted.

Table I distinguishes references made by institutional decision-makers from those made by programme decision-makers. The table suggests that institutional decision-makers refer much more often to experiences from other roles in the institution, from design practice in other programmes and from their personal lives. Seven of the institutional decision-makers and eight of the programme decision-makers had a management position in the institution, that is, they had personnel and budget responsibilities. All other participants had an academic position, which includes teaching, programme coordination and/or academic advising responsibilities. Table II presents the same references as Table I, but distinguishes between participants with a management position and those with an academic position. Table II shows that, compared to participants in academic positions, few participants in management positions referred to their experiences in the role in which they were interviewed or their experiences as a student. On the other hand, compared to managers, few participants in academic positions referred to other roles they have in the institution, to design practice in other programmes, to previous professional lives and to their personal lives.

Each source of experiences is explored and described in more detail below, illustrated with representative quotes from the data. The person who provided the quote is shown between brackets, using a letter (ID, P, T, M or A) to identify their role and a number to identify the person.
Table 1: Number of identified references to each source of experiences for Institutional and Programme decision-makers. The number of participants is each group is shown between brackets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences from</th>
<th>Number of identified references to the source of experiences by:</th>
<th>Total of references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional decision-makers (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role within this study</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other roles in the institution</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design practice in other programmes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>previous professional roles</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lives as a student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal lives</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Number of identified references to each source of experiences for participants in management positions and in academic positions. The number of participants is each group is shown between brackets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences from</th>
<th>Number of identified references to the source of experiences by participants in:</th>
<th>Total of references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management positions (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role within this study</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other roles in the institution</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design practice in other programmes</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>previous professional roles</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lives as a student</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal lives in general</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Personal experiences from decision-makers’ roles within the context of this study

Within this study, people were interviewed from the perspective of a particular role they had in programme design practice: as institutional decision-maker, teacher, programme coordinator, manager, or advisor. Reflection on personal experiences from their role appears to influence people’s programme design practice. Thirty-two references to this source were identified, all but two of which were made by people in an academic position. All references expressed examples of reflective practice, in which people draw on a framework based on past experiences and/or models to inform the new situation. The framework can be explicit in the form of a model, or rule, as illustrated by the following consideration regarding assessment weightings:

As soon as [the assessment] has been published and given to the students we have to stick to it. [...] I had a situation where the students had a published weighting and it had been marked on another weighting. [I was told] to go back and remark the weightings both ways, to make sure that no student was disadvantaged. This shows how important it is that you do do that, and don’t make it flexible, like I did. (P-5)
It can also be implicit, for example, where a teacher gauges what the students can cope with and adjusts the level of his teaching accordingly:

When I first arrived in the teaching profession I tended to over-teach my subject and talk on a level that was too high. As experience is gained, I tend to lower the bar a little bit so you think the student may or may not understand or you have a clear understanding of how the student learns, so then you adjust your teaching to that level. (T-3)

**Personal experiences from another role within the institution**

Most decision-makers in this study had other roles within the institution than just the one for which they were interviewed. For example, the institutional decision-makers were also faculty managers, or members of institution-wide support services. The programme decision-makers were also involved in design practice for other programmes or were line managers in the institution. The teachers often taught in other programmes as well. Personal experiences from these other roles were found to influence programme design practice. All but one of the 29 references to this source were from institutional decision-makers who were also faculty managers.

All those references from faculty managers showed how the personal experiences from this role were directly transferred to programme design considerations at institutional level. There appeared to be no reflection whether the faculty experiences were applicable to practice at the institutional level. Two types of transfer were found. Firstly, although I interviewed them about their role as institutional decision-maker, participants used examples from their faculty as if this was the topic of discussion. For example, in decision-making about intentions:

I am quite capable of looking at the course outcomes and say to myself: do [the students] really need that? But [as a faculty manager] you do get to know your staff a bit and some staff would like to think that their courses are the most important thing ever, and you have got to listen to their advice carefully, and you also get some staff who want to take anybody and everybody, and in that case if they say that what you do is say to yourself: well are we teaching at the right level? (ID-1)

Secondly, participants spoke from their role as institutional decision-makers, but they clarified themselves with examples from their personal experiences in the faculty context. The following example shows that a variety of teaching methods and a practical focus are important in decision-making at institutional level, because of the decision-maker’s experience in her/his own faculty: “It is important to have a variety of teaching methods, because a lot of students, in our faculty’s case, are good with their hands, so I think it is important that it has quite a strong practical focus” (ID-6).

**Personal experiences from design practice of other programmes**

This study only included design practice of provider certificate and diploma programmes. However, decision-makers appeared to use personal experiences from design practice of out-of-scope programmes in their considerations for the programmes within this scope. Fifteen of the 16 references to this source were made by managers. In almost all references participants appeared to transfer their experience in other programmes directly to the design practice under consideration in the study, without reflecting on the appropriateness of this transfer. An example is the following, where the decision-making on credit values for degree courses is transferred to certificates and diplomas:
There is lots of debate whether the credit size is right. For instance the [Bachelor of XYZ] had different sized courses in it and we had to re-do the whole curriculum, and it wasn’t easy to fit things into 15 or 30 credits in terms of content areas because they were required content areas that you couldn’t move out from. So trying to get a sensible mix of content into courses [...] that was quite difficult. [...] That is a three-year programme, as opposed to a certificate or diploma that would be shorter, but it is the same process. (ID-3)

Two references to this source showed how an experience from another programme is used as a model. Reflection on this model informs decision-making in the programme under consideration. In the following example a participant reflects on negative experiences with allocation of programme development time, and how this influences her/his practice:

From my own experience, the person who developed the Bachelor of [ABC...] was asked to develop a programme while teaching a new programme. It was a huge thing for one person and I saw him as completely blown out a year and a half later. [...] [The institution] just don’t resource [these people] well enough. [...] I hope that I am perceived to do quite well in giving time for development. (M-4)

**Personal experiences from previous professional roles outside the institution**

People also bring experiences from previous professional roles to their programme design practice. Thirty-three references to this source were found, the vast majority of which (23) came from managers. In all of these references experiences in the previous role appeared to be used as a model, on which participants reflected to inform their decisions in the programme(s) under consideration.

Some used their experiences from a professional role in education as a model. For example, one used an experience from a previous role as a teacher:

From my experience, if people know their own learning style, they actually know how they learn, they learn more effectively, and I have also found that the more teachers know about the individual learning styles, the more effective their teaching is, it is very important to me. (ID-4); Another example shows an experience from a previous management role: “I have seen [in a different institution] that sometimes they have ended up with a policy statement which became highly prescriptive, and will presumably quite quickly end up being non-compliant, because nobody does it that way” (ID-7). Others reflected and built on experiences from a professional role outside education. The following two examples show similar personal experiences, but with opposite effects on the practitioners’ considerations: “I used to live in an organisation, the army, which relied on its rules and regulations. I had to abide exactly by these, chapter and verse. Now I don’t have to do that, and I don’t” (T-2), versus “My whole credibility of my job relies on following this, how I am viewed and how I am judged. But having a navy background that does not worry me, I am used to following instructions” (P-5).

**Personal experiences as a student**

Some decision-makers reflected on their own experiences as a student in their programme design considerations. Seventeen of the 20 references to this source were found amongst decision-makers for three of the five programmes. This could be partly understood considering that participants from these programmes generally were industry practitioners before they became educators, and therefore had studied a similar programme to the one for which they were now decision-makers. Again, these experiences were used as a model, on which participants reflected...
in order to inform decision-making in the programme under consideration. The following illustrates these experiences and how they influenced considerations, for example on standards of performance in comparison to other institutions:

All of our staff come from private schools ‘cause that’s all that was available so we know what the training was like. We’ve tried to replicate that plus more, because we’re a longer programme. We’ve worked really hard at making sure we ensure those higher standards. (P-4);

or, on teaching methods:

In my personal experiences my learning was always better if I had been pre-exposed to the problem. With the polytechnic system we are presenting the problem to the student, we are presenting the solution to the student, and that is their learning cycle, providing problem-solution-problem-solution and getting them to demonstrate along the way. I believe sometimes it is better to present them with problems for which there is no solution and either you develop a solution in your context at work, or that solution does not appear until you move from your work context into a formal learning context. (M-1).

Personal life experiences
The final source on which decision-makers appeared to draw for their programme design considerations is their life experiences in general. The majority – 31 out of 41 – of the references in this theme were from institutional decision-makers who were also managers. The references from this source indicated how people used implicit frameworks to reflect on their experiences. In one type of references participants appeared to use a framework of who they were or had become through their life experiences which influenced their programme design considerations, e.g.

The political context is what I look for particularly in programmes. That is because I am a result of politics, and so, I am looking at how much colonisation is still going on within programmes, and the impact that it might have on the students [...] and how it can be steered by a political agenda, without sometimes possibly not even realising that that is happening. (ID-8)

In a second type, an intuitive framework built upon the whole of life and professional experiences informs people’s considerations. For example:

If there is something that I find really important in a course and it is not there, I would talk to the Head of School or the programme coordinator. Depending on my own personal knowledge of an area I would stick at it for a while, or just give it away if it is distant from my expertise. (ID-4)

One entirely different reference illustrates how life experiences were transferred to the programme design situation under consideration, without reflection:

something that influenced me strongly was the attitude of our own daughter, and our son, and I learned quite a lot from them about what young people’s needs are. I take notice of friends who’ve got potential learners. I meet other learners or potential learners all the time. (ID-1)
Discussion

The use of personal experiences in decision-making highlights the non-instrumentality of decision-making (Flyvbjerg, 2001). It emphasises that it matters who is involved in programme design practice, not so much in terms of power relationships as noted by Cervero and Wilson (1994), but in terms of people’s involvement as individuals, who are guided by their own unique experiences. Each person’s experiences are different, and therefore each person contributes differently to programme design. The previous section presented six sources of experiences that were identified in this study. Across these six sources, five different uses of experiences were identified. The role of these uses will be discussed in this section, using the ideas presented in the literature overview as a framework.

It was noted in the literature overview that novices tend to rely on objective rules to inform their decisions. Because the use of personal experiences was the topic of this study, and not the use of models, systems and rules, no examples of this were found. However, this raises the opportunity to extend this study with an inquiry into how people use objective rules. In the next stage of development, people start using experiences from situations they consider sufficiently similar and transfer these to new situations (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The data showed how ‘sufficiently similar situations’ include other programmes, particularly for managers, and other roles in the institution, almost solely for institutional decision-makers who have a faculty management position. In one instance a life situation was seen as sufficiently similar. It was shown that these similar situations were transferred to the situation under consideration, without reflection on the appropriateness of this transfer.

This approach is of concern. There is a wealth of models, frameworks and research about education available that could have informed people’s programme design considerations; the literature overview has only pointed to a few of those. Yet decision-makers elect not to use this and directly transfer experiences from a known situation to a new situation. The obvious risk is oversimplification of the new situation by ignoring important aspects of the new situation, that are not found in the known situation, for example a different demographic of students. Such an approach leaves no space for innovation and only recreates the past – in a similar way as novice teachers recreate their own educational experiences (Goodyear et al., 2009; Lankard Brown, 2003).

The literature overview further noted that people increasingly reflect on their experiences to inform their practice as they develop their professional expertise (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Schön, 1983). The first step of reflection identified from the data was the use of experiences from previous professional roles, mostly by managers, and from being a student, mostly by people in academic positions. People seemed to use these experiences as a model or a theory, which formed the foundation for their judgment regarding the situation under consideration. This implied that reflection was needed to identify whether the experience was comparable to the current situation and if so, whether the experience should be transferred to or rejected for the current situation.

Similar concerns arise from this approach as from the ‘transfer’ approach. While the new situation is not blindly adopted as similar to the known situation, people still remain within their own limited one-off experience, without drawing on the wider knowledge that is available. Again this creates the risk of repeating the past, as was put aptly by one of the participants:
It is easy for people like ourselves who have come through an industry and take that industry how it should be and will always be, but we have to make sure that we do not become a stick in the mud. (T-3)

Evidence of further development of reflective practice was found where people drew on explicit or implicit frameworks to reflect on their experiences and inform their practice. This approach was particularly taken by participants in academic positions, where they reflected on experiences from the role in which they were interviewed. This is understandable considering these people negotiate programmes almost on a daily basis, which has over time provided them with a lot of expertise on which to build. Furthermore this approach was used by all participant groups - managers more than others - through reflecting on their life experiences in general. Decision-makers appeared to have created frameworks built on the whole of their professional and life experiences, and used these as the foundation for reflection. In many cases those frameworks appear intuitive, making it impossible to analyse the nature of the frameworks.

Two key findings result from this analysis of personal experiences in programme design. The first one is that many decision-makers do not seem to draw on the research and knowledge that is available in situations where this knowledge could have been beneficial for the purpose of developing well-considered programmes; instead, they draw on their own local experiences. However, “Knowledge that comes from experience limits the knower to that experience” (Rata, 2012, p. 104). In order for people to learn from their experiences they need to connect with research to challenge their experiences against established knowledge. Just relying on experiences holds programmes captive in “a never ending present” and cannot bring about change and innovation (Rata, 2012, p. 104).

The second key finding is that particularly people in management positions were shown to use personal experiences in the above way. These people have considerable power in educational institutions like polytechnics, due to the managerialist discourses that have influenced programme design and tertiary education in Aotearoa/New Zealand in general since 1989 (Govers, 2010; Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004). The importance of power in programme design practice has been highlighted by Cervero and Wilson (1998). Yet, this study suggests that people in management positions are strong users of experiences that have a very limited knowledge base. While polytechnics tend to have mandatory professional development programmes for academic staff, such a requirement does not apply to managers. This implies that if managers have not had the opportunity to engage with research and established knowledge regarding programme design in their career, they will be drawn into the dominant discourse of the institution and contribute to the “never ending present”. Important programme design decisions, including what students should learn and how they should be taught and assessed, would be grounded in very thin arguments and without critical reflection.

Summarising, the findings from this study suggest the beginning of a case to connect programme design decision-makers, and particularly people in management positions, with research and established knowledge on programme design.

The above says ‘beginning’, because the exploration is this paper has its limitations. Firstly, the paper only considered personal experiences. In doing so, it ignored the first step in the framework described by Flyvbjerg (2001), and it is therefore not possible to evaluate which established knowledge people did use in their decision-making. This is definitely a possibility for further inquiry. Secondly, this study concerns only one institution with a limited number of participants. As a consequence, a limited number of sources was identified. For example, none of the participants referred to personal experiences from being a student in a tertiary teaching programme, while
such references could have been expected in this study. Therefore, to strengthen the case, the inquiry would have to be extended to more participants, other contexts and to more in-practice and possibly longitudinal investigation of people’s development in this field.

References

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References


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