
Published 2007 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155 6223
ISBN: 0 908557 71 X

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors’ names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

Copyright@ 2007 HERDSA and the authors. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Design and Patent Act, 2005, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any for or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms and licenses issued by the copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the address above.
Using Professional Dialogue to Facilitate Meaningful Reflection for Higher Education practitioners

Rejoice Nsibande
Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa
nsibander@cput.ac.za

This paper describes the value of ‘professional dialogue’ as a process that could enhance reflection leading to professional development of academic staff. It draws on a reflection process that Foundation programme practitioners at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) engaged in to show the relationship between the method and learning. The paper discusses the approach, as a means to capture practitioners’ conceptions of their practice and how it sensitised them on what was involved in the teaching and learning of their subjects. Lessons were recorded on video and were later on played back to stimulate professional dialogue between a practitioner and myself. This involved conscious self-evaluation in order to gain understanding and improve students’ learning. The research process highlights the challenges and benefits involved in employing this method especially in helping practitioners to interrogate the theory that underpins their everyday practice. The paper concludes by stating that, to experience the relationship between reflection and learning the reflection process should allow an in depth engagement with practice.

Keywords: Professional dialogue, Reflection, Professional development

Introduction

Improving practice through developing more coherent theories of teaching and learning, with concepts such as ‘the reflective practitioner’ is being increasingly emphasized in Higher Education. This strategy is aimed at breaking away from instrumental ways of teaching that assume simple accumulation of content were sufficient for successful professional development (Hargreaves, 2003). The focus is on promoting meaningful learning experience for students measured against mastery of clear criteria and standards that define cognitive development in particular subjects. Drawing on the views of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), this cannot happen without the practitioner’s attempt to continuously strive to develop his/her practice. In their view, such can be witnessed when practitioners treat their lessons as sites for intentional investigation and further use knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogating and interpreting their ways of working. This suggests a relationship between reflection and deep learning based on experience. Often reflection is equated to consciously rethinking about what the learning environment is about leading to the tendency to remain on the ideal rather than the reality (Davies, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler 2000). This in turn decreases the chance for interrogating concepts and assumptions that inform practitioners’ everyday practices. Reflection that foregrounds learning from practice requires people to work with what really happened so that a learning curve is created. In order to improve practice, practitioners need opportunities that would “…enhance, make explicit, and articulate the tacit knowledge embedded in experience…” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999: 262).
This paper focuses on how practitioners could be encouraged to engage in reflection that leads to learning thus improving practices. It draws on work done with selected academic practitioners at CPUT who teach in foundation programme. The programme is focused on providing an environment that would encourage epistemic access, development of academic depth and the general needs of under prepared students in higher education. Research was conducted to understand how practitioners were working and the method discussed in the paper focused on data collection together with developing and supporting practitioners so that they could think of ways to change their practices where necessary (Nsibande and Modiba, 2005). The assumption was that all practitioners had acquired knowledge-for-practice, through formal training provided in the institution for academics with no teaching qualifications. Knowledge-for-practice is described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) as formal knowledge on how to teach. The paper explores how the reflection process addresses issues that are basic to reflection, such as, enabling practitioners to clearly articulate their practices and further encourage them to interrogate the tacit knowledge which informs practice on a daily basis.

**Reflection as Professional Responsibility**

Schon (1991) argues that, practitioners need to reflect on their work as a way of ensuring that they are accountable to the students. Reflection should attempt to understand what worked and what went wrong in order to begin to design proper interventions. This also encourages practitioners to develop themselves as the reflection process will encourage a continuing process of self-education as they recognise errors and this becomes a context for “…discovery rather than an occasion for self defence” (Schon, 1991: 299). This means when engaging in reflection, the approach has to avoid being defensive but focus on how teaching and learning is conducted. As much as learning environments are places where students “receive, respond to and actively participate in generating knowledge…” (Day, 1999:201), they also provide professional development opportunities when practitioners reflect upon and inquire into their thinking and practice. It is a way of enhancing what the practitioners know in order to improve practice. What is discussed here can be taken as a form of professional responsibility and accountability that all practitioners in Higher Education are expected to exhibit in order to ensure the success of students.

Reflection focuses on identifying both mistakes and good practices so that they are interrogated to gain knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). They contend that, practitioners learn when they have the opportunity to reflect on their practice as they “…deepen their own knowledge and expertise as makers of wise judgements and designers of rich learning interactions in the classroom” (p. 250). This is guided by what they refer to as ‘a deep and passionately enacted responsibility to students’ learning and chances to succeed. There is an attempt to transform the structures in the teaching and learning process that limit students’ access to learning opportunities. In order to be able to do this, Luneta (2006) suggests that practitioners’ understanding of practice should “…be nurtured, revisited and reinforced with various episodes of professional development dialogues, caucuses, workshops and seminars.” Underpinning this way of working is the usefulness of collaborative methods of deepening reflection.

**Barriers to Reflection for Professional Development**

According to Carte and Doyle (1987) teaching and learning practices are governed by underlying concepts that are to be revisited and interrogated to ensure that practitioners learn
from them. Practitioners should engage in a process that provides an opportunity to reveal the origin of the taken for granted assumptions and concepts that underpin their work. They also indicate that “it is unlikely, that teachers [practitioners] can readily provide an analytical description of their classroom knowledge and how it is used to comprehend classroom events” (Carter and Doyle 1987:149). Implied here is the difficulty that might be experienced in any attempt to get practitioners to reflect on the concepts and theory underpinning their practices. Sharing this view are Davies, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000), when they allude that practitioners can develop narratives about what they do but the problem is on uncovering the assumptions and conceptions that inform practice. This is a result of consciously reporting on what is thought should be the case in practice rather than what happened. Davies, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000: 42) assert that, “what we say about what we believe is usually more a reflection of what we think we should believe than what is actually revealed in our action.” This makes it possible to reflect on conscious interpretation (espoused curriculum) rather than digging the hidden concepts that inform actual practice. The result would be variations between lecture room practices and what practitioners reflect on. Wagner (1987: 168) refers to this as ‘knots’ that “…arises in consciousness if a discrepancy is detected between what is and what must be…” This means there is a gap between what was done in the lesson and what an individual think he / she is expected to do.

For Gitlin (1999) and Lather (1998) the problem is compounded by the fact that when people are engaged with their everyday practice, there are a number of things they take for granted. Unless helped to talk and think about those activities there is a tendency to ignore them. Collaborative reflection based on data becomes a way of working around the general failure to bring out the theory practitioners need to interrogate in order to improve practice. It was in this context that the use of professional dialogue to encourage reflection was conceptualised. According to Davies, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) to avoid practitioners’ conscious interpretations of their work they need help to indirectly uncover the assumptions and concepts embodied in their work. It is an attempt to enable them to go beyond articulating their practices to also start thinking about the theories and philosophies that they draw on as they function in the teaching and learning process.

Methodology

The study intended to do two tasks, collect data for research purposes and also facilitate reflection that would encourage development for the practitioners. The concept of ‘professional dialogue’ as described by Gitlin (1999), Nsibande and Modiba (2005), and Stevenson and Coats (2005) seemed to be useful in this regard. It is not an assessment or interrogation but a discussion between peers that allows the other to explicitly articulate, appreciate and extend their understanding of practice. Focusing on areas of practice selected prior to the dialogue the participant verbally explores their experiences. Gitlin (1999) clarifies the difference between dialogue and talk. He says, a dialogue does not attempt to sway people to adopt your way of thinking but rather attempts an understanding built on working together. A precondition for dialogue “…is that all participants see the discourse as important and have a say in determining its course” (Gitlin 1999: 448). As somebody helping the practitioners to reflect, I avoided paying the role of expert by imposing my views and beliefs about teaching. The method is not to help the ‘needy other’ as if practitioners have no way of talking about their practices. “Rather, the researcher [I] and subjects [practitioners] attempt to come to a mutual understanding based on their own strongly articulated positions” (Gitlin and Russell, 1994: 187).
Sample
It is not representative because the aim was not to make generalizations (Flick, 1998 and Gall, Gall, and Borg, 1999) but to establish how practitioners in Foundation Programmes conceptualized what was essential to teaching their subjects and further facilitate a reflection that would interrogate this. The intention was to work with one practitioner in the six programmes in the institution. However, due to reluctance associated with video recording (Brown and Dowling, 1998), only four participated. For purposes of this research, it was important that they had at least six months or more teaching experience to ensure that lessons were conducted comfortably as they would have established some relationship with students. It was hoped that such a relationship would ensure a relaxed environment for practitioners to interact freely with students (Moser and Kalton, 1986).

Lesson Video Recording
The design required in gathering data on practice so that it forms base to deliberative dialogue (Heath and Hindmarsh, 2003 and Luneta, 2006). The data becomes a context for reflection, analysis, critical insights and improved practice. Lessons were video recorded to capture detailed descriptions of practice. Two lessons were recorded for each person and they later chose the one they wanted to review. To lessen pressure on the practitioners, the recording was flexible, individuals recorded themselves or a specialist from the department where I am based did the recording.

Stimulated Recall Discussions
Video-recorded lessons were used for discussion. Four broad areas were the focus of the discussion, that is, curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. What practitioners understood in relation to these areas and their conceptual implications for practice was considered interesting. This process was flexible; two practitioners watched their lessons with me and talked about what happened. The other two practitioners watched their lessons on their own then arranged an appointment for discussions. This might be good in reducing anxiety for participants, but it could also encourage a situation where practitioners dwell on their ‘espoused curriculum’ rather than the ‘lived curriculum.’ There was flexibility also in terms of wording and probing where necessary. It had to be appropriate to the discussion with each participant (Moser and Kalton 1986 and Flick 1998). Discussions were recorded on tape.

Interrogating Practice
Providing descriptions of practice without interrogating them could have portrayed an assumption that practitioners’ lessons and explanations of their practices were free of ideology. Fairclough (1992) suggests that practice is produced out of processes of contestation with alternative practices, invested with particular ideologies such as views of learning and teaching. Not interrogating descriptions would also mean that practices were not to be questioned and thus not providing room for change (Bilmes, 1986). This last stage of the process intended to tease out of the practitioners the tacit theory in their practice. The following task was sent to practitioners together with the transcripts of their lessons and descriptions of the lesson.

‘Read through your transcripts and think of theories and concepts acquired in the Higher Diploma for Higher Education Training seminars. Which theories are influencing how you work? What is essential to that theory? Have you translated its principles meaningfully in your practices? If not where do you think you need to improve and how?
NB: You do not have to give this back to me unless you want to
This process was guided by van Manen’s (1995: 46) views that what happened in the lessons and how it is explained can be studied “in order to determine what are the knowledge forms or ideas that underlie their practices.” Of importance was that practitioners should realise assumptions that shaped the choices they made when deciding on practices they engaged with. Then begin to identify whether what they are doing needs to be changed and to what direction.

**Analysis**

For purposes of this paper, analysis was on identifying the depth of the reflection process and its relationship to professional development. Transcripts of the conversations were repeatedly read to identify what characterised it in terms of the level of discussions. The process was guided by the views of Henning (1997) and Patton (2002) as the data was approached with the aim to explore how the process enabled practitioners to understand and reflect on their experiences. Through the dialogue practitioners got the chance to become aware of what they have been taking for granted and where necessary began to rethink their practices. In the discussion examples will be drawn from two participants that is, AT and ES to clarify points being made.

**Articulating and Meaning Making of Practices**

The process in which the practitioners engaged enabled them to be in a position to articulate explicitly what they were doing in the lessons and also provided reasons for the decisions they took during the process. It seemed to reduce the difficulty that has been alluded to by Carter and Doyle (1987) and Gitlin (1999). Watching themselves, together with the probes and prompts encouraged them to talk about what they would have otherwise neglected or taken for granted to be trivial. Here is an example;

**[ES was explaining how she was helping students to work on their ‘speed project’ in Graphic Design]**

ES: Yes it’s coming through, you hear me time and again interrupting as they continue with their work.
R: ...tell me more why are you interrupting them?
ES: As I move around I do not only look at their creativity but also how they work. For instance, how they are holding their brushes, do they understand colour, do they wash the brush between the uses of different colours.
R: How do you think this is helping them in the process?
ES: They know I am involved in what they are doing and I am constantly around, I am aware of what is going on.
R... how is it helping you as a lecture?
ES: It helps me to get a sense of whether my direction of teaching is achieving the intended targets otherwise I will have to change quickly. If you listen carefully here, I am referring them back to what we did in the lesson; I had to recap this one to guide them...

The practitioner is identifying actual examples from her lesson and provides an account of what she was doing and why. This provided her with a ‘thick’ and ‘rich’ description of the reality of her lesson on the basis of which she could begin to tease out the conceptual and theoretical assumptions that informed the way she worked. The process helped them to articulate and connect narrations to reality thus lessening chances of descriptions that would be full of ‘knots’ (Wagner 1987). However, in some instances there was lack of consistency between practitioners’ espoused theory and their lesson practice (cf Cornbleth 1990). The
latter was often related to what was considered good teaching practice thus explanations seemed to correct the mistakes made in the lessons by using ‘I have to’ and ‘I should’. Here is a typical example:

I have to teach them to deal with solving problems in steps, they must read the problem and write down the key words or diagram at this stage they must forget about thinking how to solve it. They need to identify its features. They need to develop a relationship between themselves and the data given [extract from interview with AT]

In practice this was not done in the lesson. When he watched himself on video he was aware that he did not do what he thought was supposed to be done. It seems that to reduce the discrepancy he opted to talk about what should have happened rather than what actually happened (Wagner 1987). The practitioner knew what is involved in encouraging and helping students to solve problems but had not exactly done it in this lesson for him to reflect on. To talk about it when reflecting on a specific lesson could be problematic if the purpose of the reflection was to help him improve or consolidate practice. What he was referring to was in his ideal world and there was no context for it to be analysed, critiqued and reflected upon. The benefit of dialogue is ensuring that the conversation was redirected and focused on the recorded lesson so that questions on the actual practices could be asked to create a certain level of awareness and consequently provide space for him to begin to think about what he was doing (Luneta 2006).

Creating Awareness of Practice through Professional Dialogue

Drawing on the basis of the conversations with practitioners, it could be argued that viewing themselves in action on the video and discussing that with me created awareness of what their practice was about. Here is an example taken from conversation with AT,

AT: I ask students to come and demonstrate on the board how they have worked out a particular calculation.
R: Why do you want them to do this?
AT: So that they can show me and the class what is the correct answer?
R: Are you confident that the student has mastered the principles if they just give you the correct answer?
AT: Not sure what you mean?
R: When a student writes the correct answer on the board does it show you that they understand what they are doing?
AT: Not really but at least they are doing something
R: ...Do you think it would have made any difference if you asked her to verbalise how she arrived at the answer?
AT: Yah! I would have asked one of the students who did the sum on the board to explain the thinking process and general procedures...but she is shy so I thought I should not bother her
R: But how are you going to know when and how to help if she does not tell you what she is doing?
AT: I do not want to put them under pressure because they might be embarrassed
R: Can you think of possible ways in which you can work without embarrassing them?
AT: ... may be if a student is working on the board and gets stuck I can ask the rest of the group to help out on what step must be taken and why...I think I should encourage students to explain or verbalise the process so that others can be helped. Actually it also helps them
[student] as they consolidate what they know and it helps me to identify if the student engages in the correct ways of thinking and working around the problem.

The process was not aimed at just indicating shortcomings in the way the practitioner worked, but the focus was on helping him to think and identify what influenced him to work in that particular way before making decisions on how to change. The practitioner is given a chance to think how he can work around the challenge. Therefore, the intent of the dialogical method employed was rather meant to help identify and examine how a particular way of working could be revisited so that it is done meaningfully. I had to avoid providing solutions as I thought it would be professionally demeaning (Gitlin, 1999).

The process did not only create awareness of practices that needed attention but also functioned to create an opportunity for practitioners to appreciate and consolidate what they were doing. Here is an example from a conversation with ES when explaining how she conducted a brainstorming session with the students in Graphic Design. [The word fantasy was written on the board. All students were to contribute by writing on the board what they thought fantasy was about]

ES: There is no pushing, they are given space and time to think and write.
R: Now what is happening with this one [pointing at a student on the video]?
ES: This one had a problem, he can go and sit down, take his time to think and will come back when he is ready.
R: Why?
ES: This will ensure that he does not feel embarrassed, this is very important. I had to give him time to fulfil the task given in his own space and time.
R: How does this help him?
ES: They freeze if you put them under pressure so they need to be relaxed in order to be prepared to be involved in the activity. I allow them to get involved in their own terms. See now he is coming back and I didn’t call him, this is important. He volunteers himself to come and write something when he is ready. He is putting his contribution in inverted commas because they were taught if you borrow somebody’s words you must acknowledge it that is what he is doing otherwise it could be plagiarism.

Awareness of practices that made the practitioners feel proud of themselves and their work was as crucial as that of identifying problems arrears. In a way the process did not leave them feeling bad about their work. Practitioners were prompted to clarify essential principles they were working with and through dialogue myself and the practitioners could reflect on taken for granted dispositions and the extent to which they facilitated or not the success of students in the learning process.

Conclusion

In designing this exercise the aim was to provide the practitioners with the opportunity to articulate their understanding of what was crucial in teaching their subjects and how they translated that into effective practices. The method pushed practitioners to take the first steps towards developing themselves as they were encouraged to see their world differently and to act on these insights. However, it was a problem to challenge practitioners’ conceptual understanding of what is essential to teaching as an outsider to their subjects. I had no conceptual insights of the criteria and principles that characterised the different subjects making it difficult for me to push for awareness in that regard. This could have been a
challenge for me but it clearly pointed to the importance of ensuring that professional
dialogue is between individuals in the same field if it is to cater for knowledge base. Despite
this I do believe that in a very modest way, a foundation was laid for a ‘bottom up’
continuous professional development focused on improving practice.

References

Cochran-Smith, M and Lytle, S. (1999). ‘Relationships of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in
45). Britain: Cassell Educationl Limited

Copyright © 2007 Rejoice Nsibande. The author assign to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grant a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD and in printed form within the HERDSA 2007 Conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.