

## **Reflective Teaching Portfolios.....or Not!!**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will explore the use of Reflective Teaching Portfolios as a final piece of assessment on a Level 9 Training and Education Programme.

The aim of the paper is to establish the extent to which the compilation of a Reflective Teaching Portfolio does indeed facilitate reflection.

Walker (2006) describes pedagogy as being 'interactional' and discusses how this shapes future judgements and behaviour. Dewey (1933) suggests lecturers can only be truly reflective when they are willing to search in a sustained and protracted 'state of doubt', which stimulates inquiry into practice. Biggs (2007) develops reflective practice to incorporate transformation from 'unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be'.

The question the authors would like to answer is 'Do Reflective Teaching Portfolios offer an opportunity for Lecturers to search in a sustained and protracted state of doubt to stimulate transformation in practice?'

The research will be conducted using quantitative data collected from a group of thirty eight lecturers participating on a Level 9 Training and Education Programme.

The findings will be used to inform future assessment strategies on the programme.

### **Keywords**

Reflective portfolios; assessment; reflective; pedagogical practice

## What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice is the impetus of the practitioner to inquire into their own practice, question why they choose certain approaches, resources, techniques and activities over others. This questioning combined with the ability to evaluate the appropriateness of the choices for the learners and material being developed forms the essence of reflective practice. (Dewey, 1933, p.15) frames it superbly when he says ‘...*thought affords the sole method of escape from purely impulsive or purely routine action*’, using the word ‘escape’ implying that to think (or reflect) is something beautiful and wonderful. Reflective practice is capable of greatness. Dewey believed that reflection begins when lecturers are willing to search in a sustained and protracted ‘*state of doubt or perplexity*’. Rather than allow a challenging teaching moment leave the lecturer feeling powerless, reflection is the tool, which makes learning from the challenging teaching moment possible. Reflecting (coupled with research) on the challenge leads to development of self and is often how new approaches are discovered. The discovery may simply be an adaptation of an existing method or approach. In Schön’s seminal work (*The Reflective Practitioner*, 1983) he refers to these challenging teaching moments as ‘*swampy lowlands of practice*’ where lecturers develop ‘*tacit knowledge*’ (as opposed to ‘technical rationality’ i.e. the theory) which is a synthesis of theory and practice that the lecturer has developed themselves. Schön differentiates between the learning from ‘*reflection in action*’ and ‘*reflection on action*’; the first being to reflect as you teach the other reflection after teaching. Both offer valuable pedagogical development opportunities. Osterman and Kottcamp (2004, p.35) build on the work of Schön in the way they view reflective practice as being the marrying or reconciliation of ‘espoused theories’ or beliefs and ‘theories-in-use’ which is reflection in action. Improvements or development opportunities come from ‘critical examination’ of the discrepancies between both. The challenge for the reflective practitioners is to identify the discrepancy between their practice and their theoretical view of their practice i.e. rhetoric Vs practice.

A comprehensive and yet all embracing definition of reflective practice, highlighting both the in and on action elements of reflection shared with the research and experimentation aspects is:

Reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes. Practitioners use these processes for examining beliefs, goals, and practices, to gain new or deeper understanding that

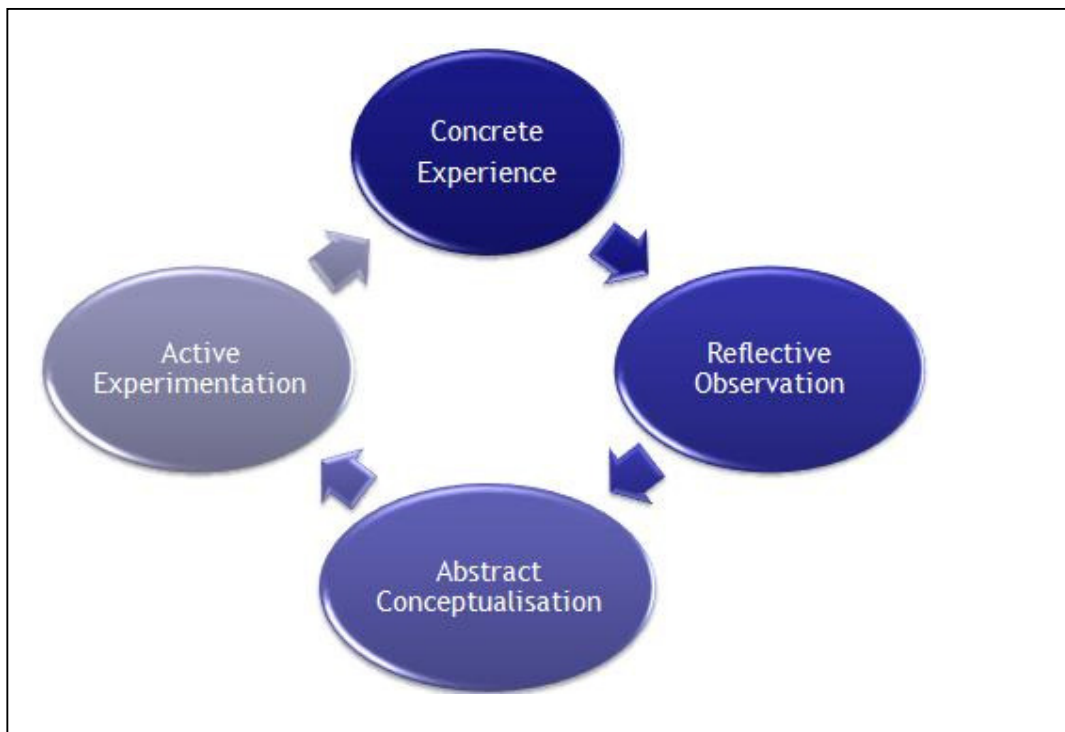
lead to actions that improve learning for students. Actions may involve changes in behaviour, skills, attitudes, or perspective...

York-Barr et al, 2001, p.6

In teasing this definition apart we can identify the main components of reflective practice as being (i) down time or a 'deliberate pause'; (ii) evaluation or 'higher-level thinking'; (iii) informed new actions resulting from 'deeper understanding'. Merriam et al, (2007, p.172) talk about reflective practice being much more than '*abstract theoretical or technical knowledge*'. They say the knowledge gained through experience and the way '*we practice our craft*' are just as important. The knowledge gained as a result of the way '*we practice our craft*' comes from taking some time to evaluate how we practice in different situations.

Kolb's learning (1984) can be interpreted as a reflective learning tool (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Kolb's Learning Cycle



We can consider a challenging teaching moment as being a 'concrete experience'. The reflective practitioner will 'reflect' on this difficult teaching experience and consider how the learning situation may be improved the next time. As part of their reflection they will do some research and often discuss the situation with their colleagues. They will then reframe

the experience in their mind factoring in how they might approach it the next time; this is 'abstract conceptualisation'. They will then 'actively experiment' with this new approach (model) the next time thereby starts the cycle all over again with a new 'concrete experience'. This theory is a useful approach for reflective practitioners in writing up a log or diary (i.e. reflective teaching portfolio).

Rollet (2001, p.27) talks about expert lecturers drawing from a '*large repertoire of strategies and skills that they can call on automatically*' and discusses how having this '*repertoire of strategies*' or toolbox to hand leaves them '*free to deal with unique or unexpected events*'. Rollet says often the practitioner does not know why they choose that particular approach but '*when questioned they are able to reconstruct the reasons for their decisions and behaviour*'. So expert lecturers question their choices of resources and techniques in an effort to move from '*routine action to reflective action*' and this reflective action is characterised by '*ongoing self-appraisal and development*'. (Scales, 2008, p.10).

Wellington and Austin (1996) argue that reflective practice is hugely influenced by the lecturer's values and beliefs i.e. their orientation. Effectively their philosophy of teaching and learning will sway the way they reflective. For example is the reflective lecturer reflecting on practice in relation to '*system or human concerns*' (Wellington and Austin, 1996, p.308). Is the reflection in relation to QA and organisational concerns? Or societal needs Vs learner's needs? In effect it is the reflective lens that influences the reflective action. The reflective teaching portfolio should conceptualise the lens through which the reflective practitioner is evaluating practice. This conceptualisation is usually presented through the writers teaching philosophy statement, which opens the reflective teaching portfolio.

### **What are Reflective Teaching Portfolios?**

Portfolio development is a popular method of encouraging critical reflection and evaluation of practice. Brockbank and McGill (1998, p.34) describe the reflective teaching portfolio as:

...a compilation of learning intentions, accounts of learning activities, learning outcomes, records of reflective dialogues. It includes evidence from a variety of sources including your private learning journal/diary/log, and most important of all, a reflective document detailing your learning process.

Scales (2008, p.15) states that reflection is both a '*process and activity*' and should lead to a product such as a diary, log or reflective journal. He defines the reflective journal as '*a*

*written record of [your] experiences of, and feelings about planning, preparing and delivering teaching and learning*'. It is a tool, which encourages reflection and stimulates enquiry into pedagogical practice. It should record details of critical teaching incidents or challenges. The record will highlight main problems and identify, as a result of research, reflection and discussion, key developments for the subsequent teaching and learning experiences. It is an opportunity for the lecturer to *'make sense of the experience'* by *'organising, evaluating and learning from it'* and can often be quite therapeutic according to Scales (2008, p.17). Biggs and Tang (2007) develop reflective practice to incorporate transformation. In the therapeutic designing and writing of a reflective teaching portfolio it is hoped that the author will demonstrate transformative practice through using critical reflection on practice to develop existing practices thereby adding to the lecturer's toolkit or repertoire of teaching and learning strategies i.e. pedagogy. Leach and Moon (2008) preface a section in their book titled 'toolkits' with *'...without tools...we are not a 'naked ape' but an empty abstraction'*. Knowing what tools are appropriate for different situations requires critical reflection and recording for further evaluation and reflection with regard to new teaching experiences. This approach has the added benefit of facilitating greater reflection and responsiveness in action, in addition to reflecting on and making informed decisions regarding reflection on action. Mezirow (2000) differentiates between three types of reflection. Content reflection involves reflecting about the teaching experience, and process reflection requires problem solving. Process reflection through reflective teaching portfolios facilitates transformational change and ongoing development because the problem solving has been recorded and can be expounded upon for further reflection and development subsequently (remembering Kolb's learning cycle). The third type of reflection identified by Mezirow (2000) is premise reflection which involves critical reflection through the lecturers or authors own beliefs about teaching (remembering Wellington and Austin's views). Reflective teaching portfolios allow the reflective lecturer to frame their evaluation of practice and pedagogical development with regard to the lens they are critically reflecting through.

Fry et al (2009, p.482) quote teachers who compiled reflective teaching portfolios as saying it offered them a *'space and incentive'* to engage with *'relevant literature and current debates'* and to *'look at best practice...and connect theory with practice and think more broadly'*.

The benefits of producing a reflective teaching portfolio can be summarised as follows:

- They offer the '*ability to reflect and analyse*' teaching
- Create opportunities to '*discuss teaching with colleagues*'
- Encourages '*experimentation with new teaching strategies, and to engage more in the development of enhanced teaching materials*'
- Offers the '*opportunity to examine [their] underlying philosophies...in the context in which they work...and consider alternative approaches based on different philosophies*' (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, p.31)

Effectively the compilation of a reflective teaching portfolio is an occasion to encourage critical reflection and stimulate research and discussion among other reflective practitioners. It makes possible and encourages practitioners calling time out to digest and consider how their practice is effective. It further supports research in terms of identifying what works and what does not work with regard to engaging students and promoting a positive learning environment and experience. Scales (2008, p.11) believes it is vital that the tacit experience is recorded in a journal. In this way reflective practice can be transformational.

### **Do Reflective Teaching Portfolios Facilitate Reflective Practice?**

This research strives to establish the extent to which practicing lecturers use the reflective portfolio an opportunity to search in a sustained and protracted state of doubt (critical reflection) to stimulate transformation in practice (critical evaluation).

As the authors are involved in delivering the programme the decision to use questionnaires was thought to minimise any bias, which might arise, in particular if the questionnaire was completely anonymously. For this reason an online survey (Survey Monkey) was used to collect the data. The drawbacks inherent in this type of questionnaire and the limitations placed regarding deeper investigation in respondent's behaviour are acknowledged. Thirty eight lecturers were surveyed with a total of eighteen completing the survey (47% response rate).

The authors were interested in researching the extent to which lecturers formalise their reflective practice and the degree to which they engage with academic advances in this area. A lecturer has a vast bank of knowledge upon which the reflective portfolio draws,

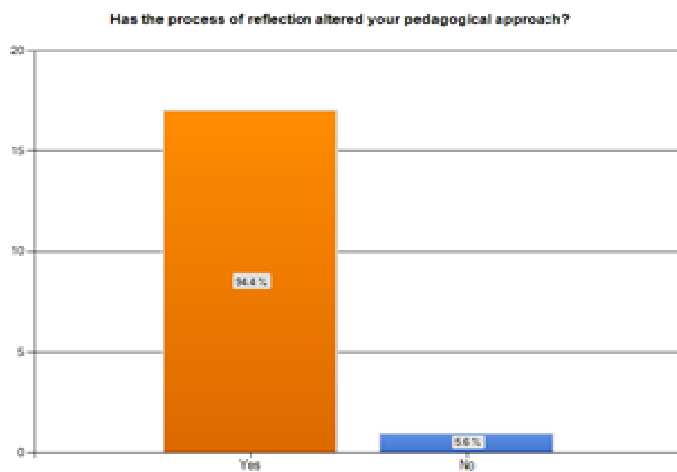
comprehension of new information requires a merger between the known and the new, hence the importance of ongoing engagement with emerging ideas and concepts.

Furthermore, the authors were interested in researching whether the practice of an annual Presidents award for Excellence in Teaching might enhance ongoing engagement with scholarly literature.

### Findings

This research set out to establish the extent to which the completion of a reflective teaching portfolio does indeed facilitate reflection. All respondents agreed that the completion of their teaching portfolio did stimulate deeper inquiry into their practice.

Ninety four percent said the process of reflection altered their pedagogical practice and 72% said that they continued to engage with scholarly literature.



In the absence of the facility to question the respondents further on their answers the authors decided to look at the subsets within the data set and try to filter out if the exercise of completing the teaching portfolio was more effective for some lecturers than others. There were constraints here by the fact that the number of questions posed was only nine, a decision the researchers made to maximise response rates.

However it was established that the effectiveness of actually formally writing a portfolio on ones future teaching practice is affected by ones prior reflective capacity. The lecturers who had a history of reflective practice prior to writing the teaching portfolio seemed to gain more

long-term benefit and engaged more with the scholarly literature on completion of the portfolio than those who became reflective practitioners during the teaching and learning course. 83% of the respondents considered themselves to be reflective practitioners prior to writing their portfolios, and all of these used the reflections to modify their practice. When asked to say how they altered their practice some of the following responses were given.

*'I put more thought into my practice and its possible outcomes'*

*'Assessment methods, tutorial activities were changed in line with student feedback and my reflections'*

*'Change the way I get the class involved in the learning sessions, change the way I have sought feedback and evaluation'*

Although these 83% of respondents were reflective practitioners it may be that their reflection was more reactive than proactive and transformative because only 6.7% of them considered themselves to be excellent when asked to rate their reflective practice before the teaching and learning course, whereas on completion 46% considered themselves to be excellent.

Ninety three percent of the respondents who considered themselves reflective practitioners prior to completing the portfolio have actually engaged in transformative reflection and have altered their pedagogical practice. Some of the answers to how this change in pedagogical practice manifested itself are as follows:

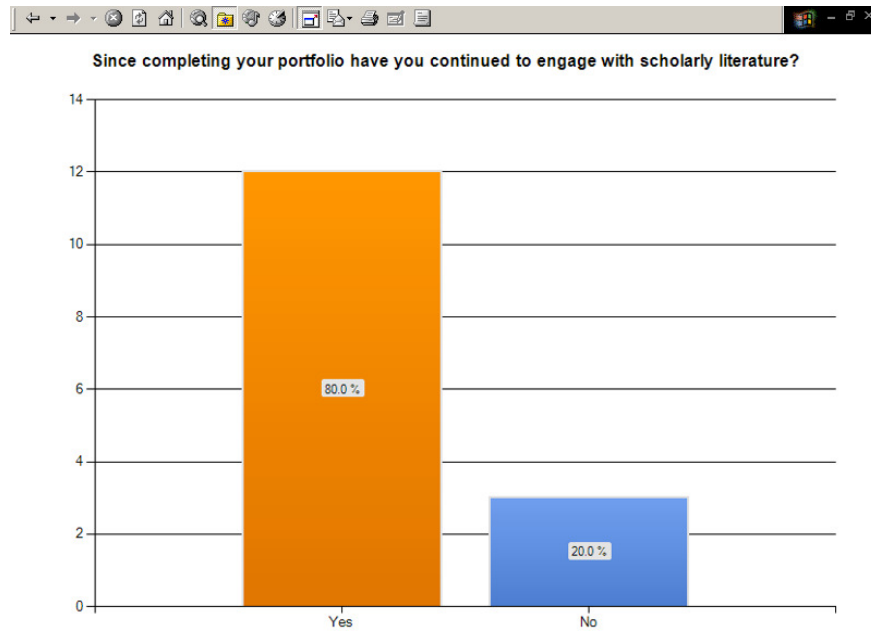
*'Yes, constantly updating, seeing what works, what doesn't, analysing different ways of transmitting relevant information'*

*'It has made me think more about my students and also about myself as part of the learning process (I'm still learning)'*

*'One example - giving students the opportunity (where available) to submit 'draft work' before their actual 'real work' e.g. assignments, has improved the student / lecturer learning process'*

Eighty percent of prior reflectors have continued to engage with the scholarly literature since completion of their portfolio whereas only 33% of those participants who were not prior reflectors have continued their scholarly practice.





Interestingly of the respondents who were already reflective practitioners only 66% were in favour of a prize as motivating force, whereas 100% of those who were not existing reflective practitioners were in favour. This suggests that in a population of lecturers that have not been exposed to any formal third level teaching and learning course would find a competition in some way beneficial and encouraging of ongoing engagement with the literature.

A more interesting subgroup are those respondents who did not consider themselves to be reflective practitioners prior to writing the teaching portfolio. 100% of this group found the act of writing the teaching portfolio stimulated a deeper enquiry into their practice. This group had a very low rating on their own reflective ability prior to actually writing the portfolio, this improved significantly while they were on the course but declined again after finishing the course. This would suggest that lecturers who are not natural reflectors do need the added encouragement and feedback, afforded in a structured course, to enhance reflection and to prolong the reflective practice on completion of the portfolio. It is worth reiterating here that 100% of this cohort advocates the prize as a means of facilitating further engagement with the academic literature.

In accordance with the literature these participants reinforced the view that reflective practice

enhances teaching and brings about change in how lecturers approach their craft. 100% said that the process of reflection altered their pedagogical approach with some of the responses as follows:

*I am able to empathise with student's experience to provide more engaging classes.*

*I am now constantly reviewing my practice and open to new ideas and approaches*

A disappointing finding was the percentage of this cohort who have not continued to engage with scholarly literature @ 33% compared with 20% in the other group of prior reflectors as mentioned earlier.

This study confirmed that the completion of the reflective teaching portfolio does facilitate reflection; it also established that the ongoing writing of a journal in a formal context facilitates transformation reflection rather than passive reflection. Further observations which dovetail with research on students, showed that formative feedback and a formal structured approach to the portfolio is particularly useful to the “non-natural” reflectors and that a prize in colleges would encourage this cohort to engage further with the literature.

This study should be seen as a starter project and preliminary insight into lecturer’s perceptions and actions regarding completing teaching portfolios. Further studies in the area will allow deeper enquiry into this area.

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