



Resource Guide in the Engagement of Foundation Degree Students in Reflective Learning

Introduction

This resource guide is the outcome of a joint project undertaken by the University of Bolton and the Manchester College of Arts and Technology in the period 2005-2006. This project sought to address the engagement of students in personal development planning through an evaluation of a multi-faceted intervention to promote the value of reflective learning to their personal and career development. It was based upon a University of Bolton Foundation Degree in Sport and Fitness Management delivered in partnership with the Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT). The sample student cohort was diverse and embraced not only mature students but younger students who did not possess the necessary qualifications for direct enrolment on an honours degree. There were accordingly differing levels of commitment to and ability in reflective practice and intervention was considered to be advisable to ensure their presence. While reflection and planning are vital to all undergraduate programmes, their integration in foundation degrees is particularly important because they are essential to effective work-based learning and the development of the independent learner.

The first phase of the project focused on the engagement of students in reflective learning. This included an initial appraisal of students' understanding of reflection and the development of reflective practice techniques through a year one semester one study skills module and through the tutorial process. In the second semester the students undertook a work based learning module designed to support PDP. The curriculum, work-based and tutorial interventions provided an integrated approach to the development of reflective practice.

The second phase focused on a post-intervention evaluation of students' perceptions of reflective practice and sought to establish the extent to which they had developed both the motivation and the skill to reflect across class, work-based and tutorial supported learning contexts. It also attempted both to identify barriers to this development, as perceived by students in both the college and the work place, and to explore practice that would be of value to other members of the subject network.

Reflection, Reflective Practice and Learning

The concept of the reflective learner has occupied a high profile in higher education since the publication of the Dearing Report a decade ago (NCIHE,1997) which raised concerns about the need for lifelong learning and the requirement for citizens to have the ability to take responsibility for their own learning and development in a rapidly changing world. Dearing recommended that higher education providers should develop a wider focus than the traditional emphasis upon the nurture of intellectual capacity within a disciplinary field by developing their students' capacity to practice a wide range of key (or generic or transferable) skills which transcended disciplinary boundaries. This recommendation has been widely and enthusiastically adopted, particularly in those post-1992 institutions with an explicit objective of widening access and participation in which the need to teach key skills, especially that of reflective practice in learning, has been perceived to be necessary to students' success.

One of the most commonly adopted vehicles for the development of reflective practice in learning has been Personal Development Planning through which students are encouraged and helped to become responsible for their own learning through reflection and planned future action. As Huntington and Moss (2004) note, Personal Development Planning has enabled higher education providers to codify reflection as a means to develop a range of particular attitudes in learners, by which they mean the acceptance of personal responsibility for their progression on their course and for their own post-university career and professional development. Reflective practice has also gained a higher profile in the work place, not least within higher education itself in which it has become valued for its role in the general development and continuing practice of teaching staff (Kahn et al., 2006) and also in the professional accreditation of new (and existing) academic staff through staff development programmes.

There is a substantial body of literature on the role of reflection in learning, much of which is grounded in Schon's (1983) seminal work. Schon anticipated Dearing in identifying a dichotomy of learning in which technical rationality would be accompanied by a form of learning which transcended its boundaries, noting that in new or changed situations the practitioner would allow himself or herself:

“.. to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.” (Schon 1983, p. 68).

Schon's ideas of reflective practice are substantially in evidence in two authoritative interpretations of reflection in the context of higher education. The Higher Education Academy (2005) defines reflection as:

“...a form of mental processing that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to gain a better understanding of relatively complicated or unstructured ideas and is largely based on the reprocessing of knowledge, understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess.”

Moon (2004) offers a similar interpretation in stating that reflection is:

“..a form of mental processing – a form of thinking – that may be used deliberately to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome, or there may be an unexpected outcome from a state of ‘being reflective’.”

Moon (1999, p.51), in her exploration of Schon’s theory in the context of leaning and professional development relates Schon’s notion of reflection on action to Kolb’s learning cycle. Kolb (1984) identified a four stage learning cycle which corresponded to four learning styles:

Learning Cycle	Related Learning Style
1. Concrete Experience (CE)	1. Diverging (CE / RO)
2. Reflective Observation (RO)	2. Assimilating (AC/RO)
3. Abstract Conceptualization (AC)	3. Converging (AC/AE)
4. Active Experimentation (AE)	4. Accommodating (CE/AE)

In Kolb’s model, reflective practice is a not only a stage within the learning cycle but is also associated with a specific learning style. He suggests that for some students, reflective practice may not easily relate to their preferred learning style and may thus be more challenging than for those to whom it has a natural affinity.

The abundance of literature on reflective practice is generally theoretical in nature and rarely touches on the practical methods through which students can be encouraged or enabled to become reflective learners. However, there is a commonly held view that teaching reflective practice is a challenging process. Clegg (2000), for example, describing the use of reflective practice amongst research degree supervisors, says that reflective practice is likely to involve references to emotional states as well objective action while Hatton and Smith (1995) note that definitions of reflection based on critical analysis, as for example Schon’s, maybe inappropriate or too ill-defined to be of value to students. As Moon (2004, p.9) acknowledges, it is not possible to make someone reflect and thus the challenge to higher education providers is to create the conditions and opportunities for reflective practice to be available and to help students to realise the potential benefits of reflective practice no matter how it is defined.

The interpretation of reflective practice adopted in this intervention was broadly grounded in the notion of metacognition. While there is debate on the precise meaning of this term, it is understood within this project to refer to “thinking about thinking” and therefore, following Livingston (1997) about thinking whether a cognitive goal has been met. One of the most relevant theories to this concept and one also highly relevant to the nature and context of the students undertaking the case-study programme is that of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This theory demands that learning be explored not only in terms of cognitive processes but also in terms of its situational or social context. When learners enter a new learning situation, as they do when moving into higher education, they are joining what Lave and Wenger refer to as a new “community of practitioners” with its own socio-cultural practices. For students entering higher education through what is commonly referred to (perhaps somewhat inaccurately) as a non-traditional route, that is through a pathway other than A Levels, the social and cultural differences

between a university community and that from which they have progressed can be marked. This would be particularly so in terms of a foundation degree and this was evident in the backgrounds of the students under review in this report. Not only did entering higher education necessitate involvement in new cognitive processes but the learning situation – physical, social and cultural – was fundamentally different to that of their previous experience. A principal aim of the project was to investigate the role of reflective practice in their adaptation to becoming effective learners in this changed environment.

Reflective Practice and Foundation Degrees

While Personal Development Planning and reflective practice are now key structural elements within a substantial proportion of higher education undergraduate provision, they are of particular importance in foundation degrees. Foundation degrees differ from traditional degrees in that, through their structure, their students and mode of delivery, they require a high level of autonomy in the student's capacity for taking responsibility for his or her learning. Through recruiting both young and mature students who may not possess the standard entry qualifications for an honours degree and who will be expected to undertake a substantial proportion of the learning for the foundation degree in their work place, they necessitate a greater engagement by the student in planning and reflecting upon learning experiences. The foundation degree qualification benchmark (QAA, 2004, pp.8-9) is explicit upon this in stating that:

“Foundation Degree programmes are designed to enable learners to benefit from the interpretation of ideas and the experience of practice, within the wider context of employment and one in which knowledge, understanding and skills are clearly integrated. In the interests of lifelong learning students should be encouraged to use personal development plans in conjunction with learning agreements where relevant, as a reflective learning tool throughout the programme.”

The integral role of reflection in Personal Development Planning is also embedded in the Higher Education Academy's (2002) definition of the latter as:

“..a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.”

Personal Development Planning and reflective learning are thus seen to be integral to the student's learning experience. However, both the concept and practice of reflective learning are complex and if, as Kahn (2006) suggests, the meaning of reflective practice needs to be explained to academic staff, it clearly cannot be assumed that students inherently understand the term, nor that they have the skills and motivation to act reflectively upon entering higher education. Indeed, there is a growing recognition within the higher education sector that little is known about students' perceptions of the value and practice of reflective learning (PDP-UK, 2004) and that many students experience significant difficulties in demonstrating effective reflective practice (Moon, 2004).

Project Aims

The aim of the project was not to further the theoretical debate about reflection, but to explore ways in which reflective practice might be developed at ground level, with students entering higher education. As the review of the literature on reflection presented above suggests, the concepts of reflection and reflective practice are complex. Higher education providers are thus faced with the challenge not only of enthusing and enabling first year undergraduate students in reflective practice but also of developing their own understanding of reflection. The project thus sought to implement an intervention to develop Personal Development Planning and reflective practice, to evaluate this, and to gauge students' responses to, and interpretations of, reflective learning.

Method

The project was designed to explore the engagement of foundation degree students in reflective practice through personal development planning. It was undertaken through a case study based on a Foundation Degree in Sport and Fitness Management validated through the Department of Sport, Leisure and Tourism Management at the University of Bolton and delivered through the Department of Sport and Recreation of the Manchester College of Arts and Technology. The intervention under review was a first year module, Business and Study Skills, which combined the teaching of study skills with an introduction to Personal Development Planning and reflective learning. The module assessment requirements were based upon the construction and development of a Personal Development Record. Students were provided with guidance on the contents of this record which included the writing of 14 reflective logs of a minimum of 200 words throughout the fourteen weeks of the duration of the module. In Semester Two the students undertook a Work Experience module in which they were expected to maintain their Personal Development Plan through the production of reflective logs. The period of research covered the whole of the academic year 2005-2006 (the first year of the delivery of the course) and the first semester of 2006-2007.

Prior to the commencement of the course it had been anticipated that approximately fifteen students would be recruited. However, the actual number of recruited students fell short of this figure; furthermore, due to the personal and domestic circumstances of several students, there was a relatively low retention rate and by the start of the second year in September 2006 only six students remained on the course. While presenting some methodological difficulties, this rate of attrition highlights an important aspect of this research project, namely that it was conducted with students who might be described as being at the limits of the widening participation agenda. Although the intervention was based upon a foundation degree, the majority of the students recruited were aged under 21 and had enrolled on the course primarily because they did not possess the entry qualifications for an undergraduate honours degree and not because they had been seconded by an employing organisation. Two were mature students who were not in full time employment in the sport and fitness sector but who joined the course as a route to an honours degree via the third year of the University's BA (Hons) Sport and Leisure Management.

The aims of the project necessitated the collection of the views and perceptions of the students on the meaning and value of reflective practice. These were obtained via a series of questionnaires distributed before, during and after the intervention. In addition a number of interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by a

member of the research team based at the university rather than the college on the basis that this person had a more detached relationship with the students and that this would encourage students to express their feelings more candidly.

Results

The students completed an initial questionnaire in October 2005 at the start of the course and before Personal Development Planning and reflective learning had been discussed in depth with them. This revealed a range of attitudes which provided a useful context in which to locate their views on learning. The majority had not enjoyed school. They felt that teachers had controlled their learning and that personal relationships with teachers had been crucial to the level of interest and motivation they were able to invest in learning. Some had been employed for short periods after leaving school and had chosen to enter further education on realising that a qualification was essential to career progression and a higher wage. There was accordingly a relatively high degree of motivation within the group which was augmented by the view that although college lecturers respected them, they would not attempt to coerce them. When asked if they reflected on their learning, some students were unable to offer a response. The two most cogent responses were made by mature students, one of whom revealed in her answer that students do reflect on the course even though they may not conceptualise what they are doing as reflection:

“We [i.e. the student cohort] talk about the course outside the college. We check what each other has done and where we are up to. We do all talk to each other; we get on.”

The students completed a second questionnaire in November 2005 which explored their understanding of Personal Development Planning and Reflective Learning. The responses may be summarised as follows:

1. Understanding of the term “Personal Development Planning”

With the exception of an engagingly cynical student who felt PDP was a means of padding out the course to attract extra funding, most students saw it as an opportunity to check their progress and to identify strengths and weaknesses. Only one specifically mentioned reflection, and overall there was a greater emphasis on reviewing the past than forward planning.

2. Understanding of the term “reflective journal”.

The overall notion was one of recording progress and strengths and weaknesses. However some students referred to the recording of feelings and opinions, thus indicating the perceived subjective benefits of a reflective journal.

3. What should be recorded in the reflective log?

There were several references to review, for example, difficulties experienced, but only one reference to an action plan. Again, there was mention of opinions and feelings.

4. How do you believe reflecting may help you?

Mainly review, for example, looking back, summarise ability to cope, record of the week and again understanding feelings.

5. What do you perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the process of reflecting?

Approximately 40% of the responses referred to a perceived weakness as not being honest about themselves. Other comments referred to a dislike of writing about oneself and to the time required, which, as some noted, might have been devoted to completing assignments.

These preliminary questionnaires were followed by individual interviews in January 2006 the results of which suggested that some students retained negative concerns about reflection while others felt they had developed a more positive attitude. One student remained unconvinced of the benefits of reflective practice as he felt that employers would be interested in subject knowledge; reflective practice was conceptualised as a key skill associated with further rather than higher education. Other students had developed a more positive attitude, one admitting to being sceptical at the start of the module but now feeling that “writing things down is helpful”. The reflective logs were seen as a “useful way to reflect on achievement” and also as “a weekly benchmark to check where I am”. However, several students remained unconvinced of the benefits of committing reflection to a written form even though they held positive views of the benefits of reflection.

While size of the sample was too small to suggest any generalised pattern, there was nevertheless a very rough division of attitude by age with the mature students valuing the reflective logs more than the younger students. The mature students believed Personal Development Planning was a useful tool for career development and were supportive of the intervention because it had introduced them to a process of reflection and personal planning that they had not previously known about. The younger students however would, in the main, have preferred a subject module rather than the intervention.

A final interview was conducted in May 2006 to investigate the extent to which students were continuing to maintain their Personal Development Plans four months after the conclusion of the intervention. Even though not all students were at this point maintaining a written plan, most felt that the practice of reflection – in their own understanding of it – was useful. However, only one student had continued to produce a weekly written reflective log after the close of the intervention.

The reflective logs

For most of the students the intervention represented the first time they had been required to produce a written learning log. Attitudes to this requirement varied from a negative view that the reflective log “gets in the way of other course requirements” to a more positive reception as “this is the first time I’ve ever thought about myself”. The initial logs tended to display some hesitancy to commit reflective comments to a written form with many being in a more traditional diary form. As the module progressed and levels of confidence and ability increased, there was a greater variation in their style and content.

The majority of the reflective logs focused on reflection on doing, for example activities undertaken, things achieved and the identification and recording of action to be undertaken. These logs did incorporate reflection insofar as they represented a process of review and evaluation, with, for example, some students recording what they had learned in the preceding week and noting the need to work on assignments to meet the deadline. While this was clearly useful to the review and completion of tasks, only one log developed a focus on reflection on thinking and learning. This log demonstrated a process of reflection on learning style, statements on what type of learning and learning environment were best, comments on struggles with self-

confidence and ways in which this was being addressed and changing feelings about the course and involvement in it.

Conclusions

The project revealed the complexity of the terms reflection, reflective practice and reflective learning. However, it is instructive to recall that the rationale for the implementation of Personal Development Planning and reflective learning in higher education was essentially simple, that is, to develop in students a sense of responsibility for their own learning and career progression. The intervention demonstrated that although students may have differing interpretations of reflective practice and may exhibit varying levels of willingness to commit personal reflections to a written form, most acknowledge the benefits of some process of reflection, review and action. Reflective practice differs from subject knowledge in that it is difficult if not impossible to reduce it an objective or quantifiable form. A positive outcome of the intervention was that it introduced students to Personal Development Planning and reflective learning. However, some students resented the fact that their reflection had to be expressed in a written form and had ceased to do so after this was obligatory. This may be related to Kolb's assertion that reflective practice may not relate to the preferred learning style of some students and may thus appear to them to be challenging.

In overall terms the students' approach to reflection tended to support Lave and Wenger's (1991) views on situated learning. Reflection had for some become a way of dealing with the socio-cultural context of a new learning environment at least as much as a way of dealing with the cognitive facets of learning. For at least one student reflective practice appears to have been largely instrumental in her retention on the course. However, reflective practice appears to have been of less perceived value to those students whose learning style did not easily relate to it. This suggests that teaching institutions may need to consider if a uniform prescriptive approach to personal development planning and the assessment of reflective practice are appropriate to the differentiated situations and needs of students.

References

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Suggestions for Practitioners

- Consider an intervention in the first semester of the first year. This could typically be integrated within a study skills or “learning to learn” module. Some students may have had previous experience of such an intervention in further education and it may be useful to encourage them to share their experiences of this with other students.
- Undertake briefing sessions on personal development planning and reflective practice and use plain jargon-free language.
- Do not assume that all staff are able to teach reflective practice; most subject lecturers have no training in doing so. Staff development should be provided to enable teachers to deliver effective training in personal development planning.
- Reflective logs are widely adopted method of ensuring that students do reflect on their learning but conversely may be resented by those for whom reflective practice is not closely related to their preferred learning style. Consider other

ways through which students might demonstrate reflective practice, for example the production of action plans or tutorial discussions.

- Be aware that older students may feel more comfortable and confident in reflection than younger students because they have more life experience.
- The differentiated situated learning environments of foundation degrees offer a rich variety of experience. This can be a useful factor in encouraging students to think about how they learn in differing contexts.
- Students may feel reluctant to share reflective thoughts with staff. Consider ways in which a neutral third party might be involved as a mentor.

Guide to Further Resources

LEARNING AND REFLECTION

Donald Schon The Encyclopedia of Informal Education

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm>

David Kolb The Encyclopedia of Informal Education [http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-](http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-explrn.htm)

[explrn.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-explrn.htm)

David Kolb Experience Based Learning Systems

<http://www.learningfromexperience.com/about-us/>

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

E portfolios <http://www.eportfolios.ac.uk/search?target=reflective>

Centre for Recording Achievement <http://www.recordingachievement.org/>

Higher Education Academy <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/PDP.htm>

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