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ACADEMIC PAPER

Building reflective practitioners on business programmes: An action research study

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Abstract

Faculty engaged on Masters programmes at a Swiss hotel school participated in an action research project which aimed to provide ongoing quality improvement within the curriculum. This article describes how the research team addressed one specific issue: the claim that the programmes would help students to become reflective practitioners. The project took place over 3 academic years and the findings show that reflective learning occurred and that, in some cases, the reflective process persisted after the students had left the institution. The findings also shed light on the nature of reflective learning, both from practical experience and from courses of study, and support the findings of other studies into this phenomenon.

Keywords: reflective learning; curriculum development; action research; profile accumulation

Introduction

This article describes a curriculum and faculty development project in a Swiss hotel management school which took the form of an action research process. The aim was to establish an environment of reflective practice which would provide an ongoing quality improvement process for two Masters programmes that were relatively new to the institution. The research discussed here dealt with building reflection into the educational curriculum, a stated aim of the two programmes which faculty identified as especially difficult to teach and assess.

Learning and practice

The difficulty of reconciling the formal knowledge content of programmes designed to develop managers or teachers, with the pragmatic often tacit and intuitive knowledge inherent in professional practice, has long been recognised. Schön (1987) notes that formal

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knowledge deals at best with defined problems, while much practical, professional knowledge comes through experiencing the ill-defined, complex problems that arise from practice. This latter type of knowledge is difficult to teach, but constitutes the most important part of what professional practitioners need to learn, and this has drawn close attention to the way professionals learn from experience.

Probably the most notable theorist of experiential learning is Kolb (1984), who proposed the basic model shown in Figure 1. This shows a recurring sequence of events in which a learner experiences something, reflects upon it, produces hypotheses to explain what has been experienced and then tests these hypotheses. Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) gave rise to an instrument, the learning styles index (LSI), which claimed to measure the emphasis that different individuals give to the stages of the learning cycle. Honey and Mumford (1982) produced another widely used instrument, based upon the ELT, which sought to categorise learners as activists, pragmatists, reflectors and theorists.

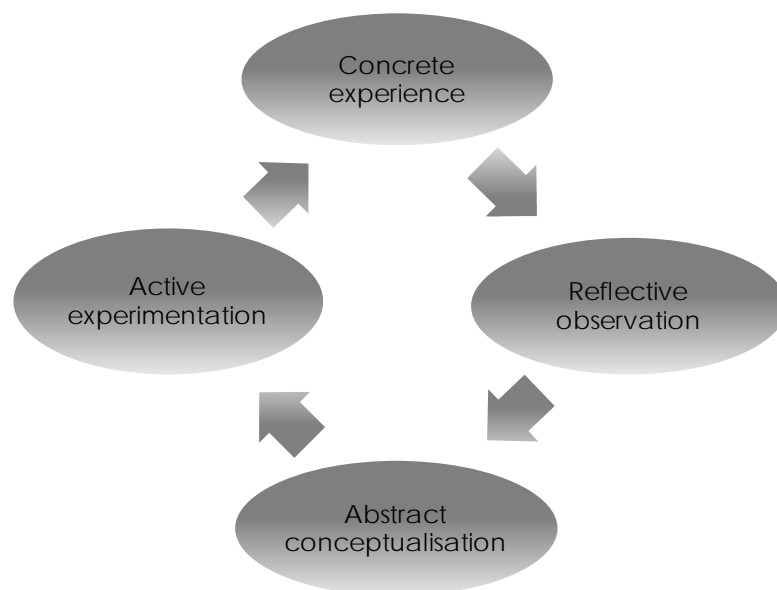


Figure 1: Experiential learning theory model, based on Kolb (1984)

The ELT is widely accepted among academics and trainers, not least because it identifies experience and reflection as major factors in learning. However, it has drawn a number of criticisms, including questions about its empirical validation through the LSI (Freedman & Stumpf, 1980; Greer & Dunlap, 1997). Although these are methodological in origin, they also hint at deeper validity issues. At a theoretical level, the ELT has been criticised for over-emphasising the individual aspect of learning and omitting some wider factors that impact learning, such as the power relations inherent in social status, dominance and gender (Vince, 1998). In addition, the ELT allows no room for second order learning, or for unconscious learning processes, and it implies a limited, separate, time-defined role for the reflection process (Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998). Among others, Kayes (2002) and Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis (2001) have responded to these criticisms and the debate continues.

Reflection in learning

Reflection in learning is itself a complex issue. Moon (2004, p. 82) defines it as:

A form of mental processing... that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome, or we may simply 'be reflective' and then an outcome can be unexpected. Reflection is applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas, for which there is not an obvious solution and it is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess.

Moon identifies five stages in reflection: *learning, assimilating, representing learned material, upgrading existing learning and generating new ideas through inspiration*. Learning may lie anywhere on a continuum between superficially noticing something and fully understanding it. Thus, for Moon, reflection is integral to all higher level learning, where it acts by imbuing what has been learned with greater meaning, and includes assimilating and representing knowledge. This contrasts with the ELT, which emphasises the role of reflection in learning from practical experience. However, one might count formal educational experiences such as classes, coursework and examinations as part of the *concrete experience* shown in Figure 1. In this case it would seem beneficial to overtly encourage reflection in higher education curricula, but the question remains whether reflection may be embedded in subject teaching or offered as an independent stream of the curriculum.

According to Jeffs and Smith (2005), reflection has three components: returning to the experience, relating it to the learner's feelings and emotions, and evaluating it, i.e. comparing the experience with existing knowledge/experience and assimilating it into one's conceptual framework. Verdonschot (2006) identified five different aspects of reflection that are important for professional learning:

- reflection based on the things that happened daily in their normal practice
- issues of experience and emotion: narratives and feelings
- appreciating what went right at least as much as what went wrong
- social factors, including interpersonal interaction and teamwork
- ongoing awareness of the history, the current status and the likely future of the situation

Like Kolb, these authors focus on practice as the source of learning and therefore tend to regard reflection as separate from other aspects of learning, including experiencing, experimenting, assimilating and contextualising. Unlike Kolb, Verdonschot (2006) includes sociocultural factors, which she regards as important in recalling and representing experience, as well as in relating to it emotionally (see also Vince, 1998).

An individual's intention also plays an important part in learning and may turn activities not usually associated with deep learning into opportunities for reflection (Kember, 1996). In addition, the effort of learning probably imbues the process of assimilation with emotion, which may play a role in reflection. Moon (2004) noted that emotion can influence learning both positively and negatively, but while it is clear that positive emotion can facilitate learning she concludes that emotional involvement is not an essential component of reflection. She stated (p. 89) that, "when asked to reflect, many learners do not understand what they should do, or even resist reflection". Verdonschot (2006) also reported that learners in practical situations find their own reflective process elusive and obscure and may resist reflection as result.

Hatton and Smith (1995) offered a typology which can be applied to writing or storytelling to assess the level of reflection demonstrated by the writer.

Descriptive writing	A description of what has occurred without discussion.
Descriptive reflection	The writer describes what has occurred and admits the possibility of other viewpoints but does not explore them.
Dialogue reflection	The writer demonstrates a 'stepping back' from the events and actions of the descriptive 'story' and examines more than one view of what has been described.
Critical reflection	The writer demonstrates awareness not only that the actions and events described exist in (and can be explained by) multiple perspectives, but also that they are located in (and explained by) multiple historical contexts.

In principle, such a schema can be used to evaluate reflection in educational programmes and even, under appropriate circumstances, among professional practitioners.

Various curriculum development activities have sought to close the perceived gap between the formal knowledge that vocational programmes teach and the informal knowledge that professionals need to acquire (McHardy & Allan, 2000). These include curriculum-centred exercises such as building in additional qualifications from chartered professional bodies (Morgan & Turner, 2000) and developing transactional relationships with businesses to assist the continuous development of the curriculum (Hannon, Patton, & Marlow, 2000). A recent report from Finland describes a business management programme for potential entrepreneurs, itself designed on entrepreneurial lines (Heinonen & Poikkijoki, 2006). A more student-centred approach is demonstrated by Johnston and Watson (2004), who reported an 'integrative studies' course that requires students to work in interdisciplinary teams, sharing experience and knowledge gained within and outside their taught programme. The authors claim *inter alia* that students' learning is enhanced through reflection, although no overt encouragement of reflection is reported. Like other authors (e.g. Bourgeois, 1999), they designed reflection into the curriculum as a separate stream, rather than seeking to embed it into the individual subjects.

Action research

Action research simultaneously investigates and intervenes in a specific study situation. The research process may be modelled as the spiral shown in Figure 2 (Sanger, 1989) with a cyclic process (data gathering, analysis, reflection, change, more data gathering...) that makes some progress as each cycle is completed and leads to a new cycle.

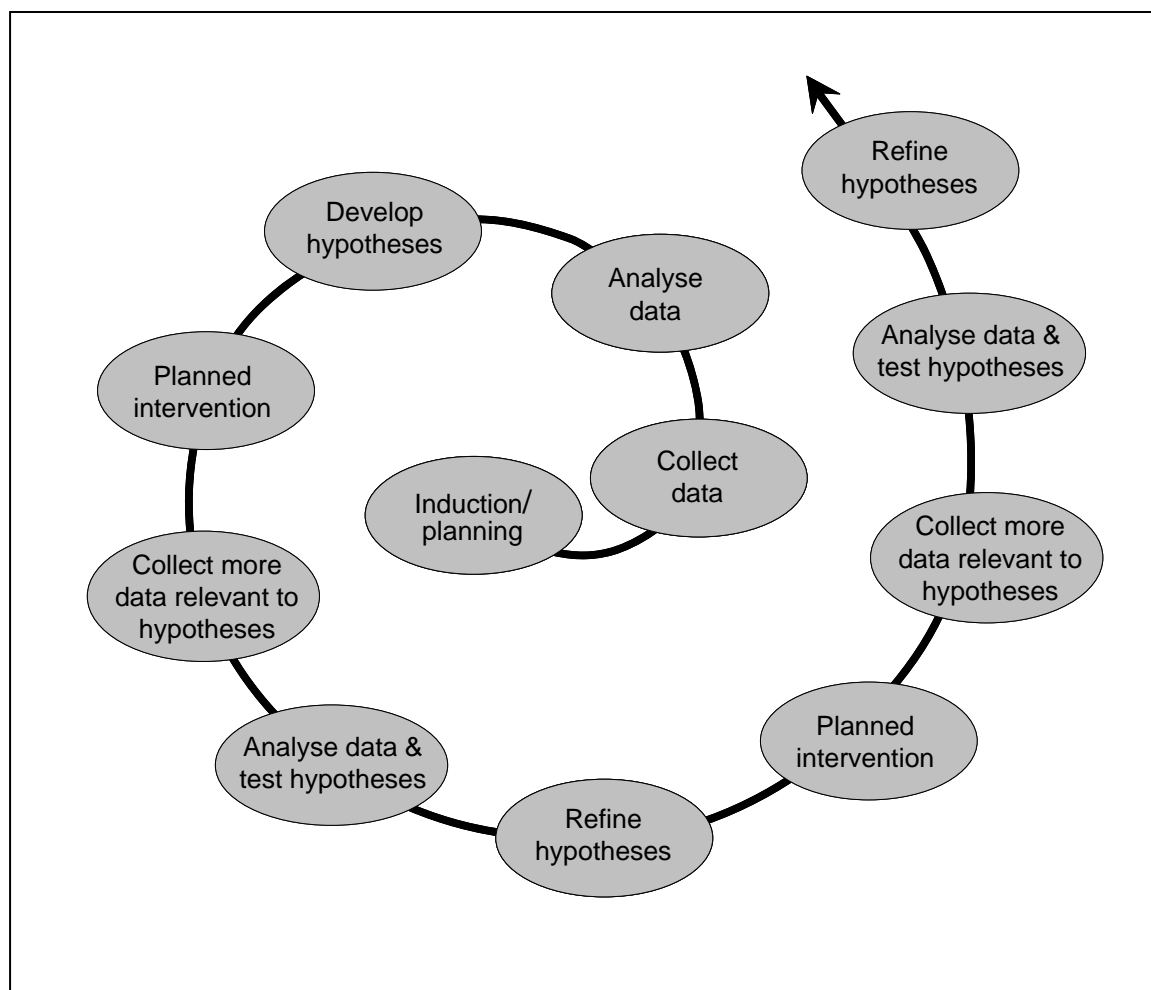


Figure 2: Action research spiral (adapted from Sanger 1989, p. 10)

The underlying sequence – data gathering, analysis, hypothesis formation, hypothesis testing – has similar features to Kolb’s experiential learning model (Figure 1). Various conceptions of action research have been put forward (Adelman, 1993; Argyris, 1985; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Hart & Bond, 1995), the main differences between which concern the level of democracy inherent in the research system (see Table 1).

Identifying question	Criteria
What is the relationship between the leader/facilitator and the rest of the research team?	External ‘scientist’ to research subjects Manager to subordinates Community of professional equals
Who ‘owns’ the research problem?	A complete outsider (e.g. consultant) Managers in the organisation The research team participants themselves
Who ‘owns’ the research process?	A complete outsider (e.g. consultant) Managers in the organisation The research team participants themselves
Who designs and plans the intervention?	External ‘scientist’ (consultant) Managers in the organisation Team members, as part of their development process
What knowledge is learned by the participants?	Practical training Organisational information Professional reflection and self-development
What knowledge is produced by the process?	Quantitative/normative metrics Descriptive/categoric information Personal or professional development

Table 1: Factors categorising action research systems (derived from Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Hart and Bond, 1995)

Business-based projects tend to take a less democratic approach to action research, typically centralising control of the problem, the process, the data produced and the interventions. Preferred outcomes are metric data, practical training and organisational development. Professional and community projects tend to approach action research in a more democratic way and all participants tend to be involved. Outcomes tend to be more personally relevant for the participants, but often less demonstrable. However, a more democratic approach to action research is increasingly becoming acceptable in business organisations and, for instance, Dick (2002) and Coghlan (2007) propose ‘insider action research’ processes for the development of managers.

Action research in educational settings often involves a team of professional teachers, who aim to improve their practice through a communal programme of research (Sanger, 1989). Burn (2007) describes such an exercise, where a team of experienced teachers sought to enhance the learning of history in a teacher education programme. Bourgeois (1999) discusses an action research project in which students were encouraged to integrate theory and practice through reflective analysis of their learning experiences. Thus it is clear that there is a potential synergy between reflection in practice and action research as tools for professional development.

Background to the case

The study institution was a Swiss hotel school, where a Masters programme in hospitality commenced in 2001. This was a Masters in Education (MEd), which aimed to prepare individuals to work as teachers in hospitality management schools or as trainers in hospitality organisations. The authors (who had been associated with the MEd course from its inception) joined the faculty of the institution on a full-time basis in summer 2003, which also saw the start of an MBA with a business management focus related to hospitality and

associated service industries. At this time, management of the two programmes was consolidated, presenting an ideal opportunity to set up a process for managing the quality of the programmes, and an action research group was set up spanning the two programmes.

From its outset in 2001, students on the MEd programme arrived in early June, followed an intensive summer school curriculum through the summer and then continued their studies, graduating in late May the following year. During the latter half of the academic year they were assigned a faculty mentor, with whom they underwent an in-house teaching internship. During 2003/04 and 2004/05, MBA students commenced in late July 2003 and 2004. They completed their taught programme in one year, but carried on with their dissertations during a subsequent six-month internship. A number of them had problems completing their dissertations under these conditions and it was therefore decided in 2005 to start the MBA in parallel with the MEd, so that both underwent the summer school and completed their study and dissertations within 12 months. MBA students went on to undertake an internship in industry.

About 10% of students on these Masters programmes had 6 or more years' industry experience. The majority were recruited from relatively recent university graduates. Ethnicity and culture varied widely, as the students came from most continents of the world. Between 2001 and 2003 there was a preponderance of Asian students. However, after this, the proportion of Asians was much the same as those from the Americas and Europe. Programmes were taught in short modules of 2 to 3 weeks as this made it easier to augment the core team with highly qualified teachers from overseas who only visited for short periods. The teaching style was intensive but not especially didactic considering the constraints of time. Assessment was entirely through coursework, some of which always remained outstanding at the end of the teaching time, when the reflection and course feedback was taking place.

Until 2003, feedback on courses was gathered using a standard closed-item questionnaire administered by the course teacher. This process was not centrally managed, feedback tended to be patchy and teachers complained that they could learn little of value about the students' educational experience from the quantitative data provided by the questionnaires. From summer 2003, the feedback process increasingly used the profile accumulation (PAT) approach (Johns & Lee-Ross, 1996). PAT was originally developed as a tool for assessing customers' experience of services (Johns & Howard, 1998; Johns, Lee-Ross, & Ingram, 1998; Johns, Lee-Ross, & Tyas, 2000) but has also shown its value in education situations (Johns & Henwood, 2006). It is a semi-quantitative technique, which collects and enumerates respondents' comments about their experience with the minimum of input or bias from the researcher. PAT forms are structured in a particular way, the front of the form containing (besides explanatory notes) a number of empty boxes which ask respondents for positive comments as follows:

The best things about the **** course were ...	The reason these aspects were good was because ...
--	--

The reverse side of the form similarly elicits negative comments:

The worst/least satisfactory things about the **** course were ...	The reason why this/these aspects were unsatisfactory was because ...
--	---

Experience has shown that variations in response between individuals in a given population are limited, so that after a certain number of responses saturation is reached and no new ideas appear. If the responses are listed and counted, a profile of strengths and weaknesses can be built up, which allows the areas of most concern to respondents to be identified. In the present study, at the end of each course, students were asked to reflect upon the experience they had just undergone and complete the forms. They were also encouraged to discuss the course among themselves. The (anonymous) completed forms were collected by the lecturers, who read through them and identified points relevant to their professional

practice. The forms were also analysed and enumerated centrally, and the results collated and reported to the individual lecturers as well as to the programme committee. The aims of the project were to manage ongoing quality improvement on the programmes and to examine how they might achieve their stated goal of developing reflective practitioners.

Methodology

The action research discussed here began in 2003 and was intended to involve both faculty and students, as far as possible, and to confirm them as stakeholders in the programmes. It was apparent that there were issues with fulfilling and demonstrating fulfilment of the programmes' claims, many of which were enshrined in the stated philosophy and aims. One of these overt claims, that the programmes produced reflective practitioners, formed the subject of the present study.

The research process was designed as a participatory action research model similar to that of Sanger (1990) and was conceived in terms of the action research spiral (already shown in Figure 2). Since programmes ran essentially for one academic year it was convenient for each loop of the spiral to also take one year (i.e. June to May). The stages of the research process were as follows:

Cycle 1 (June 2003 – May 2004)

- Induction/planning
- Collect data
- Analyse data
- Develop hypotheses
- Planned intervention

Cycle 2 (June 2004 – May 2005)

- Collect more relevant data
- Analyse data and test hypotheses
- Refine hypotheses
- Planned intervention

Cycle 3 (June 2005 – May 2006)

- Collect more relevant data
- Analyse data and test hypotheses
- Refine hypotheses and formulate conclusions

Cycle 1

Induction/planning

The induction/planning phase consisted of initial briefing and consultation meetings held between programme management and faculty when the new MBA programme was introduced. At this stage faculty agreed an action research approach (visiting faculty were consulted by email or phone) was an appropriate way to monitor and maintain programme quality.

Data gathering and analysis

The first data-gathering exercise was the examination of existing programme paperwork, including the published philosophy, aims/objectives, syllabuses and assessment structure. When these had been analysed and discussed, a number of potential development areas presented themselves. Of special concern was the problem of achieving abstract educational outcomes specified or implied in the course paperwork. The present study deals with only one of these: the claim made by both Masters programmes that "students are encouraged to enter into collaborative learning situations and to develop a 'reflective practitioner' approach to their studies and... [professional]... practices" (Programme Handbooks). During this cycle, PAT data were gathered on a pilot basis on three courses: Research Methods 1, Research Methods 2 and the dissertation.

Hypothesis generation

On the basis of this data-gathering exercise, the programme team adopted two working assumptions:

1. The skills and habits of a reflective practitioner could be learned by students on programmes such as the MEd and MBA.
2. The curriculum could be adapted to teach these skills during class time.

At this stage it was not possible, and would probably have been counter-productive, to standardise teaching processes, since faculty were not all on site but all had to be consulted. However, the authors already had experience of PAT, a technique that requires respondents to comment on their experience and hence to reflect on it. There are other approaches to teaching reflection skills (e.g. Greenaway, 2008) but these are more time consuming and would not have simultaneously provided written student feedback about the courses. Hence PAT was chosen as a practical way to achieve the desired objectives. Since it would be used many times on the different courses making up the programme, it should promote the development of skills and attitudes of professional reflection. The hypothesis at this stage was that incorporating PAT into the programme in an appropriate way could encourage students to develop skills of reflection.

Planned intervention

The easiest way forward was to identify how PAT could be used to promote reflection in learning, and then to instruct and encourage the whole faculty team to use it. It was decided that an hour of course time would be dedicated to review, during which students would reflect upon their learning, complete the PAT form, and discuss their reflections with faculty and with other students on the course.

Cycle 2

Data gathering and analysis

During the second year-cycle, PAT data were collected for each course, analysed, discussed and presented to the programme committee at the end of the year. In addition, comments were solicited in oral and written form (e.g. by email) from students who were leaving or had left the institution.

Hypothesis refinement

PAT data plus review discussions in the classroom indicated that reflection was occurring. However, the nature of the reflection was not clear. It was assumed that unless the reflective process was truly embedded in the programme it would be undertaken only at a superficial level and learning would be compromised.

Planned intervention

In order to encourage students to reflect further on their learning it was decided to present faculty members as role models more overtly. Faculty were already required by the programme committee to identify strengths and weaknesses and to prepare an action plan for the following year. For the next research cycle they discussed how they could demonstrate that PAT feedback was used in the evaluation and development of their courses. They also agreed to discuss course development issues with the students.

Cycle 3

Data gathering and analysis

The last year-cycle took a similar form to the previous one. PAT data were again analysed, discussed and considered at programme committee, along with reflections and reports from faculty. Student comments were obtained in both oral and written form.

Hypothesis refinement and conclusion

At this point the action research team decided that reflective skills were being learned by students on the Masters programmes and that the PAT feedback process supported this learning. As a consequence they decided to relinquish this topic in favour of more pressing ones.

Results

Programme paperwork

Paperwork from both Masters programmes claimed to develop reflection among students, as revealed by the following excerpts:

The ... MBA program [is] for students who wish to develop further their business acumen and expertise in advanced management ... Students are encouraged to enter into collaborative learning situations and to develop a 'reflective practitioner' approach to their studies and business practices. (MBA Programme Handbook, 2005)

[MEd] students will be involved in their own assessment processes with the objective of developing a 'reflective practitioner' ethos and appropriate work ethics. (MEd Teaching Skills Development Handbook, 2005)

The MEd handbook also recommends that students keep a journal of the practical aspects of their studies, and quotes Carr and Kemmis (1986), Schön (1987) and other significant publications on the subject.

The reflective practitioner theme was echoed in all institutional publications relating to the Masters programmes, including national and international advertisements, the institutional prospectus and catalogues. When these were scrutinised in the first research cycle, a number of other claims were noted, which were not supported by available evidence. These included the acquisition of business acumen; problem-solving skills; and the qualities and behaviours that make learning and its broad application a defining characteristic of organisational culture. These aspects of learning lie outside the scope of the present study.

PAT data from courses

2003 – 04 (MEd: 21 students; MBA: 15 students)

In this first cycle, PAT evaluation was only used on three of the courses. However, the anecdotal evidence thus obtained demonstrated to the research team that PAT might be an appropriate way to encourage the learning of reflective skills. Some relevant PAT results from the dissertation course are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

	Items	Spontaneous responses from 22 students
1	Learning experience (general mention)	9
2	Novel way of learning/learned how to learn	4
3	Could work at my own pace	3
4	Challenge/difficult	3
5	Finding out for ourselves	3
6	Working on the literature helped me	3
7	Good to interview people, discover things	2
8	I enjoyed having to communicate with others	1
9	Writing process	1
10	Want to go on to PhD now	1
11	It was my own work	1
12	I put a huge amount of effort into it	1
13	I visited different libraries and universities	1

Table 2: Positive responses indicating reflection

	Items	Spontaneous responses from 22 students
15	Not enough time	10
16	Problems meeting/communicating with faculty	8
17	Frustration	5
18	I did not have enough skills/knowledge	3
19	Problems with computer/library facilities	2
20	Word count limits	1
21	Lonely work	1
22	Still feel I could have done better	1
23	I was too lazy	1
24	I was bored sometimes	1

Table 3: Negative responses indicating reflection

Using the typology of Hatton and Smith (1995) it is already possible to see different levels of reflection. For example, the items ‘could work at my own pace’, ‘I visited different libraries and universities’, ‘not enough time’, ‘problems with computer/library facilities’ and ‘word count limits’ are purely descriptive. However, ‘novel way of learning/learned how to learn’, ‘working on the literature helped me’, ‘I did not have enough skills/knowledge’, ‘frustration’ and ‘lonely work’ from Tables 2 and 3 admit wider personal perspectives (Stage 2 of the typology) and also indicate emotions associated with learning. These data provided enough examples of reflection to convince all team members of the potential of the technique. A substantial number of students had considered the reflective nature of their learning and their comments shed useful light on the nature of that experience.

2004 – 05 (MEd: 22 students; MBA: 18 students)

During the second cycle, students on both Masters programmes were given curriculum time in all the courses to reflect, during which they completed the PAT forms. These were then analysed on a qualitative and quantitative basis, the quantitative results for the year being shown in Table 4.

Masters course titles	N	Total best	Total worst	Total	Total Best/100 respondents	Total Worst/100 respondents	Total/100 Respondents	Best/worst
General Management	18	144	34	178	800	189	989	4.24
Information Management	18	83	29	112	461	161	622	2.86
Leadership	17	121	12	133	712	71	782	10.08
Marketing management	20	91	26	117	455	130	585	3.50
Managing Communications	16	78	12	80	488	13	500	6.50
Research Methods	16	81	34	115	506	213	719	2.38
Financial Management	16	33	28	61	206	175	381	1.18
Human Resource Management	11	32	8	40	291	73	364	4.00
Business Practice	17	66	22	88	388	129	518	3.00
International Management	19	74	19	93	389	100	489	3.89
Strategic Management	17	46	23	69	271	135	406	2.00

Table 4: Quantitative results of PAT exercise for the MBA programme 2004-05

The columns headed ‘.../100 respondents’ are presented to make comparison possible between the different subjects. The final column shows the number of positive items divided by the number of negative ones. It forms a useful comparator for course teachers to consider and also helps contextualise qualitative aspects of the courses. Faculty used the qualitative comments to evaluate their courses and to identify strengths, weaknesses and action plans for the following year.

2005 – 06 (MEd: 7 students; MBA: 16 students)

Data were gathered during the third cycle in essentially the same way as in 2004-05. In addition, faculty agreed to make students aware of any changes they had made in the curriculum in order to emphasise that they, as well as the students, were required to adopt a reflective approach to their work.

Student comments on the PAT exercise

Fifteen students gave usable responses about the reflection sessions in which they had participated. Ten of these indicated that they had learned something from them, but were unclear about its nature:

I cannot say if it is skill or knowledge, however I can say it is a good way to evaluate a job I have done. (China, male, MEd, Cycle 2)

Not really skills... knowledge probably a bit. (Indonesia, female, MBA, Cycle 2)

[I did not gain skills or knowledge] only a sense of ownership in the possible development of the course. (Switzerland, male, MEd, Cycle 1)

The first two of these comments are merely descriptive, but a sense of ownership implies emotional engagement, so skill, knowledge and emotional learning were all represented. Only one student mentioned reflection in so many words, and this may have been mere repetition of what he knew was a programme aim:

[I had] the opportunity to be a reflexive [sic] practitioner as well as to analyze and assess what had been learned, retained, and made into knowledge. (USA, male MBA, Cycle 3)

The following comments show how different individuals saw the reflection process:

I used to summarise what this course gave me and then thought about the positive or negative things. (Lebanon, male, MBA, Cycle 2)

It could not give me any knowledge, but it indeed helped me recall and re-consider the knowledge [gained in class]. (China, female, MEd, Cycle 2)

I expected that the stuff that didn't work for me will be getting better. (Indonesia, female, MBA, Cycle 2)

It's not only the way to recall the knowledge or the words the professor used, but also it's a chance for thinking. (China, female, MEd, Cycle 2)

Again, these comments correspond to the first and second levels of Hatton and Smith's (1995) typology. Some students just went through the motions required by the PAT form and the teacher, but others took stock, recalled what they had learned, reconsidered their knowledge, filled in any gaps and thought about what they had done, and perhaps also why. There was further evidence of personal emotional aspects of learning and reflection:

I was able to put closure on the class as well as reflect on what I thought the best learning methods were. (USA, male, MBA, Cycle 3)

I knew my own feelings when I was doing this form. I could learn from it. (China, female, MEd, Cycle 2)

I learnt that we all have different plus similar shades to our personality ... everyone likes to be praised ... criticism may not be easy to handle for many, but is valuable. (India, male, MEd, Cycle 3)

This shows that students were able to work through their feelings about each course and face any problems or negative emotions they had about learning. The PAT forms were mentioned for their time-saving approach and their anonymity:

This form let me do a short review and a quick evaluation for my learning. (China, male, MEd, Cycle 2)

One could give feedback that was not normally possible during the classes. (India, male, MEd, Cycle 3)

Some students found the process a challenge, but this probably also contributed to their learning:

Sometimes it is very hard to give the best and worst things. (China, female, MEd, Cycle 2)

There was just one comment suggesting that reflective skills had been learned on a deeper basis:

I still ask myself after I complete a job or project in order to find the best and worst things to improve my performance. (China, male, MEd, Cycle 2)

This is an example of the third stage of Hatton and Smith's (1995) typology: dialogue reflection or 'stepping back'. Some respondents specifically mentioned the reflection of the teachers on the programme:

The teacher is open-minded, ready to accept criticism, looking for new ideas in terms of teaching and learning. (Swiss, male, MEd, Cycle 1)

The personal feedback will help to evaluate the lecturer's performance. The next module or the one for next semester will be improved accordingly. (China, male, MBA Cycle 1)

I saw some very anxious profs who were very keen to see their feedback. (India, male, MEd, Cycle 3)

Not all students enjoyed the reflection process, or took it seriously. For example:

I did it because I was asked to. (Switzerland, male, MEd, Cycle 1)

After each course, most of the students just want to relax or think about the vacation. So they just want to finish this job [completing the PAT forms]. The results are not critical. Time and questions are limited and in 5 or 10 minutes you cannot give a high quality answer. We just fill in the forms [briefly] so they cannot cover all aspects of each course. (China, male, MEd, Cycle 2)

This shows that for some the time was too short to do justice to the reflection process. Although most students seemed happy enough with the PAT format, it did not suit everyone.

For instance:

You can see from my comments that I am not a great fan of these feedbacks in general. I'd rather have a discussion with all participants. (Switzerland, male, MEd, Cycle 1)

In summary, it is fair to say that reflection occurred for the majority if not all students, albeit at many different levels, and there was evidence that skills and knowledge were being learned, applied and consolidated. For some individuals the process had an important emotional component and relatively deep learning seems to have occurred. On the other hand, some students resisted or were bored by the process, the curricular time slot seemed inadequate, and the PAT format challenged or put off some individuals.

Faculty comments on the PAT exercise

The following comments show the range of views about the feedback exercise:

To improve the learning/teaching experience of students.

Students' assessment of teacher and course.

To compute a ratio of positive/negative comments [and] to improve the courses depending on the frequency of the comments.

In general, faculty concentrated their responses on the forms, the statistics and the utility of the feedback. They found the process user-friendly and could use the student comments effectively. Quite often the exercise encouraged individuals to review their work and change their course content and delivery:

We were collecting these data for formative evaluation purposes, that is for continuous improvement reasons.

To use student feedback to improve the future course content and delivery.

I found the form to be quite useful in that it was simple, clear, direct, user-friendly, and provided me with important information for fine tuning the course.

I personally use them to improve my course content and delivery in the following year.

The value in terms of student reflection was noted, along with other benefits:

The entire exercise encouraged reflection and... this can be regarded as having learned something.

I think that the course evaluation facilitates the development of the students' critical reflection skills. In addition, these forms provide a formal feedback mechanism for the students' voice with respect to the value-added of the course to the MBA program.

Faculty noted several issues and potential problems with the feedback forms. The main ones being:

[A problem may have been that] the students could have actually missed criteria that could be important for the teacher but irrelevant to them.

In later courses in particular, some students may have not included negative feedback out of frustration of having reported the same things previously.

End-of-course evaluations can easily become 'smile sheets' in the context of the students' feeling of achievement at having completed yet another step in the process.

The correlation of these data takes a lot of time; thus, there is some delay in my receipt of these data and the completion of my reflective report for the current year.

In summary, faculty were happy with the feedback they received and used it to develop their courses. Their own reflection was constrained within the administrative requirements of the programmes, and perhaps also by the brevity of the PAT feedback. They were anxious that, for various reasons, students might not be not giving them the whole story, and that the feedback exercise would take more time and involve extra administration.

Discussion

This study sought to build reflective learning into two higher education programmes. It considered reflection to be a mental process that could deepen understanding by creating links within existing knowledge, for instance between different parts of a formal curriculum. Following Kolb's (1984) view, it was felt that reflection would be a useful habit for management students to acquire, which would allow them later in their careers to learn continuously from their professional practice. The challenge was to devise a learning opportunity for students that would permeate the curriculum (as implied by Moon's (2004) five stages) and yet be identifiable by the students as a specific portable skill. This was achieved by adding a reflection session to each taught course.

Moon's stages were built into these reflection sessions as far possible, since students were asked to revisit what they had experienced and learned (learning, assimilation) and to write down key aspects of their learning experience (representation). From this it was hoped that at least some advancement of learning would occur. This approach also corresponded to the three stages of Jeffs and Smith (2005) (returning, relating, evaluating) and added the social dimension identified by Verdonschot (2006) as students were asked not only to recall their learning experience but also to share it with the others in their group. The PAT forms they completed required them to examine first the positive and then the negative aspects of the experience, and they were also taught that criticism should always start from the positive aspects of whatever was under scrutiny. This corresponded to Verdonschot's (2006) recommendation to look at what went right as much as what went wrong.

The evidence suggests that most, if not all, students in this study underwent a reflective process as a result of this initiative. However, acceptance of the process varied considerably between individuals, and this affected the level and extent of the reflection. Using the typology of Hatton and Smith (1995) it was possible to see examples of dialogue reflection and descriptive reflection, as well as descriptive writing. There was also evidence that skills and knowledge were being learned, applied and consolidated, as would be expected in a reflective process (Moon, 2004). For some individuals the process evidently had an important emotional component and relatively deep learning seems to have occurred, perhaps as a result of emotional involvement (Moon, 2004; Verdonschot, 2006). As predicted by both of these authors, some students resisted or were bored by the process. In addition, the curricular time slot seemed inadequate and the PAT format challenged or discouraged some individuals.

The student reflection that occurred was evidently constrained by experience. Most of the MBA students had no work experience and their responses seemed shallower and less insightful than those of the MEd participants, who underwent an internship at the school. However, the picture is more complex than this, since the MEd students studied the theory of learning in their curriculum and therefore also knew more about reflection and its potential role in learning than those on the MBA. From available evidence, teacher reflection was limited to the practicalities of fulfilling their professional responsibilities. They produced the prescribed evidence for programme committee and otherwise, if they reflected, it tended to be as a teaching aid, for the benefit of their students rather than consciously for their own

benefit. The project also aimed to manage quality improvement on the programme by developing reflective skills and practice in faculty. All faculty were happy to receive feedback and used it to develop their courses. However, the evidence at best suggests a beginning rather than the establishment of a deep-seated or rigorous process and it is likely to take time before the faculty group as a whole feels confident about its reflective practice.

Student and teacher backgrounds must also have influenced the reflection process. The students were very diverse culturally and many came from educational backgrounds where discussion and feedback were rare, conscious reflective learning still less. Despite this, many of them took the reflection very seriously, as evidenced by the feedback data. Teachers were mostly from the UK and USA, with a few from Switzerland. All were committed in principle to reflective learning, and teaching/learning strategies involved considerable discussion, case study work and problem-solving. However, more than half of the faculty were located off-site and this encouraged a rather mechanistic approach to anything outside the classroom, including the demands of programme committees and the action research project.

This action research project was led by the authors, who held management roles within the institution. Other faculty were co-opted by virtue of teaching on the programme and an element of persuasion was involved in retaining their active participation in the research team. That said, all faculty participated in gathering student comments, giving their own comments and in meetings at which progress was discussed. There was a recognised aim to develop the participants as well as the programmes, and the research topic was a group choice. These factors influenced the effectiveness and democratic nature of the action research both positively and negatively. Total student numbers between 2003-06 were 50 for the MEd and 49 for the MBA. Almost all of these returned PAT forms at the end of courses (illness or other absence were the only limiting factors), and of the total 99, 15 provided written or verbal comments. This sample is small by quantitative standards but convincing as a qualitative sample. Conducting the PAT exercise before the final assessment had been marked might have inhibited some students from complaining, but the process was conducted as anonymously as possible, and the number of negative comments received was proportionately no fewer than have been obtained in other studies.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that a feedback process can be exploited as a learning opportunity, and that a level of reflective learning can be achieved, even on intensively taught courses. The findings reaffirm existing studies of reflective learning but leave a number of gaps unfilled. A deeper qualitative study would be needed to do full justice to the glimpses of the reflective learning process reported here. The value of this action research approach in maintaining overall programme quality is suggested but not proven, and it is desirable to conduct further cycles of the process, aimed for example at other abstract claims made in the programme literature, for which no evidence is currently available.

From the outset, the team felt that programme development should involve changes and, it was hoped, improvements in teaching, learning and perhaps in student and team morale. Professional development should be reflected in changes in faculty attitudes and behaviour and perhaps in greater individual confidence. Curriculum development should encompass development both of the programme and the professionals who deliver it. This present study has addressed some of these issues but also shows the complexity of such aims and hints at the magnitude of the development task overall.

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