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Adult learners learning from experience: using a reflective practice model to support work-based learning

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The learning achieved by individuals through their work-based activity is unique and differentially experienced. It involves a combination of intuitive reasoning, inference and inductive thinking which is normally tacit and not available for analysis. In this paper I present research undertaken with groups of adult students training to work as mentors on a community mentoring project, in an attempt to explore how they learned from their mentoring encounters through the use of reflective practice. Each mentor was asked to keep a reflective diary using a specific model of guided reflection. A number of models of reflective practice are discussed in the paper and the briefing and debriefing methods used to help students understand the concept and processes are presented. Results from questionnaires and focus groups, in which mentors were asked to reflect on the efficacy of the reflective practice model, are also used. In addition, a discussion of earlier work with groups of students undertaking work placements in industry is also included in order to illustrate how the use of a model of structured reflection can have relevance for work-based learning in a variety of contexts.

Introduction

What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: 'This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it ...' (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 341)

Readers may wonder why I have chosen to begin this paper by drawing attention to Nietzsche's famous demon quotation; a quotation that he uses in order to illustrate the frightening potential of eternal recurrence. It is because something akin to this phenomenon appears to me to be inherent in any failure to learn from experience and particularly, in the context of this article, work experience. My contention is that without the conscious will and determination to learn from our encounters at work,

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errors of judgement, poor attitudes and dissatisfaction continue to recur and to cause us distress and loss in our working lives.

Most people do, as a matter of course, learn from experience and they do this moderately well without any pedagogic intervention. However, I would suggest that the regular use of a reflective practice tool or model makes learning from experience a more reliable and faster method of gaining access to necessary knowledge and wisdom about our work processes and about ourselves.

Work-based learning has been described as the linkage of learning to a work role. Levy *et al.* (1989, p. 4) identify three components to work-based learning which they claim provides an essential contribution to the learning, by:

- identifying and providing relevant off-the-job learning opportunities;
- structuring learning in the workplace;
- providing appropriate on-job training/learning opportunities.

Later Seagraves *et al.* (1996) went on to classify the three strands as: learning for work; learning at work and learning through work. In this paper I argue that each of these constituents of work-based learning can be informed and perhaps even accomplished, by the carefully planned use of a structured reflective practice model. Indeed it is perhaps no accident that the conjunctions used by Seagraves ('for' 'at' and 'through') resonate with those used by Schön (1983) in describing the activities of the reflective practitioner: 'reflecting-*in*-action'—the tacit knowledge which people bring to any situation—and 'reflecting-*on*-action', which has been summarized as 'retrospective reflection carried out after and usually away from the event' (Rolfe, 1999, p. 21).

However, whereas it might be accepted that students undertaking any level of work-based activity could be assumed to engage automatically in reflection-*in*-action (since this is, seemingly, unavoidable) structured reflection-*on*-action could be viewed as a highly introspective activity that has little relevance except in higher level occupations. Reflection-*on*-action may have relevance in professions where there are ethical dimensions to be considered and important decisions to be made, but, in other fields, retrospective reflection as a means of learning appears to have been discounted in favour of more measurable approaches to learning from work, for example NVQ. Thus, although structured reflective practice has been adopted by a number of professions in their training, notably in healthcare and teaching, such techniques are very rarely explicitly incorporated into other forms of learning 'for' 'at' and 'through' work. Nevertheless, it could be argued, that in an age where people are more and more involved in service industries and knowledge management, the technical and practical skills encouraged by traditional forms of work-based supervision need to be augmented by reflective practice which will give people insights into a wider range of work-based issues and thus further their development. Furthermore, as Johns (1998) points out, 'reflection on' can promote 'reflection in', making, I would argue, for increased self-awareness and better informed responses in everyday work.

Mezirow has suggested that the role of the adult educator is to 'respond to the learner's educational need in a way which will improve the quality of his or her

self-directedness as a learner' (1981, p. 135) and he criticizes the way learning is often evaluated by 'subtracting measured learning gains in skills or competencies from behavioural objectives'. These may, he states, be acceptable for task-oriented learning, but not for the subjective changes involved if perspective transformation is to be achieved. Mezirow has also described how the critical consciousness and particularly, what he describes as 'theoretical reflectivity', represents a uniquely adult capacity, but one that needs to be taught. He suggests that it becomes realized through perspective transformations:

Perspective transformation involves not only becoming critically aware of habits of perception, thought and action, but of the cultural assumptions governing the rules, roles, conventions and social expectations which dictate the way we see, think, feel and action. (Mezirow, 1981, p. 129)

More recently, Brockbank and McGill have explained how reflective practice involves reflective dialogue that 'engages the person at the edge of their knowledge, their sense of self and the world as experienced by them' (1999, p. 57). This leads to assumptions and understanding about self and the world being challenged. In addition it is inherent in the concept that everyone has to make his or her own journey. Thus reflection forms the bridge between a course of study and personal experience and is a highly individual and, I would venture, often very motivating learning activity.

In this paper therefore, I contend that encouraging reflective practice at all levels is beneficial for students undertaking any kind of work-based activity, even though, as will be shown, there is often resistance to the process and difficulty in initial development of the reflective and analytical skills required.

My project here, hopefully demonstrates how a complex reflective practice tool can be used successfully with students, particularly adults returning to learn, to enable them to develop critical thinking power and increased levels of confidence through their everyday work or through course mediated practice.

Methodology

By reporting on the use of a structured model of reflective practice used with students from two different courses of study, each undertaking work-based learning in quite different contexts, this paper aims to assess the usefulness of a structured model of reflection for general use in work-based learning. The use of the model was originally a purely practical expedient on my part: I wanted to be able to promote deep learning; learning where change in fundamental ideas and attitudes could be effected through work-based activity. It was anticipated that the questions that underpin the model would enable such learning.

Research was undertaken with groups of students undertaking two different courses of personal and professional development at a higher education institution. The first group were undertaking a course in advanced mentoring, at third year undergraduate level, which involved each student in providing mentoring support for a lone parent wishing to return to work (hereafter referred to as mentoring students).

The second group were adult returners using work-based learning as part of an identified work placement chosen to enhance their individual career development (hereafter referred to as work experience students). This course was delivered at first year undergraduate level and also at foundation level, and the range of placements was quite broad: learning support in local schools, administrative work in private and public sector organizations, project work with charities, freelance creative and design work, retail work, etc.

Before embarking on their work-based learning, both sets of students were briefed on how reflective practice could play an important part in their learning. This briefing also served to explore the attitudes and expectations of students to the 'learning through work' process. Mid-way through the placement a focus group was held with each cohort in order to gauge the effectiveness of their reflection to date and whether attitudes had changed and at the end of the placement a full debriefing on the reflective process was carried out. Mentoring students also completed an end of course questionnaire that focused on the use of reflective practice in their own development.

Using content analysis, information is also drawn, from the diaries that students kept to record their learning. These written diaries were used as a means of recording reflective practice during the placements, since, as McAlpine describes, 'writing helps the professional to be intentional about the process' (1992, p. 24). Boud has also argued that writing is an important contribution to understanding:

... it provides an objectivity in relation to the initial learning experience. It can clarify the initial experience by removing it from the clouds of subjective feeling that can obscure it. It is a way of distancing oneself from the experience, which has the effect of clarifying it and fostering the ability to work with it, so that the learner can draw out potential learning. (Boud *et al.*, 1993, p. 63)

Identifying a model

In earlier work with foundation level students I had used an unstructured diary format, anticipating that students would, like the teachers Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) describe, enjoy creating an individual text, which would reflect their individual personality and the nature of the placement being undertaken. Later I introduced a model based on the stages in the debriefing process described by Pearson and Smith (1985):

1. What happened? (Log)
2. How you feel? (Diary)
3. What does it all mean? (Journal)

However, even this 'log, diary, journal' format did not appear to provide the necessary structure needed to help and support the development of critically reflective powers in all students working at this level. Despite classroom practice in using the format many students gave purely descriptive accounts in each of the three sections and found particularly that the 'diary' and 'journal' analysis was very difficult. It was then that I decided that an even more structured model might be preferred and that I would combine this with a more detailed briefing and debriefing process.

The underlying idea behind the use of any model is to imitate the behaviour of a real life system. In the case of reflective practice a model was needed which would simulate, and potentially enhance and expedite, the metacognitive processes involved in learning from experience. In this way it would be possible to achieve an increased understanding of a situation and thus gain real insights into how to control or improve that situation. The use of a model also tends to focus the mind and provide a framework for analysis.

In my search for a suitable format for the diaries, I had considered a number of reflective practice models. All appeared to be based on Kolb's learning cycle (1984) and to recognize the cyclical nature of learning. I also reviewed the work on reflection undertaken by Griffiths and Tann (1991) in which they identify five different levels of reflection, and concluded that the reflection level best suited to this context would be 'Review', where students would reflect on their experiences either later on the same day or a day or two later:

1. *Rapid reaction*: which involves an instinctive and very immediate response.
2. *Repair*: where reflection may entail a slight pause to gather the thoughts, but action is still fairly immediate.
3. *Review*: necessitating time out to re-assess, usually some hours or days later.
4. *Research*: a systematic, sharply focused approach to reflection taking place over weeks or months.
5. *Retheorize and reformulate*: the abstract, rigorous, clearly formulated contemplation which occurs over months or years, and which, I would suggest, can eventually become integrated into the 'Rapid Reaction' response repertoire, and thus complete a learning cycle.

However, it was the work of Platzer *et al.* (1997) that first brought Johns' model of structured reflection to my attention. After reviewing a number of learning models, the authors point out that Johns considered his structure useful in the development of essential skills and values equated with professional learning. In examining the model further, I realized that the sections which it contained echoed the Kolb learning cycle and the 'log, diary, journal' model that I had used previously, but in addition the model incorporated a series of questions which students could use to prompt appropriate reflective responses.

The Johns model (1994)

The Johns model of structured reflection (MSR) takes account of social constructionism by recognizing that actions and responses are influenced by emotions, intentions, values and attitudes as well as external factors and provides a structured platform from which events can be analysed. However, the Johns model is formulated for use within nurse education. In order to ensure the model was suitable for use with my students, I therefore modified the cue questions slightly. The revised model used in this study is shown in Figure 1:

Core question: What information do I need access to in order to learn through this experience?

Cue questions:

- 1. Description of experience*
 - 1.1 Phenomenon
Describe the 'here and now' experience
- 2. Reflection*
 - 2.1 What was I trying to achieve?
 - 2.2 Why did I intervene/react as I did?
 - 2.3 What were the consequences of my actions for myself, my customers or clients, the people I work with?
 - 2.4 How did I feel about this experience when it was happening?
 - 2.5 How did the other person/people feel?
 - 2.6 How do I know how the other person/people felt?
- 3. Influencing factors*
 - 3.1 What internal factors influenced my reactions?
 - 3.2 What external factors influenced my reaction?
 - 3.3 What sources of knowledge did/should have influenced my reaction?
- 4. Learning*
 - 4.1 What other choices did I have?
 - 4.2 What would be the consequences of these choices?
 - 4.3 How do I feel about the experience now?
 - 4.4 How have I made sense of this experience in the light of past experiences and future practice?
 - 4.5 How has this experience changed my ways of knowing:
 - * practically? (How have your skills or contextual knowledge been affected?)
 - * aesthetically? (How has your understanding of appropriate response been modified?)
 - * ethically? (Has there been any internal conflict/negotiation of your values?)
 - * personally? (Has your self-awareness/self-esteem been altered?)

Figure 1. Johns' model of structured reflection (MSR) (modified for use with adult learners)

Briefing and debriefing

Students were thoroughly briefed on the use of the Johns MSR. In a workshop setting they were asked to close their eyes and reflect on a recent event; one which they considered to be significant enough to learn from. Bearing in mind the five levels of reflection outlined by Griffiths and Tann (1991), it was suggested that the event should have occurred within the last two or three days, since our activity was to involve reflection at the 'review' stage. They were next asked to write down and analyse the individual experience and draw learning from it using the Johns model (Figure 1). The shared classroom experience of using the model was then debriefed on a flipchart using the same MSR, on the assumption that learning to use the model itself could be classed as a significant event. The aim of this in-depth briefing was to give students two opportunities to use the model, one in which they were working individually with virtually no guidance, and one in which they worked as a group with

considerable guidance in how the sections might be usefully exploited to provide maximum learning.

At the end of the work placement or mentoring experience, students were brought together for formal debriefing of the activity, again using the flipchart and the MSR to unpack the experience of using the reflective diary in practice over a period of weeks.

Pearson and Smith have confirmed that 'debriefing provides the opportunity for structured reflection' (1985, p. 70) and provides an opportunity to alter individual understanding of actions undertaken and move them to a new level of critical understanding:

The purpose of developing critical knowing is to provide the intellectual tools for individuals themselves to continue in the process of critical reflection without the support of a group leader or other group members. (Pearson & Smith, 1985, p. 77)

The model in action

The 'description of experience' section of the Johns model allows the student to tell their story. Johns cites Mishler in his explanation of the importance of story telling in learning from experience: 'Telling stories is a significant way for individuals to give meaning to and express their understanding of their experience' (Mishler, 1986, p.75).

However, in Johns' original model he advocated breaking down the description section using four headings, what he calls 'reflective cues' (see Figure 1). But, having experimented with the model in my own practice, I decided that this interfered somewhat with my ability to express the event and its significance to me. Student responses have reinforced the decision to make this adjustment. For example, one student commented: 'I felt my experience reduced by answering a series of cue questions which splintered the human encounter'.

I therefore, decided to omit the cues in this section in my instructions to students and to give them complete freedom to both choose and recount the incident in their own terms. In Johns' more recent work (1998) I note that he has also suggested the removal of these cues. The cues in the other three sections were retained since they reflect and organize the cognitive, affective and temporal aspects of the student's experience.

Interestingly, it is not thought necessary for students to remember the incident in every detail or with particular precision. Wheelhouse (1997) has commented that the selection of incidents and the accuracy of memory recall in their reporting are not as important as the way a practitioner remembers the incident. Thus all reflection can be viewed as truthful reflection, regardless of its 'exactness'. It is very much the case that the individual perception of events is the only reality and that it is the meaning that they give to the situation which is all-important. However, Jones (1993) identifies what he terms 'hindsight bias' as a problem in the analysis of critical incidents. Students reflecting on an incident without a structured format might find it hard to view the situation in any way other than that which complements the known outcome or response. The Johns model overcomes this by forcing recognition of other options, approaches etc.

To present the data and classify student responses to questions in the three reflective analysis sections of the model, I have borrowed from Johns (1998) the grid format he suggests for helping with the consideration of reflective cues within the MSR.

Reflection

Having told the story in section 1, the student is then encouraged to analyse its significance through reflection in a section that brings them into the domain that Schön would define as ‘reflection-*on-action*’. Initially, as the comments in Grids 1 and 2 illustrate, many students found it difficult to isolate and think subjectively about events. The majority of students, particularly work-experience students, tended to be focused on others in their workplace, and they therefore found self-reflection difficult and uncomfortable. In their actual work experience diaries these groups tended either to continue their descriptive accounts in this section or to start unpacking the influences, which then had consequences in the ‘Influencing Factors’ section. Mentoring students also found the section challenging, but overall their comments

Grid 1. Typical ‘reflection’ section responses from work experience students

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I wasn’t comfortable about picking out issues and ‘bumping them up’ out of all proportion. | I was uncomfortable about criticizing new people/situations as I’m only on placement. | I edited entries because I was conscious of an audience. It felt very personal. I held back a bit—did some selective reporting. |
| Felt useful for tracking/comparing/thinking back to similar situations. I liked the new experience. | Reflection | It felt unhealthy to analyse too deeply. Analysis happens anyway, subconsciously. |
| I felt ‘what is the point’? It felt like a nuisance. | It was good for getting things out of your system – useful for offloading a bad day. | It felt ‘airy fairy’. |

Grid 2. Typical ‘reflection’ section responses from mentoring students

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| There appeared to be two stages of reflection—reflection on things that were not thought of at the time and reflection on the reflection made at the time. | Emotions were involved in the reflective process and this might have been connected to anxiety, making choices etc. It was a subjective process. | It helped me to focus on my own feelings at the time. |
| Made me aware of how we magnify our own problems when seen in isolation. | Reflection | It was easy to start undertaking causal analysis in this section rather than in the next section. |
| I often felt apprehensive, unsure what to write. It felt like over analysis. | My recollections may have been one-sided and there is no means of checking. | Often, what you think is a simple event, turns out to be quite significant and complex. |

were more positive, possibly since learning to be a good mentor relies more manifestly on the development of self-awareness.

Influencing factors

The ‘influencing factors’ section recognizes the social context of learning. Jarvis (1987, p. 15) reminds us that the learner is, to a certain extent, a social construct and

Grid 3. Typical ‘influencing factors’ section responses from work experience students

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>The situations have been and gone and life moves on. Most events are too small, insignificant and routine, compared to other larger problems in the world.</p> | <p>I felt I didn’t want to wallow in self-castigation (having just built up my confidence in other areas). The quality of my reflection depended on the experience and how much confidence I had.</p> | <p>The diary was imposed and assessed and this influenced the way I used it.</p> |
| <p>Confidentiality affected openness and choice of incident, because I was required by my placement to keep things confidential.</p> | <p>Influencing factors</p> | <p>The level of interaction with others (as opposed to things) and the routineness of the work.</p> |
| <p>I wanted work to be different from College and so I didn’t like having to write about it.</p> | <p>Some events were commonplace and significantly insignificant.</p> | <p>The uncomfortableness was caused by the work placement situation. Perhaps in a real situation I could have used the tool more wholeheartedly, without reservation.</p> |

Grid 4. Typical ‘influencing factors’ section responses from mentoring students

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>I recognized that my internal responses need to be taken into account—ditto historical factors, values and expectations.</p> | <p>Physical surroundings and comfort play a part in using my reflective space.</p> | <p>The status and stage of the relationship was influential.</p> |
| <p>I could fill in the description better than the reflection section.</p> | <p>Influencing factors</p> | <p>This section provided the opportunity to look at the event with different (more objective?) eyes. It put things into context.</p> |
| <p>Encouraged me to draw on previous experiences that would help in the current situation.</p> | <p>It allows insight into consequences and other choices.</p> | <p>I didn’t know initially whether this should be influences on the incident, or my responses and feelings about the incident.</p> |

that learning should be regarded as a social phenomenon as well as an individualistic one. This being so, the ‘influencing factors’ section of the diary is used to record any external influences which may have impacted on the event: historical influences, cultural or contextual factors (what Johns called external factors in his 1994 MSR model). It is important that the section is not used to make excuses for feelings or responses, but to unpack fundamental values and attitudes that have impacted on the event.

In this section then, students commented on what influenced them when reflecting on the use of the tool. Many work experience students found it a difficult section to complete and this was particularly the case if they had not reflected in the previous section. If they had merely continued their description then they looked for factors that influenced the event, rather than their feelings and perceptions of the event.

Learning

Students found the ‘learning’ section much more straight forward and everyone, regardless of their perception of the ‘reflection’ and ‘influencing Factors’ sections, felt able to extract some learning from their experiences. For some work experience students, the reflective process highlighted the disparity between their ability and the lack of challenge provided by the placement, and there were still those who resisted the model altogether. Mentoring students on the other hand appeared to gain substantial learning from their reflections.

Discussion

Favourable comments from end of course questionnaires indicate that the use of a tool such as the Johns MSR promotes an awareness of the possibility of independent learning from experience:

Grid 5. Typical ‘learning’ section responses from work experience students

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| What’s the point? I now have answers just waiting for problems. | It provided a written record, although I found my own short notes about the day provided a better reminder. | Completing it became a discipline. The diary gave me a method of recording my learning. I learned that thinking can be broken down. |
| It made me aware of my responses and made me focus on myself. | Learning | It gave me insights and was helpful in learning how to treat others. |
| Reflection was good and helped with moving on. | It provided positive learning from often negative incidents. I learned how to assess things. | It highlighted the repetition in my work. |

Grid 6: Typical 'Learning' Section Responses from Mentoring Students

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <i>It helped in preparation for similar events in the future. Gave insight into what to do more of, less of or continue doing.</i> | <i>The boxes help with analysis and recognition of patterns and so give an opportunity to do 'action research'. It was useful to reflect in a structured way.</i> | <i>Reflecting on the mentee's experiences made me respect the mentee and I was able to feedback this respect to her.</i> |
| <i>The diary enabled me to put incidents in a wider context. It helped me to be aware of how we magnify our own problems when seen in isolation.</i> | Learning | <i>Using the diary made me realize how much I get out of it. I want to use it more.</i> |
| <i>The diary helped me to be aware of what was learned theoretically and to put it into practice.</i> | <i>I was shy about reaching conclusions about myself.</i> | <i>The model may suit some and not others. It will depend on learning styles.</i> |

It has helped me in appreciating life and the continuous learning that is involved.

By making regular entries it gave my learning a change to take hold.

It helped me to think before I spoke. For instance on two occasions, I found myself committing to something I should have encouraged the mentee to do.

The diary made me examine events holistically, by considering them as a whole chain of events, rather than as a simple isolated behaviour.

The majority of students also identified benefits from the discipline that came from writing the reflective diary itself, and, as the following comments suggest, there are considerable advantages to recording reflection in a structured way:

It made me feel more intellectually involved.

I found the discipline of using it necessary to get going.

It helped me feel more secure and professional in the mentoring role.

Something happens with this writing down.

I actually did not find it unsatisfactory at all, which surprised me. The only difficulty I had was in understanding its purpose before I had used it. Once I had used it it was an excellent tool.

Despite the generally positive response to the use of the structured diary, a number of issues for my own practice have been highlighted by this study.

Day has noted that Schön's (1983) notion of reflective practice could be criticized for failing to deal with the importance of the discursive, dialogical dimension of learning, which, he suggests, can only emerge from processes of confrontation and reconstruction: 'reflection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning: confrontation either by self or others must occur' (Day, 1993, p. 88). Johns (1994) has also argued that reflection should always be coached or supervised, to prevent meanings from being distorted. The use of a reflective diary allows for *self*-confronta-

tion to occur, which is one of the reasons why I chose it. However, regular individual debriefing with a tutor could have enhanced the whole experience, especially for work-experience students. The reflection' section, in particular, raises some significant doubts in relation to students who lack confidence. The fact that one student viewed reflection as 'self-castigation', observing that 'in some instances it could be good not to have too think too hard, and just accept', suggests that one-to-one debriefing during the work experience period would have been beneficial. However, where discussions did occur the feedback was positive: 'Having the opportunity to talk through the problems of practice, enter into dialogue etc, was helpful in identifying my own professional development needs'.

It appears therefore, that the group briefings and debriefings were not entirely adequate and that individual dialogue with a tutor, focusing on reflections and influencing factors, would probably have helped students considerably. As McAlpine points out, 'through involvement with students' reflective diaries the instructor can play a more active role in the learning process' (1992, p. 24). She also suggests that these 'professional conversations' can also be important in providing learners with explicit modeling of the productive uses of reflection.

There is also an issue around trust. The reflective diaries formed part of the assessment for the courses and some students commented that they were conscious of choosing experiences to reflect upon that would meet the expectations of the course. They also admitted that instead of giving very personal responses they 'laundered' their reflections and submitted what they considered to be 'safe' responses. It is difficult to see how this issue can be overcome, except by the building of trust through a one-to-one dialogue with the tutor.

Another effect of using the diary in this format is one that Johns recognizes. Some practitioners are prompted only to answer the series of cue questions encompassed within his framework. Certainly one or two work experience students did this, even though they were reminded frequently that the questions were merely a guide to the kinds of issues they might reflect upon. This then limited their ability to give an holistic account of the episode.

Some students also felt that 'most events are too small, insignificant and routine' to be included in a diary which formed part of an assessment, and yet others had problems identifying, or coming to terms with, the factors which had limited their responses to events, often because such factors are so deeply rooted within them.

Johns recognizes that knowing what reflection is does not necessarily enable practitioners to use reflection in meaningful ways to improve their practice and they may need to use various models of reflection to obtain different objectives. It is hoped that introducing course participants to one model of reflection will encourage them to adapt the model for their own purposes: it is the introduction to the concept of reflection that is important, rather than the model. But Johns' model, I believe, provides a useful structure and is very helpful for introducing participants to the concept of reflective practice.

Overall, I feel that the three strands of work-based learning flagged up in the introduction to this paper are enhanced by the use of reflective practice. It has been shown

that reflection can help in the identification of gaps in learning and areas for personal and professional development. It also heightens awareness whilst at work, providing a structure for learning in the workplace. Similarly ‘learning through work’ is integral to the whole reflective practice process and can provide valuable opportunities for individual action research in the work context.

A comment from a mentoring student sums up the value of the experience: ‘The reflective diary was the most useful personal skill I learnt on this course—without it I would have found it very hard to stand back and make sense of the sessions with the mentee’.

Moon stresses that reflective practice encourages a sort of mindfulness—‘a quality of behaviour that links thought and action in a relationship between self and others’ (2000, p. 67, citing Van Mannen, 1991). From the comments collated above it can be seen that considerable critical analysis and self-understanding is being generated for students who may not normally reach this level of self-awareness. Using reflective practice techniques began to make students conscious of the potential for learning through their work, and could even actively encourage them to seek new experiences from which to learn. Rather than being troubled by change and discord, or being condemned to repeat their mistakes over and over, reflective learners could begin to view each new challenge as a learning opportunity.

Notes on contributor

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