**CRITICAL REFLECTION**

**Introduction**

Entering the teaching profession could be a complex and taxing process in the framework of my professional development. The part played by reflection practices in this context is very important. Ghaye et al (1981) asserted that reflection on practice that is structured, challenging and supported is an essential part of the process of professional development.

To many people reflection on practice might mean different things, but from my own perspective it means constructive criticism: being honest with myself, and becoming aware of and understanding my own feelings. These are my critical reflective approaches throughout my teaching and learning. This argument is supported by Bengtsson (1998), who pointed out that there are many views on what constitutes ῾reflection᾽ and what reflective practitioners do, and the impact of reflection on the quality of teaching and learning. This argument was supported by Ghaye et al (1998) who argued that many teachers have gained from learning through reflection and that is why they are called ῾reflective practitioners᾽. Their teaching and their understanding of what is possible and what is less possible, their influence and its boundaries, have risen from this process of reflection (Ghaye et al, 1998).

Based on these aspects of reflection on practice, this assignment will critically reflect on my own professional development as a reflective teaching practitioner. It will firstly explore the theoretical concept of reflection, reflection in action and reflection on action along with the theory behind critical reflective practices.

Secondly, it will explore critical reflection in the context of my teaching strategy based on social constructivist theory that supports the aim of meeting individual needs. These needs can be fostered by understanding learners’ previous experiences of the subject in question and actively involving them, using activities which encourage them to actively participate rather than be a passive learner. This includes the exploration of the context of planning and delivering learning, and using motivation strategies and the role of assessment for learning as it relates to my subject-specific pedagogy.

Finally, a conclusion will be drawn from the discussion which will outline areas of reflection to improve my professional development.

**Concept of Critical Reflection**

The first author who brought reflection into an understanding of what professionals do was Schön (1983). Schön (1983) defined ῾reflection᾽ as thinking about what we are thinking, acting upon rather than reaction to a stimulus. This is viewed as being interrelated with social constructivist practices and openness to change, and it enables reflective practices (Schön, 1983, 1987).

Kolb (1984) also stated, in his influential argument on experiential learning, that reflection plays an important major role in the transformation of experience into knowledge. Under this fundamental principle of this scholar reflection has been placed at the core of the learning process, especially in relation to learning as a development and not merely the acquisition of information (Reynolds, 1998).

‘Reflection is a way of helping practitioners to better understand what they know and do as they develop their knowledge of practice through reconsidering what they learn in practice’ (Loughran, 2002:p.). It is within the context of management education that the concept of critical reflection now forms a core part of trainee teachers’ qualification. It is believed that by thinking more critically about their assumptions and actions, practitioners can develop more collaborative, responsive and ethical ways of performing their duties within the context of their work.

The term ῾critical᾽ now broadens the perspectives of Schön’s (1983) reflection by bringing into focus the socio-structural context and historical events. This means the historical incidents and events in society that precipitate the need for critical analysis and reflection. This generates the ability for us to learn from past events and the problems involved. Solutions to these events are sorted over the time in which a lesson is learnt. Therefore, critical reflection in itself is a learning process (Allen, 1992).

As a reflective practitioner, I have been critically conscious of my actions in addressing 16–19 year olds and my overall daily performances in my placement colleges. This has been triggered by a number of significant events which have contributed to my professional development. This evaluation of these events enables me to analyse my own strengths and weaknesses, and awareness of my values, and enables me to continuously change and improve my teaching practice. Reflection on action is a process that takes place sometime after the significant event and cannot influence its outcome (Schὃn, 1983). The situation is unexpected and uncertain and at times leads to consultation with peers.

Reflection in action can be described as interaction with a ῾live᾽ problem as it unfolds. The capacity to reflect in action assumes that the problem-solver has the capacity to surface his ῾knowing in action᾽, that is, the hidden or tacit knowledge that we use to deal with particular tasks (Schön, 1983; Hawkridge, 2000). This, for instance, could be the informed knowledge of college regulations in dealing with classroom latecomers. Therefore, for reflection on action and reflection in action to be effective, they have to occur in reflective teaching practice – a safe learning environment where learners may put their rule-based knowledge into action and develop a repertoire of responses and judgements which become progressively more complex and sophisticated as they develop to cover a wider range of experiences (Schön, 1983).

In the context of critical reflective practice it is argued that it constitutes an attempt to break with positivist views of ῾technical rationality᾽. Technical rationality is a positivist epistemology of practice, ‘the dominant paradigm which has failed to resolve the dilemma of rigour versus relevance confronting professionals’ (Usher et al, 1997:p.143). Positivists argued that Schön (1983, 1987) looks at an alternative epistemology of practice ῾in which the knowledge of inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing᾽. This is because critical reflective practices required diagnostic testing and believe in personal causation. Kirby et al (1992) pointed out the elements of diagnosis in reflection:

* Diagnosis involves ῾making sense of᾽ a problem through use of professional knowledge, past experiences, and the uniqueness of the setting and people involved, including expectations held by others
* Once the problem is framed, the practitioner engages in on-the-spot experimentation and reflection to test alternative solutions
* Finally, the practitioner accepts responsibility for action – has the courage to act in a situation of uncertainty (Kirby et al, 1992:p.2).

This process reminds me of my situation after each classroom session and my teaching observations. Criticism has been levelled at this model of reflection on and in practice and it is argued that Schön (1983, 1987) failed to clarify what is involved in the limitation of the reflective process, and according to Eraut (1994:p.145), ‘when time is extremely short, decisions have to be rapid and the scope for reflection is extremely limited’. It has also been argued that there have been no psychological elaboration and realities of reflection in action (Russell et al, 1989); however, the combination of reflection in and on action makes it possible for practitioners to ῾think on their feet᾽.

The importance of action reflection also impacted on my critical thinking as a process. This is an outcome of critical thinking that helps practitioners to develop the habit of mind in which ‘change is regarded as the fundamental reality, forms and structures are perceived as temporary, relationships are held to involve developmental transformation and openness is welcomed’ (Brookfield, 1987:p.13). My long-term objective of critical reflection is to develop and change my approaches and strategies by evaluating my actions and the actions of others, thereby generating a positive relationship as a teaching practitioner.

**Critical Reflection in my Teaching and Learning**

Brookfield (1998, cited in Hillier, 2009:p.7) argued that ‘a critical reflective educator knows that while meeting everyone’s needs sounds compassionate and learner-centred, it is pedagogically unsound and psychologically demoralising’. My experience as a trainee teacher lends support to Brookfield’s assertion. Having identified that my value as a teacher is based on supporting learners’ needs, and from my experience in teaching students at my placement college, I find it impossible to meet everyone’s needs. The fact is that all learners have varying degrees of needs. I reflected on the best approach to meet the needs of my students and consulted my host teacher. It is apparent that at the initial stage of my teaching some elements of practice are missing which need to be addressed to generate my students’ learning process. I came to realise that I was not differentiating appropriately to meet the needs of my students during lessons. Differentiated instruction is an approach that enables teachers to plan strategically to meet the needs of every student. It has been accepted that there is variability among any group of learners and that teachers should adjust instructions accordingly (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003).

Appropriate planning is an important element of good delivery in the classroom which includes differentiation. In differentiating a lesson to be responsive to the needs of each learner, I need to take into account not only the content of my lesson, but also each individual student. Evidence has shown that students are more successful in colleges and are more engaged if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness level (Vygotsky, 1986), their interest (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and their learning profiles (Sternberg et al, 1998). In addressing differentiated instruction, I must try to address these three characteristics for each student.

Hillier (2009) argued that using learner-centred methods is a strategy which is based on the view that we should look at all learners as individuals with varying abilities, learning styles and requirements. She further argued that it is generally assumed that learners have some experiences and knowledge that they bring into the classroom which should make them an active participant in the classroom environment. I agree with this argument having reflected on my placement college which has a high degree of socio-culturally diverse students with different learning abilities. The classes of Year 1 and 2 students of Travel and Tourism show some differences in the abilities of students. I need to develop a teaching strategy to address their individual learning needs, which could be quite taxing having taught both groups once. After my critical reflection on this aspect of teaching and learning, I have since developed inclusive student-centred teaching strategies in response to their readiness level, motivating their interest by using various teaching styles, and assessing their learning profiles.

In the initial stage of my first teaching role with Year 2 students of Travel and Tourism I was concerned with my teaching and what impact I would make on my students. From my first teaching in the classroom I experienced a great deal of resistance in terms of participating in class and in the practical exercise. I often heard the complaints that something I asked them to do was boring. In my second teaching session with the same group I made the class more challenging by trying to motivate students to think more critically about what they were doing, why I asked them to do the task, and what implications their actions had for the types of analysis they were trying to complete. They seem to be enjoying the course more and I have certainly heard fewer complaints. They took more away from the experiences based on their performance.

The above assertion is in line with Vygotsky’s argument. Vygotsky (1962, cited in Kyriacou, 1997:p.31) argued that ‘...an effective way to help a pupil who is having difficulties is to direct their attention to the key features of the task and prompt them in ways that will facilitate their understanding’. Bruner (1966) refers to this view of teacher support as scaffolding. Smith and Cowie (1991:p.31) also identify the importance of scaffolding in that ‘it is the pupil, rather than the teacher, who does the work, with the teacher simply helping to direct the pupil’s cognitive process’. I think that this is what I should have done in my first unobserved session with the students. By using scaffolding, effective one-to-one teaching will identify the learners’ needs and relate the task at hand to their previous understanding, thereby directing their attention to key features of the task necessary for their achievement. The limitation of this approach according to Bliss et al (1996) lies in the ability of the teacher. In other words, the teacher must be skilled and have a sensitive awareness of both the pupils’ needs and of the subject matter in hand (Bliss et al, 1996).

The desired educational outcome of this unobserved session is to recap the task and to increase interest in the subject matter. Motivation and willingness to learn have an important impact on generating a good learning experience. According to Hillier (2009:p.), three factors could generate this experience, namely: to ‘elicit and sustain pupils’ attention; elicit and sustain pupils’ motivation and mental effort and foster the type of learning desired’. Reflecting on my teaching experience, the second factor needs to be focused on more. The students were noisy during the activity and playful with each other, so assertive control is needed to establish order, while at the same time focusing their attention on the task in hand. I looked in particular for a way to motivate them to learn by encouraging them to concentrate as the task will assist them more when they get to university. Now, that makes some sense. I came to realise that a good rapport can go a long way to stimulate pupils’ learning.

In order to be able to facilitate effective learning, the scheme of work and lesson plan highlighted the learning strategy involved in the lesson delivery. Small group work contributes immensely to the development of social and communication skills of the learners, which aims to produce quality work from the students. Whitaker (1995, cited in Kyriacou, 1997) described the value of small group work as: creating a climate in which pupils can work with a sense of security and boosting self-confidence; facilitating the growth of understanding offering the optimum opportunity for pupils to talk reflectively with each other; and promoting a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect. These observations were noted during a ten-minute activity session in the classroom environment.

The class was divided into groups of four and asked to draw a mind map regarding the business of Travel and Tourism. Writing materials were provided and the instruction was given that each group would present its findings, and that the outcome of each group’s findings would be marked. This shows a sense of ownership and belonging to the creative work in each group. The inter-subjectivity (sharing of ideas on the task and interacting with each other) that the learners experience with this project motivates their understanding of the business of Travel and Tourism. The small group activity also enhances learners’ communication skills and social interaction to achieve a productive mind-map for the subject. The use of the social constructivist approach for the lesson proved successful as they engaged their understanding of the subject. This activity also gave the learners the space to relax after the tutor-led introduction at the beginning of the session. Animated feedback was generated which stimulated classroom experience. However, I think that I need to develop ‘…skills in handling and understanding the groups, give a positive lead before the group work begins and follow up the group work by pooling the discussion and given feedback on the work produced’ (Kyriacou, 1997:p.51).

The third aspect of critical reflection focuses on effective learning and engagement in the classroom. According to Meyers and Jones (1993:p.6), ‘…active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read and reflect on the content, ideas, issues and concerns of academic subjects’. Students learn best when they engage with course materials and actively participate in their learning. Active learning shifts the focus of what I should teach or deliver to the students to what I want the students to do with the course materials presented to them. This means that I have to determine the course materials that students will need throughout the session, handouts, PowerPoint slides and activity materials. On the other hand, the students need to come into the classroom prepared to use the assigned reading and review materials from the previous lecture to recap. They need to have assimilated the material in order to build on the lesson.

On reflection, students in my college need to focus on lesson preparation to be active learners. They should abandon their passive role on entering the classroom and focus on the lesson. Moreover, there are some who come into the classroom as passive learners, hiding behind the computers and not participating in classroom discussions. I think that a seating plan is the best option in this case.

**Conclusion**

The impact of reflective practice has been significant in my training and development, especially the work of Schön (1983), both in organising my experience and in the teaching content. Indeed, a useful method that I have thought about for this work is my personal framework for teaching and learning, identifying which learning theory coincides with my values and what I see as the goal of education. I have perused a variety of literature on learning theories, including the work of Merriam et al (1999), and I have come to the conclusion that they all address the truth about how students learn which I need to reflect on continuously, and I need to improve my development in the learning environment.

I believe that the best way that I can facilitate my students’ learning is by understanding how my students are going about learning and by attempting to provide them with opportunities to participate in activities that will help them to cognitively engage at a level that will produce the type of learning that I hope they will achieve. I will evaluate whether the activities I plan are indeed facilitating learning by asking students to describe how they are experiencing those activities.

Importance is also attached to my own learning preferences, so that I can provide a much better diversity of teaching and learning activities for students in the hope that at least some of them will resonate with each student. I also believe that the theoretical literature and the community of practice can help me to make sense of what I observe and reflect on in my students, as well as to identify alternative ways of restructuring my students’ learning experiences.

These alternative ways include how effectively I can teach my students because I am a moderate bilateral hearing-impaired teacher. On reflection, I realise that I was not able to communicate my plans and strategies in the classroom because of effective communication. I became aware that my students actually enjoy my lessons and participate effectively in all of the group work, though I must confess that there are some who refuse to adhere to my teaching and learning strategies because they claim that I cannot hear them.

I have reflected that the best approach is to get the students to be fully engaged in the classroom. My lesson plans should reflect student-centred learning with minimal lectures. I intend to allocate more time to activities and feedback from the students. Travel and Tourism is an interesting vocational subject linked to work-based learning. Therefore, I think that it is practical to seek learners’ understanding of the subject and to generate debate and activity.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the importance of critical reflection. It has continuously improved my performances as a trainee teacher and it generates a strong awareness of my strengths and weaknesses. The reflective log is an important document to relate to and to keep updating as a teacher. This should be an effective practice for everyone in the teaching profession. The combination of reflection in and on action has made me an effective reflective practitioner.

**Source:**

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