Feedback & Reflective Processes

Thematic text

Abstract

This EQUiiP thematic text supports the critical reflection by educational developers (EDs) on how to facilitate academic teams who intend to internationalise their programmes, inspire them to share their own perspectives and learn from other EDs, lecturers and students.

With this overview of reflective practices, EDs can identify and apply reflective tools and methods to be used in facilitating reflection in their institutional context. The text discusses reflective practice in general, as well as the benefits of using both individual and collaborative reflection to develop professional competences. Although this information is provided as a summary of the EQUiiP module, *Feedback and Reflective Processes,* it can be used as a general introduction. The tools suggested in the text can be used to support any of the other EQUiiP programme modules.

Identifiers

Reflective Practices, Professional development, PD, Collegial Sparring

1.Introduction

This text is a brief introduction to reflection and reflective practices for facilitating professional development in relation to the conceptual and theoretical aspects that are covered in the Introduction to the International Classroom. These concepts include Comprehensive Internationalisation (Hudzik, 2011, 2015), Internationalisation of Higher Education (de Wit et al, 2015), Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Leask, 2015), Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Jones, 2015), and Intercultural Competence Development (Gregersen–Hermans, 2018).

In order to facilitate reflection, EDs need to develop not only an understanding of the role of reflection for competence development, but also obtain personal experience with the reflective activities themselves. The following text discusses tools and methods that can be used to provide support for those learning about the internationalisation of study programmes as well as effective and appropriate teaching and learning in the international classroom. This text contributes to the EQUiiP programme by providing a background for reflective practices with which to
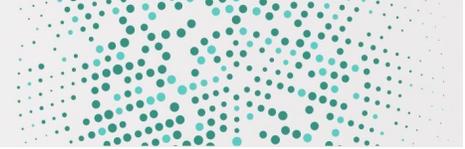
support colleagues' teaching and learning and to expand their vision on professional practice for the International Classroom.

2. Defining Reflection and Reflective Practices for Competence Development

Research on focused reflective practice for competence development has increased over the last few decades. This expansion has resulted in a broad array of definitions. There have been a range of descriptions and analyses of reflective practice and critical reflection within the field of education including, most notably, Kolb's (1984) "experiential learning model"[1] and Schön's (1987) "knowing-in-action"[2]. Given the breadth of descriptions, for our purposes we draw on Black and Plowright's (2010) definition, devised through their development of a multi-dimensional model of reflections for learning for professional development:

> the process of engaging with learning and/or professional practice that provides an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate that learning or practice. The purpose is to develop professional knowledge, understanding and practice that incorporates a deeper form of learning which is transformational in nature and is empowering, enlightening and ultimately emancipatory (p. 256).

Regardless of the definition, the notion of considering not just product but process has become an indispensable element of competence development programmes.

Although reflective practice that leads to professional development is by nature an iterative process, to create a lasting effect and become an integral element of a teacher's professional portfolio, specific goals and achievements need to be identified (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). Through a variety of activities, we can tap into our metacognition regarding specific aspects of knowledge. Professional competence development programmes strive to introduce particular input and simultaneously allow participants to recognize their own knowledge base through which to internalize this input. Reflective activities provide a path via which we can

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[1] "Experiential learning model" suggests that effective learning is seen when a person progresses through a cycle of four stages: of (1) having a concrete **experience** followed by (2) observation of and **reflection** on that experience which leads to (3) the formation of abstract concepts (analysis) and generalizations (conclusions) which are then (4) used to test hypotheses in future situations, resulting in new experiences. (https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html. (Retrieved 09 January 2019).

[2] *"Knowing-in-action* ": "When the practitioner reflects-in-action in a case he [she] perceives as unique, paying attention to phenomena and surfacing his intuitive understanding of them, his [her] experimenting is at once exploratory, move testing, and hypothesis testing. The three functions are fulfilled by the very same actions." (Schön, 1987, p. 72).
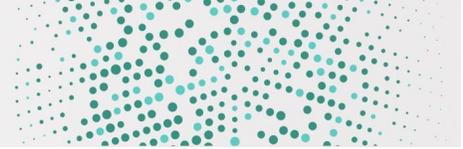
consider and assess our own understanding of this input or information (*declarative knowledge*), difficulty of a requested task, i.e. its content, length, and type of assignment (*procedural knowledge*), as well as our capability for using strategies to learn and use this information (*conditional knowledge*). Drawing on metacognitive knowledge pushes us to consider our personal thought processes and strategies, the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies and, in the case of EQUiiP, particular tacit beliefs, practices, and/or biases that may shape our actions. Our view of the world is based on our own "unconsciously held assumptions and perspectives that strongly condition what we see happening around us before we even begin to reason about it. … Critical reflection provides a means to gain some awareness of such forces as a first step toward possible change" (Sengers, Boehner, David, & Kaye, 2005, p. 50).

Directed reflection on beliefs, practices, and/or biases can aid in making the implicit more explicit. Thus, with guided activities in professional competence training, we facilitate the capacity for building greater meaningful links between knowing-in-action, i.e. "the tacit intuitive knowing that underpins all skilful performance", and reflection-in-action, i.e. "the attempt to articulate this tacit knowledge and bring it into conscious awareness" (Rolfe, 2016, p. 1).

3.Train-the-trainer

Specific professional and academic reflection for training requires purposeful inclusion at the programme development and revision stages to allow participants to make connections and relate input to personal experience and practice (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). A train-the-trainer model such as the EQUiiP programme calls for the inclusion of intentional reflection. As EQUiiP programme participants, you have been introduced to new content about the International and Intercultural Classroom that you must process in relation to your own past experiences and your local professional context. Simultaneously, you must consider how this new theoretical and conceptual input is relevant for your colleagues in your own educational context. EQUiiP gives you the opportunity to both reflect as a learner and as a trainer as you experience facilitated reflection and dialogic feedback. By looking at the reflective tools in themselves, you can also consider the benefits and opportunities of these for your own professional context.

3.1 Methods: Shifting modes to change the conversations

3.1.1 Dialogic feedback and collaborative reflection
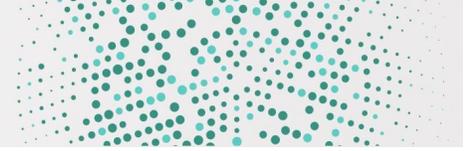
We engage in reflective practice through activities that run along a continuum from collaborative to individual and personal. Collaborative reflection frequently occurs linked to a teaching episode, with pre- and post-observation discussion. In addition to this type of peer-feedback, dialogue can also be motivated by other experiences, e.g. student evaluations or feedback, student achievement, staff meetings, etc.

Methods for collaborative reflective practice with colleagues are often very structured; sometimes there is a degree of role-play or simulation. The task of creating room for reflective conversations necessitates creating a trusting environment, where a non-judgmental peer-assisted conversation can take place. We want to be able to talk about both mundane and possibly sensitive subjects. It can be difficult to ask teachers to essentially expose their professional challenges including their teaching and interaction with students, which normally is considered private, to colleagues (Handal, 1999; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009).

In relation to EQUiiP, input related to the international classroom and interactional experiences with others from different cultures and backgrounds, as well as new pedagogical tools and expectations, can create tension with previous personal beliefs and professional experiences. Thus, to create a safe environment for fruitful reflective conversations, certain methods demand a rigid framework through which we break the traditional rules of conversation. For example, through *Collegial Sparring*, i.e. the 'dialogue-based peer coaching' used in the EQUiiP programme, we ask you 1) to reflect and receive feedback with your backs turned to your colleagues, thus not making eye contact, and 2) not to engage in dialogue, to just listen and not respond directly to critique. Although this may feel unnatural to you, the point is to break free of the standard "rules of engagement", to allow you to really listen rather than formulate your responses while your colleagues talk. Not allowing the other to comment in dialogue, or having to respond directly to commentary yourselves, allows you to dismiss what feels like irrelevant input. But since you do not engage in argument or discussion, which can lead to the rejection of colleagues' commentary, it can give you the freedom to later draw on this very input to develop your practice.

Another collaborative reflection tool that allows you to broaden your thoughts on your professional experience is the practice of *Walk and Talk*. As the title suggests, this tool is used to get you out of the chairs and up and walking. In small groups, participants are given a prompt and then have a set time-frame to 'take a walk' and discuss the prompt. In fact, research has shown that combining a focused reflective
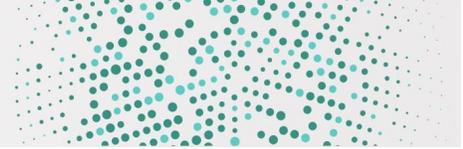
activity with physical activity enhances cognitive activity and creativity (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014). In addition, when possible, taking discussions out of doors also provides a break from sitting in a room or office and offers the opportunity to get fresh air, exercise and energy for the rest of the day.

Regardless of the method or tool, when working together in collaborative reflections you are deliberately not allowed to judge or defend your actions. Changing the social conventions of conversation prevents you from immediately interpreting and reacting to the body language of your colleagues, from reading their reactions to your words, and from adjusting accordingly - thus you are free to share your thoughts and reflections about the situation or problem being discussed as a *critical friend*. This alternative exchange shifts the mode of the conversation, and therefore also what can be said and how it can be said. You gain different perspectives about your challenges and achievements by giving and receiving feedback through this type of structured dialogue. Professional development and growth can often require a different perspective on a challenge, something a peer taking a critical friend position can help us to achieve (Handal, 1999).

3.1.2 Reflective Writing

Other tools to facilitate a shift in perspective, but without a critical friend, are exercises of personal reflection through various forms of reflective writing. In reflective writing, we move away from creating a product specifically for someone else's commentary, to writing for personal reflection (and perhaps to capture thoughts and ideas to be used later in some type of portfolio or teaching philosophy). Personal reflection in the form of free or focused writing offers the opportunity to review reflective thinking and make connections between your reactions and your actions. It is vital to have options for private, unobserved sequences of reflection.

Regardless of the activity, taking the time to document post-experiential reflection in e.g. a learning journal is beneficial. A learning journal provides an instrument to increase metacognition through awareness-raising of both cognitive processes and the management of these processes (McCrindle & Christensen, 1995). Such a journal kept over a long period of time provides a record of how thoughts and beliefs develop/change over time. While the change-the-conversation benefits of dialogue-based reflection have been argued (see 3.1.1), personal reflective writing encompasses other benefits such as:
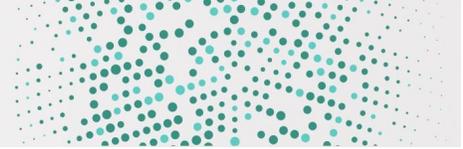
- It is always available

- It can be revisited

- It is private

- It can be in any language

- It is not judgmental

- It allows for repetition and redundancy

- It allows for writing in the moment - likely to be unfiltered

- It provides a chance for communication with the self

- It aids in clarity (writing process)

- It validates your opinion (never disagrees)

- It offers a record of learning and development

(adapted from Brockbank & McGill, 2007)

Personal written reflection in the form of e.g. observation notes, group response, peer review, self-assessment, prompted response, and time writing can also be utilized for collaborative activities when you are aware that you will be sharing your writing.

3.1.3 Mind mapping for review and consolidation

Whereas discursive methods provide an array of opportunities for reflection, as described above, there are times when consolidation or review of course material offers alternative perspectives. Via a tool such as *mind mapping*, which involves the creation of "visual, non-linear representations of ideas and their relationships" (Biktimirov & Nilson, 2006, p. 72), we can enhance comprehension and begin to make connections that otherwise might be overlooked.

Mind mapping is a cognitive reflection method developed in the 1960s that has been used in various forms in education. Through simple graphic representation, by linking ideas together in tree-formations, where ideas branch out from each other, we can enhance brainstorming and understanding around a central topic. By creating links, central topics and interdependent ideas can be explored and visualized.

Studies in educational achievement across the disciplines have documented that this
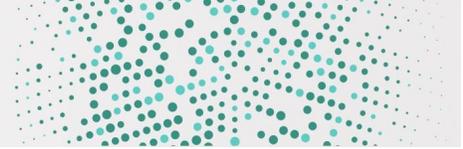
low-tech activity, which requires only a pen and paper, stimulates learning for a range of learners who may benefit from diverse teaching methods. Reflection and the creation of linkages across concepts allows us to think outside the box. The process of working through a mind mapping exercise represents brain storage more naturally than a running text or linear presentation. Research has shown that working through conceptualization in this manner encourages less surface processing and higher retention. Lastly, mind mapping appeals to both brain hemispheres, allowing for both cognitive reflection and creative production (Biktimirov & Nilson, 2006).

In a professional competence development setting, you can draw on mind mapping to provide a respite from dialogue and to allow for private reflection. With this tool, you have a chance to consolidate new input and create ties to previous notions and experiences. And, as with personal reflective writing, you can create an artefact to work with as you move forward. Mind maps offer springboards for discussion and future development.

4.From experience to facilitation

As EDs, we find ourselves in the position to push our colleagues to experiment with tools with which they may be unfamiliar. Collegial sparring is an example of this type of reflective tool. Many teachers in higher education find the simple act of discussing their teaching with colleagues to be intimate and off-limits. Therefore, facilitating these types of activities requires both increased sensitivity and candour. As a facilitator for interactive reflective practice, you need to:

- Make the purpose and rules of engagement clear
- Stress the importance of constructive and respectful feedback
- Try to alleviate the stress of the "unnatural setup" by creating a playful mood
- Enforce the rules (backs turned, timekeeping, etc.)

Most importantly, as with in any facilitated reflection, you must strive to create a non-judgmental environment, as opposed to one dominated by power, status, and hierarchy. In the end, giving individuals control over what they choose to expose and what remains private is essential to the growth process.

5.Conclusion

Reflective processes as a vehicle for professional development must thus be interwoven into all aspects of training for the international classroom. Throughout a
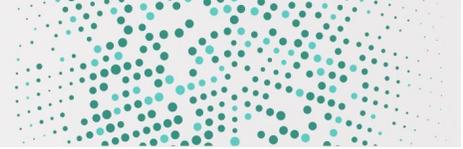
competence development programme such as EQUiiP, which challenges our traditional conceptual beliefs and understanding of higher education, there must be opportunities for both trainers and trainees to step back and consider the input from their own perspective. Can I relate to the material? Can I apply it to my own context? What do I embrace? What makes me uncomfortable? How will I address this tension?

Irrespective of the method or tool, focused training in reflective practice offers opportunities that are often lacking in competence development programmes. The EQUiiP module *Feedback and Reflective Processes* offers opportunities for ongoing reflection that can aid in building a final presentation portfolio and for the necessary meta discussion on utilizing reflective practices in local professional settings.

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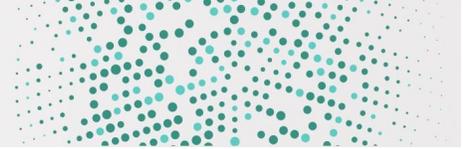
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