

APPRAISING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Reflection and reflective practice as a method to inform facilitators' teaching and learning practices has been in use for a long time. It was first introduced by Dewey in 1933. The methodology consisted of a qualitative approach supported by a quantitative analysis and was prompted by a number of questions pertaining to reflective teaching. This article communicates how reflective teaching was embedded in the Radiographic Pathology module for undergraduates in 2007 as well as the outcomes of the process.

Keywords: Reflective teaching; scholarship of teaching and learning

1. BACKGROUND

Reflection and reflective practice as a method to inform teaching and learning dates back to the works of Dewey (1933, 1938) who was described as a philosopher of education (Tate 2003:773). According to Francis and Ingram-Starrs (2005:542), Dewey was inspired by the works of educators such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and even Buddha. Dewey regarded reflection as specific problem-solving thinking which may assist professionals to improve their own practices (Francis & Ingram-Starrs 2005:542). Schön (1983, 1987) renewed the interest in reflection with reference to reflecting-in-action (during the experience) and reflecting-on-action (following the experience). The works of Johns (1995) claim that reflecting on practices enables the practitioner to "explore, understand and develop meaning as well as highlight contradictions between theory and practice" (O'Callaghan 2005:41). Since reflection may be a challenging exercise for some facilitators, Mangnall (2006:57), adapted Johns (2004) model by providing guided questions as a framework for the reflection in an attempt to make the process of reflection easier. Facilitators can use the abovementioned to reflect on teaching, learning and assessment practices in finding specific answers on the effectiveness of these practices.

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment practices became more relevant with the recent emphasis on quality in teaching, learning and assessment as is driven by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council for Higher Education (CHE). The assignment to complete the HEQC programme portfolio emphasised factors such as quality and value for money in educational practices. It has forced programmes and individual facilitators to revisit the effectiveness of educational practices, such as learning facilitation and assessment. A number of methods are useful for determining the quality of education and include questionnaires, paper trails and

quality audits. Reflective teaching was the most appealing method for the researcher to use in this specific instance. Ramsey (2003:125) reiterates the link between learner-centered education and reflective thinking, which emphasised the suitability of the method, since the Radiography programme has been employing Outcomes-based Education (OBE) and a learner centred approach since 2001. In support of this the facilitators in the School of Health Technology participated in a reflective teaching project in 2007, adding additional motivation and support to the researcher's personal reflection experiences.

Support is essential. Francis and Ingram-Starrs (2005:543) remind educators that critical reflection is not easy to learn or apply. According to the authors, critical reflection is a "strenuous activity that involves difficulty and persistent effort which usually affords no pleasure in the early stages" (Francis & Ingram-Starrs 2005:543). The aforementioned captures the researcher's experiences in the reflective teaching journey. By doing so, it facilitated involvement and participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This article communicates how reflective teaching was embedded in the Radiographic Pathology module for undergraduates in 2007 as well as the outcomes of the process.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology consisted of a qualitative approach supported by a quantitative analysis. The qualitative approach was based on ongoing action research to improve the researcher's own practice in teaching and assessment. The methodology was prompted by the questions pertaining to reflective teaching, namely: What am I doing?; Why am I doing it?; Is it effective?; How do I know its effective?; Can I improve?; How can I improve? and lastly How are the students responding? (Brüssow 2007; Quality @ CUT 2007). For the quantitative analysis the students completed two questionnaires, namely the "Critical Incident Questionnaire" (CIQ) (adapted from Brookfield 1995) and the Teaching Assessment Poll (TAP). These questionnaires were two of the instruments used in order to collect data in the reflective teaching project at the School of Health Technology in 2007. In addition the students answered specific questions at the end of the class week. For this purpose we used "colour-pages" cut to an A5 size. The questions included: What did I learn?; What has helped me to learn?; What has obstructed my learning? and lastly additional comment. This method was alternated with the so-called "robot technique", containing start-stop-continue questions. A summary of the feedback was presented to the students in the spirit of transparency.

A questionnaire that students completed for the evaluation of teaching and module content, designed by the Unit for Academic Development at the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT), was used for the quantitative analysis. This questionnaire contained the categories: personal information of the student, (no name); student evaluation of teaching; student evaluation of

module content; student evaluation of learning outcomes; student evaluation of teaching facilities and open questions. The open questions invited the students to give their own opinion or to make recommendations/suggested towards improving the module content and the learning facilitation. In the questionnaire the student was also invited to provide any other general comments.

A focus group discussion with the students took place on a scheduled date once every term. At the start of the discussion students were free to air any personal viewpoint. In this way they could build their confidence in sharing more specific and focused information on semi-structured questions during the discussion. The questions aimed to collect information on facilitation and assessment practices in the second year and in the module that the researcher currently facilitates. The questions were also linked with the feedback that the researcher received from the "colour-page day" and "start-stop-continue" questionnaires.

The qualitative results from the TAP and QIC were summarised and the numbers of specific responses were calculated and will be presented. Qualitative results from the colour-page and start-stop-continue questionnaires, together with the focus group discussions, were integrated and reported on collectively, using a thematic approach to group similar concepts to sustain the objectivity of the results. The quantitative results were analysed by an independent service provider at the CUT. The themes receiving the majority of responses are presented in the tables below in the next section.

3. RESULTS

In this section the results obtained from the various methods to appraise the quality of the researcher's teaching and learning practices in the Radiographic Pathology module during 2007 are provided. The results in Table 1 show that when students were involved in their learning, they reported on positive learning experiences. Large volumes of work and expectations not being clear, distanced them from their learning or caused confusion regarding the work.

Table 1 Responses summarised from the Critical Incident Questionnaire (QIC) (n = 23)

Question	Responses
Engaged	Participation in mind map, whole class discussion, using x-ray films in the discussion
Distanced	Group work, peer feedback, information not available in textbook
Affirming	Specify outcomes, facilitator interact with group, repetition, practical work, drawings
Confusing	Large volumes of work, expectations not clear, group feedback, fast pace in class
Surprised	Learning interesting new facts, having fun

Table 2 provides a summary of the results collected with the TAP. Students reported that visual aids helped them to learn, corresponding with the information collected via the QIC and that uncertainty about the work obstructs their learning.

Table 2 Responses summarised from the Teaching Assessment Poll (TAP) (n = 20) (see Appendix I)

Question	Responses
What helps me to learn?	Use of pictures, diagrams, images Regular breaks Recapping the work
What obstructs my learning?	Uncertainty about work Student feedback Long classes
What suggestions do you have with regards to improving the class?	More frequent breaks
What suggestions do you have with regards to improving your learning?	Recap my work Prepare for class

The critical areas (receiving a score of 2 and 3 of the maximum 4) in the questionnaire managed by the Unit for Academic Development (UAD) are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Critical areas identified in the UAD questionnaire (n = 15)

Item	Av Score
Clarity of explanations	3
Good command of English	2
Presentation in class allows for note-taking	2
Use of other resources to facilitate class	2
Fair grading of assessment	3

The feedback obtained from the students collected on the colour-page and start-stop-continue questionnaires, together with the focus group, are herewith presented. It is divided into factors pertaining to learning facilitation, assessment, quality factors and students.

Learning facilitation

- Students confirmed that building on previous knowledge helped them to learn and understand the work better;
- It is important to use visual aids in class such as X-ray films to facilitate learning;
- Students were not sure "what was important in the module".

Assessment

- Over-assessment in the module and in the programme is demotivating

Quality factors

- Students pointed out that there was a lack of alignment between outcomes, facilitation and assessment in some modules;
- Students experienced "rushing" in class as negative to learning.

Students

- The lack of the ability of the students to plan and organise learning was reflected as a shortcoming of the scheduling in the module;
- Students reported that they do not possess textbooks because of financial constraints and this hampers their learning;

In the next section, the results obtained to appraise the quality of the researcher's teaching and learning practices will be discussed.

4. DISCUSSION

The variety of questionnaires used to appraise the quality of the researcher's teaching and learning methods, pointed to the areas in the researcher's teaching and learning practices that are satisfactory to students and also those areas that may require intervention. The feedback thus assisted in triangulating the

information. The qualitative feedback from the students included constructive and less constructive comments on the facilitation methods used; helpful methods to assist in learning and factors that may obstruct learning. Results from the quantitative analysis revealed five areas in which the facilitator scored a two or a three out of a possible four. The most challenging part in summarising the feedback was the researcher's responsibility as the main enquirer, to remain objective with judgements of the results (McNiff & Whitehead 2006:149).

The willingness of students to report on methods that they find helpful in facilitating their learning is a powerful tool. The facilitator can determine if the methods of learning facilitation used are enjoyable to the students (Bellefeuille 2006:90). Likewise, the feedback can reveal if the atmosphere in the class is conducive to learning. Most importantly you can answer the question: were the facilitation methods used effective and did students enjoy their learning? It is also a learning experience for the facilitator to be objective about the facts and benchmark the feedback using literature, institutional policy, and peers. Similarly the fact that students reported on quality factors such as the lack of alignment of the outcomes, learning facilitation and assessment is of use. It shows that students are knowledgeable about these educational principles and that they can act as quality agents in the programme.

The observation that students are not sure "what to learn", even though the outcomes of each unit are available in a learning guide and the class is constructed around outcomes, points to the need for the specific focus on and attention to the outcomes. It also confirms that students largely depend on the facilitator for information and that there is a need to develop improved student-centred abilities. Students should however learn to take the responsibility for their own learning as co-producers of their learning (Barr & Tagg 1995: 9).

Students often use the opportunity to provide feedback as a complaining session. Consequently one has to learn to be a good listener and put the students' complaints into context. Thus the feedback should also aim to be educational upliftment and a process of learning for the students. However, the students were capable of providing a solution to the over-assessment and group work in the module. The solutions were practical and it was possible to implement them immediately. Another area that students misunderstood was the concept and purpose of the integrated assignment that they had to complete in the second year. The feedback that the process was still not clear to the students offered the facilitator the opportunity for clarification during our discussion.

It is said that the overarching drive to use reflective teaching had to be one's internal desire to develop and improve one's current practices in teaching, learning and assessment (McNiff & Whitehead 2006:51). McAlpine and Weston (2000) in McAlpine, Weston, Bertiaume, Fairbank-Roch and Owen (2004:338) report on the value of reflection in teaching, namely that prior knowledge can be assessed in order to construct knowledge from the experience and thus assist to

develop and grow as an educator. The researcher's brief experience with reflective teaching introduced her not only to valuable lessons but also to the areas in her own practices that may need further development. However, it remains an uncomfortable experience to acquire this kind of feedback on teaching and assessment practices from students, in particular when one knows one has to do one's best. Nevertheless the researcher is of the opinion that the negative feedback should be there to appraise one's teaching, learning and assessment practices in an objective manner. By doing so personal growth and growth in learning facilitation and assessment practices employed can be facilitated.

5. CONCLUSION

The lessons learned from embedding reflective teaching in teaching and assessment practices were useful to objectively identify the strengths and shortcomings in the researcher's teaching, learning and assessment practices. Although negative feedback from the students was part of the journey, reflective teaching is a valuable method to determine the quality of teaching and assessment practices. Such a process may help to bring out the best in the facilitator and assure that students get value for their money (Biggs 2001:221).

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Appendix 1 TAP responses (n = 20)

PTO 20 TAP Sept 2007 (n = 20)	
Question	Response
1. Helps me to learn?	5 min breaks helps with concentration Activities, assignments, doing research (xx) Repetition of important work (x) Use of pictures, diagrams, images (xxxxx) Further explanations / work emphasised on slides (x) Engaged and involved in my own learning, giving input and participate in discussions, ask questions (xxxxx) Recapping Group feedback Positive attitude Presentations boost self confidence
2. Obstruct learning?	Talking about matters other than PTO – loses concentration (x) Long classes and too much information in one session (x) Students talking in class while lecturer is talking (xx) Bad presentations of students (x) Not knowing what to include / exclude New terminology Student presentations without transparencies Group feedback – cannot hear, explanation not good / clear / audible (xxxx) Lack of focus of self
3. Suggestions to improve the class?	None (xxxxx) Shorter periods – concentration span not so long (x) Keep up the good work Do not change class format (different styles) Student handwriting on transparencies neater Student presentations – speak slower and work on presentation skills More visual aids (x) No repetition – boring More group work Be more strict when students prepare, e.g. neater handwriting on transparencies Make sure that the presentations include the necessary information Prepare for class and ask relevant questions Align assessment with everyday practical experience Make assessment more challenging so we can rise above our limitations Equipped and competent in international skills/demands – employable overseas
4. Suggestions to improve own learning	Work through my notes after each class (revise) (xx) More activities, assignments, tests Learning with colour and associating illnesses with pictures None More involved in my own learning More active in class, ask more questions, participate more (x) Prepare more (xxxxxx) Use textbook explaining in simple/relevant manner Concentrate more, not to get bored and lose concentration Studying in groups and studying harder Read, read, read Study time-management Discipline & Consistency & Prioritise Do not procrastinate

X = number of responses