

# USING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR A MORE HUMANE HIGHER EDUCATION

## **N. Toni**

Teaching and Learning Centre  
University of Fort Hare  
East London, South Africa  
e-mail: NToni@ufh.ac.za

## **A. H. Makura**

Department of Postgraduate Studies: Education  
Central University of Technology, Free State  
Bloemfontein, South Africa  
e-mail: amakura@cut.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

The rationale behind this article was to explore the importance for academics to reflect constantly and consistently on what they teach; why they teach what they teach; how they teach and assess, keeping in mind who they teach (calibre of their students); and the circumstances under which they teach. The authors posed the question: How is reflective practice used in fostering or creating a humane higher education? Using a desktop approach, the article delves into classroom practices, challenges and the influence of what happens 'beyond the classroom' on both the lecturer and students' performance. The article is fundamentally a *reflection* of what the authors witness themselves in their daily encounters, to a



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large extent, with lecturers sharing their challenges, and to a lesser extent, with students seeking development and support in their endeavours to succeed in their studies. Reflective practice is offered as a plausible approach that can be used systematically to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process in a higher education context.

**Keywords:** reflective practice, higher education, reflection, students, academics

## INTRODUCTION

This article was written from the perspective of academic developers who oversee academic development and support for both lecturers and students. They are also experienced academic practitioners within the South African academic landscape. Our assertion is that teaching for learning can only occur when lecturers teach for learning and reflect on their practices. Reflective practice is useful in determining the academic and developmental needs of both the students and lecturers. The intention is ultimately to come up with strategies to improve the teaching and learning process in a higher education context. Such a strategy will demonstrate how reflective practice can be used in order to foster a more humane higher education. For the purposes of the article, we define reflection as a conscious process of first naming and describing observable behaviours and skills of learners. This is then followed by a detailed articulation and professional discussion and finally ponderance over the effects of an individual's actions on others taking into consideration various factors of the educational context.

We argue that the above can happen through various reflective practices. This approach fits well with Gerber's (2005) 'I' or 'we' driven perspective or approach in describing practice and formulating theory. The 'we' perspective, according to Gerber (2005, 1396), is vital in knowledge production since '... the perspective you work from in an attempt to determine how to solve [your] problem ... will determine what new knowledge will be created and whether the new knowledge will actually assist in solving the problem'. Higher education institutions (HEIs), among other players, provide pristine conditions and opportunities for knowledge production. Their core functions revolve around teaching, research and community engagement (Essack et al. 2012; Francis, Dube and Chitapa 2010). The HEIs are thus 'sources of new knowledge [emanating] ... from research findings ... publishing and patenting' (Ondari-Okemwa 2011, 1448); but such efforts are not without challenges. Makondo (2012, 105) bemoans the fact that some academics consciously undo such work through their complicity in the underperformance of the students they teach by adopting ineffective lectures. Within their writings, some authors (Hassan 2011; Makondo 2012) posit that most academics are ill-prepared to cope with the challenges, particularly transformation issues. If pertinent changes are to be realised, universities

need a total overhaul of their academics so that excellence can be attained, sustained and retained. By implication, the challenges necessitate a systematic way of lecturers reflecting on their actions and behaviours as lecturers, in relation to the students' behaviours and performance. This also necessitates conversations with students about how they experience the lecturers' teaching. Ultimately, students and lecturers will do an analysis that would lead both to the identified learning objectives.

We are tempted to believe that the lack of reflexivity among academics could be a contributing factor to some endemic challenges. Mahlomaholo (2010) opines that such challenges fundamentally stem from and are engendered by centuries of colonial apartheid history of dysfunctionality. This notion is buttressed by Kreber (2005) who argues that reflection is a poorly understood concept among higher education practitioners. Badat (2001) writing the introduction of the *Kagiso* Higher Education Series observes that higher education is there for the 'public good'. He submits that this public good perspective is being eroded by the impact of globalisation, which yields skewed notions and practices that yield no benefits for the sector. Badat (2001) suggests that higher education embarks on critical intellectual work on the notion, buttressed by relevant policy action and clear meanings regarding what public good entails. Our thesis is that reflexivity is an integral component of the 'public good'. We then ask ourselves if academics are conscious of the 'humanness' of higher education through the practice of self-reflection or reflexivity. There appears to be no consensus, in our opinion, regarding the definition of the term reflexivity. Hence, Kreber's (2005) suggestion that among academics, there is a need to engage in content, premise and process reflection. Shim and Roth (2008, 6) opine that problems do not necessarily lie in academics' proficiency in content mastery (i.e., what they do) but in 'how they do or their procedural knowledge'. As such, they struggle to put across this knowledge to their clients. In this vein, we have set out to explain how reflective practice could assist in teaching for learning humanely.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our argument is buttressed by Rodgers's (2002) four-phase reflective cycle. She likens reflection to inquiry; a concept originally popularised by Dewey at the turn of the 20th century. Rodgers's (2002) central argument is that reflection is characterised by the following features: meaning-making; a systematic and rigorous way of thinking; it occurs in a community of academics; and requires attitudes that value individuals' and others' intellectual growth. Such aspects cement Dewey's notion that views the purpose of education as character building through intellectual, moral and emotional growth. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) refer to an alternative paradigm, which they describe as a process of establishing authentic relationships that are characterised by intelligent and compassionate interaction. These interactions are further described

as ‘presence’ (Rodgers and Raider-Roth 2006, 266). When ‘present’, lecturers are alert, receptive and connected to the mental, emotional and physical aspects of their students’ contexts and learning environments.

It is on this basis that Rodgers’s theory is offered/recommended as a strategy that can assist university lecturers as they systematically navigate their way in teaching for learning and not just going through the syllabus. We also argue that having basic information about students is necessary and can assist lecturers in the process of applying the reflective cycle. This premise stems from our conviction that academics wrongly apply reflective practice resulting in the endemic challenges besetting higher education. Badat (2001) challenges researchers to conduct empirical studies that seek to demonstrate ways through which some higher education systems and processes undermine the notion of ‘public good’. As such, we endorse and uphold the centrality of a learner-centred approach (Bayat and Naicker 2012) in the reflexive milieu that supports educated excellence and well-rounded learners. A learner-centred approach advances the notion of ‘public good’. Such an approach permeates all the areas of academic endeavour such as assessment, lecture delivery, supervision, curriculum re/design, and so on.

Rodgers (2002) further highlights the central role played by four critical areas or cycles in teaching and learning, namely: (a) presence; (b) description; (c) analysis; and (d) experimentation. In each instance, teachers are encouraged not only to pay attention to students’ learning but to solicit feedback on the teaching and learning aspects. Through reflecting, by being ‘present’, teachers experience student learning in real time. Such classroom experience, according to Rodgers, will enable the teacher to engage in extended reflection that will yield respect from peers and students. In the second phase, description or learning to describe and differentiate experiences, teachers need to differentiate descriptions from interpretations. In the third phase, teachers and students learn to think critically in order to discern theory. Herein, theory is generated from conjectures on the practical tasks in the learning arena. Rodgers (2002) believes that this is the ‘meaning-making’ phase in the teaching and learning process. Lastly, the fourth cycle, experimentation occurs when the teacher or group learns intelligently to take intelligent action through describing and analysing problems within the classroom context. Through reflexivity, the teacher and the student are able to understand the pedagogic processes in order to fulfil their cherished objectives. In Rodgers’s (2002, 863) words, ‘Reflection is ... a tool used in the transformation of raw experience into meaning-filled theory ... grounded in experience, informed by existing theory and serves ... moral growth of individual and society’. Therefore, staff professional development (Hassan 2011) could mitigate teaching and learning challenges as universities transform.

## Reflective practice

We are of the view that reflection is more than thinking back and giving an account of one's perspective of what transpired. Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004), citing Hatton and Smith, refer to four types of reflections, namely, technical, descriptive, dialogical and critical. Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard and Verloop (2007, 47) define reflection as 'the capacity in teachers to continuously steer their own development through a portfolio, logbooks, evaluating own practice, case studies and questionnaires'. A professional or teaching portfolio is an important document in cataloguing the reflection process. According to Mansvelder-Longayroux et al. (2007), the use of a portfolio for reflection enables teachers to reflect on their professional development, what they have learnt and the process of interpreting experiences during the production of the portfolio.

## Knowing the learner

In the event of university teachers not having 'sufficient' information about their students' academic proficiencies, reflective teaching becomes highly necessary. There are several learning areas from which such students' academic proficiencies could be derived. Initially, Rankin, Schoer, Sebastiao and Walbeek (2012) posit that the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) could be used as they possess a higher predictive power than most conventional subjects. The NBTs are being used by many universities as an admission selection tool for assessing the new students' academic potential. This probably has been prompted by the declining quality of education nationwide (Matoti 2010). Reflective practice can be used as a useful tool in gauging whether the required learning has taken place. It is in this vein that Rankin et al. (2012) investigated the predictive power of the NBTs against students' performance in the Economics 1 course. The results showed that the NBTs were a better predictor of test performance than National Senior Certificate (NSC) mathematics. The conclusion was arrived at through sustained reflective practice. It (reflective practice) can also be used to identify gaps in the students' understanding, as well as assist teachers to design intervention strategies. This is where Rodgers's four-phase theory comes in.

A possible counter argument for not effectively using the four-phase approach is exacerbated by large classes in universities. This aspect (large classes) and how they prevent scholarly excellence in teaching and learning was highlighted by some renowned keynote speakers during a teaching and learning symposium held in July 2013 at a South African HEI. This assertion, however, is dismissed by some researchers, given that large class scenarios call for innovation in teaching and learning. Sargent, Allen, Frahm and Morris (2009), while cautioning how large classes have the potential of alienating some students, suggest having coaches and connection points particularly through the tutorial system. We contend that this approach is not offered as a 'blanket' strategy for all university courses. Our basic

argument is that it is highly necessary for university teachers to always reflect on their teaching. Formal assessment cannot always be used as the sole determiner of students' learning (without identifying their diverse needs and the talents that the learners bring into the learning process). More to the point, what is known about the academic background and talents of the students entering the South African higher education landscape?

### What is known about students entering higher education?

It is our contention that the NSC results do not necessarily provide sufficient information about students' academic proficiencies. Rankin et al. (2012) have demonstrated that the NBTs could predict students' future performance better than the NSC. Their study proves that NSC mathematics does not possess predictive power for the Economics 1 tests. This finding is at variance with Van Zyl, Gravett and De Bruin's (2012) finding that predicts and shows a strong link between a mathematics (Higher Grade) pass and tertiary success among first-year students. Matoti (2010) believes that there is a declining trend in the quality of secondary education in South Africa stemming from internal promotion practices and a penchant for high pass rates. The quality of the NSC as a predictor for tertiary success is, thus, shrouded in uncertainty. Be that as it may, an earlier study by Gasa (2011) shows that the academic performance of incarcerated degree students at 57 South African correctional facilities was very high (+80%). The pass rate was reportedly higher than the performance of students in the School of Education of the University of South Africa. Gasa's (2011) observations seem to suggest covertly that the NSC is a good predictor of prisoners' success. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are identified as key determinants of prisoners' success.

A study by Chweu and Schultz (2010), citing Pieterse (2008), reveals that the 2006 pass rate of undergraduate students at the Tshwane University of Technology was 68.17 per cent, a far cry from the national benchmark of 77 per cent. HEIs in South Africa have put in place other 'testing' instruments or batteries of tests to further ascertain the students' academic literacies. Some of these tests, for example, the NBTs are designed to measure the prospective students' 'proficiency in Academic Literacy, Qualitative Literacy and Mathematics as related to the demands of tertiary studies' (University of Fort Hare Study Guide). The NBTs were instituted by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) solely to establish prospective undergraduates' academic preparedness and channel them into Science or Arts programmes (Rankin et al. 2011). Other HEIs that do not make use of the NBTs have developed their own batteries of tests for placement purposes and/or to supplement the NSC results in making admission decisions. For some time, the University of Fort Hare made use of Placement and Access Test (PAT) that sought to identify students with English second language, and numeracy challenges (Makura, Skead and Nhundu 2011). Such information is also important for academic support practitioners as well as assisting

lecturers in curriculum development and delivery. A lack of knowledge of students' background poses problems for teachers and students themselves resulting in the adoption of what we may term 'inhumane' higher education practices. Such practices are anti-Critical Cross field outcomes. Studies advocate the deep learning approach to learning (see Biggs and Tang 2011; Ramsden 1992). This approach seeks to change students' approaches to learning by encouraging them to be reflective thinkers and ultimately life-long learners. Deep learning and teaching use diverse approaches such as reflections on what has gone wrong or right, engaging in peer assessment, self-assessments and reflections that are genuinely in-sync with the development of life-long learners (Brew 2002, 1995). Such an approach is humane and synonymous with the constructivist approach that promotes active learning. Gray (1997) advocates constructivist teaching that creates motivated and independent learners by fostering critical thinking in them.

### What do we know about classroom practices of lecturers/ university teachers?

For the purposes of the article, we rely on student feedback gathered through the module and lecturer evaluation forms and analysis thereof as done by the academic development unit. We also refer to inputs made by both lecturers and students gathered during the 2012 teaching and learning week.

Research on higher education teaching shows that most academics are 'thrown' into teaching with derisory teaching or mentoring (Chweu and Schultz 2010; Schulze 2010; Shim and Roth 2008). As such, there is a need to offer these academics adequate professional support to improve their teaching and the learning efficacy of their students by creating teaching and learning conditions that support critical self-reflection. We also align ourselves with Hutchings, Huber and Ciccone (2011) who describe teaching as intellectual work, hence the need for lecturers to be involved constantly in professional development.

## METHODOLOGY

We adopted a participatory exploratory methodology in which we report our experiences in managing academic development activities in some South African universities. Our vast experiences were buttressed by secondary literature sources thus rendering the current study a desktop research study. We reflect on what we witnessed during our daily encounters or activities with the key stakeholders, namely, staff and students. Students were our key clientele in their quest to acquire knowledge and academic support in order to succeed in their studies. Most of what we discuss in the discussion section are reflections stemming from a symposium organised in 2012 at a South African HEI. Our reflections and those of staff and students were, therefore, central to interrogating reflexivity issues in the current context.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion proceeds from interrogating stakeholders' perceptions of the teaching and learning process in academic development. We start off by commenting on lecturers' experiences of the teaching and learning process as reported during a symposium. Thereafter, we catalogue and reflect our observations as managers and role players in and of academic development.

### Challenges from the perspective of lecturers and tutors

For a large majority of academics, the major problem is dealing with large classes; that is, those with more than 300 registered students. Some lecturing venues are too small and students are crowded (Matoti 2010), with some forced to sit on the terraces during class sessions. Even in instances where the venue is sufficiently large to accommodate the multitudes or, courses where fewer students are registered, the use of such lecture halls becomes difficult because the spoken word bounces back. Against the backdrop of large classes the majority of the lecturers are using the lecture method and power point slides as visual aids. In an effort to manage large classes, some departments and faculties at the University of Fort Hare have resorted to using Blackboard, the university's learning management system (Mkonqo 2012). The academics in such departments are in a position to track and monitor students' participation and learning. Blackboard has the added advantages (Mkonqo 2012) that lecturers are able to monitor the time, place and pace of teaching and learning; as well as communicate, organise and distribute content while being in a position to manage student assessment and evaluation records. Blackboard is part of an instructional offering commonly known as technology enhanced learning (TeL). In making academics more glued to their practice, Coetzee (2009) postulates that TeL has assisted academics in dealing with issues of distance, large classes and plagiarism.

On the one hand, tutors feel that students lack commitment and want to be spoon-fed. A personal communication from a colleague to one of the writers in 2013 captures this point. Below is the classic lamentation:

... I am very much worried because we have a crop of students who do not want to acquire knowledge by reading books. Our students want to pass examinations without having acquired knowledge. So far, none of the students I'm teaching can explain a ... concept to a pavilion or group of people. Their level of thinking is that of the then Std 6 we used to teach in the sixties. When I was doing Honours at ... [university] ... we were not taught. We are no longer strict; we buy faces instead of telling the students that they must study. Unfortunately the students we teach want to be **spoon fed** ... Today's students want lecturers to study on their behalf. I do not know where to in South Africa. I am really a worried ... and I will die a worried ... [man/woman] (Anon., pers. comm., 10 May 2013).



The lamentation epitomises a litany of complaints levelled against the current crop of students in South Africa which, in some instances, is compounded by some academics (Makondo 2012; Matoti 2010; Rankin et al. 2012).

Regarding the tutorial system, there were mixed views concerning these among some lecturers and first-year students in particular. A number of students felt that the tutorial system is good, but were discouraged in that little credit is given for their attendance and participation because they are availed as an option to learners. The veneer behind the tutorial system is that the majority of learners believe they are meant for 'weak' students. Moreover, some tutors are good while others seemed to lack commitment. Monitoring and regular student feedback on tutor conduct was recommended in order to get a clearer picture of what occurs during tutoring sessions. Part of the authors' job portfolio is to offer regular training to tutors to enhance the delivery. The study by Sargent et al. (2009) reported that such training enhanced students' performance. Lastly, some lecturers lamented some negative attitudes towards them and vice versa. Such students believed that lecturers did not give them adequate academic support. Hence, they did not hide their distaste for such lecturers.

From the preceding discussion, it is quite clear that lecturers and tutors fail to do introspection as regards their delivery efficacies and attendant issues (reflexivity). Some of the challenges actually stem from the academics themselves. Hence, Makondo's (2012, 108) argument that many lecturers are not trained educators despite the fact that university teaching calls for a mastery of diverse teaching for effective teaching and learning. A mind set change, that is, one of imbibing pragmatic teaching methods, in his opinion, is imperative if life-long learners are to be created. A pragmatic way forward is for the academics to ask themselves whose role it is to ensure that students learn to think reflectively, that is, what is their personal role in students' scholarly excellence?

## Students' perspectives on the teaching and learning process in higher education

The teaching and learning process in a higher education context is a pervasive and stressful affair for many a learner despite the wonderful opportunities provided by universities (Mudhovozi 2011). We found that academic problems were most stressful. Data at our disposal indicate a lack of alignment between what is taught in class and what is taught during tutorials and this is creating confusion and hence stress. Staff have differing practices in terms of giving notes and other learning aids. Some students feel that it is the lecturer's responsibility to compile notes and provide them with summaries while others feel that this is too much spoon feeding which does not prepare students for the world of work and giving back to the community. The above lamentation of an academic on this issue is thus absolved. Mudhovozi

(2010, 518) submits that such students' demands could possibly stem from a heavy academic load on their shoulders, which makes them impervious to change. Some conscientious students feel that they need more time on tasks so as to grasp key concepts to avoid memorising information that they are simply expected to regurgitate during examinations but fail to apply in the social world. This could be in the form of more tutorial tasks, study groups, group work tasks or guided classroom activities. As such, the quality of instruction leaves much to be desired according to the students.

An equally perplexing issue is that some students submit that lecturers tend to read from their power point slides and they feel it is a travesty that no further explanations are made to help them understand. Hassan (2011) notes that some academics are ill prepared to cope with higher education challenges. This has resulted in most academics experiencing work-related stress as they fail to strike a balance between ill-preparedness and the ever increasing student population. Makondo (2012, 117) feels that such academics are doing a disservice to the nation since such practices are unacceptable. Hence, he calls for such academics to embark on staff development programmes so as to upgrade their academic and professional qualifications in order to 'read and reflect' with a view to informing their pedagogic practices. We observed a lack of support from the host lecturer for the students who double as tutors. The tutors are concerned that without proper monitoring and support from the lecturers, there is little power for them to reinforce the content taught during lectures. Some lecturers are in the habit of relegating most of the teaching responsibility to tutors and student assistants. Moreover, they are seldom available for students' consultations. Given that mentoring is a cardinal aspect in the South African educational landscape (Chweu and Schultz 2010; Nundulall and Reddy 2011; Schulze 2010) it is important that lecturers consciously assist the tutors by fostering a genuine and sound rapport and relationship between them so that the learners can benefit from both angles.

Diversity has presented its fair share of teaching and learning challenges. Given the diverse lecturers and students' backgrounds due to the international nature of universities, some students struggle to understand some of the lecturers' accents. This aspect has implications on concept mastery by students. Some students also complain that the pace (verbal) is too fast and they are challenged in following the delivery. Apart from the struggle to understand what the lecturer says some students concede that they struggle to express themselves in English since English is their second or third language.

Misaligned assessment practices are also an area of student concern. A misalignment between the assessment types used during the year and the final assessments are cited. For instance, lecturers give quizzes and multiple-choice type of assessment during the term but revert to essay type assessment during the final or summative examinations. Large classes are often cited as central to the use of multiple-choice types of assessment activities. This, however, as alluded to by

students, specifically some final year students, leaves them inadequately prepared for the workplace.

## Our reflections as managers of academic development

As academics, our respective university systems demand that we maintain a portfolio of evidence of what we do; how we do it; and why we do so. This is reflection. Self-reflection or reflexivity is an empowerment strategy. Rodgers (2002) states that reflection is a tool used in transforming raw experience into meaning-filled theory. The way others influence our practice (or vice versa) is based on the four reflective lenses: self-assessment, theoretical literature, peer assessment and others' experiences. It is these issues that we reflect upon in our portfolios in our quest to generate relevant teaching and learning theories. Work related experiences critically provide us with unique reflections of ourselves – looking at the same person from different angles. Hence, Brookfield (1995, 28) has aptly argued that 'we are all prisoners trapped within the perceptual frameworks that determine how we view our own experiences'. Looking at ourselves from the four critically reflective lenses minimises subjectivity so that what we see may not be clouded by people's prejudices about ourselves. Hence, our portfolios are crucial in our quest to obtain other people's perspectives of our practices.

Our practices in the 'reflexivity arena' are not without challenges. Some of the challenges we have identified or experience include the following:

- a. Inculcating the facilitation or teaching philosophy into student facilitators and new staff – especially those with no prior teaching experience – is no mean task.
- b. Encouraging or capacitating academics to develop a reflective portfolio of evidence has proved to be a challenge to most peer facilitators as this requires high cognitive skills and commitment.
- c. The summative assessment of the portfolio of evidence process (by multiple trainers) has been shrouded in controversy as glaring discrepancies have emanated from this exercise regarding issues related to subjective influences in the assessment process. The end result is that some candidates are adversely affected and end up dropping out of programmes.

It is our contention that Rodgers's four-phase reflective cycle can be used as an effective tool by both novice and experienced lecturers to improve their teaching practices whilst enhancing student learning. As Rodgers herself posits, reflection slows down the teaching and learning process. Slowing down could benefit both students and lecturers as it allows them to think carefully about their behaviours and actions. The thinking process leads to better articulation of the teaching and learning process, thus allowing for analysis and experimenting with new approaches.

Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004) refer to four types of reflection, namely: technical, descriptive, dialogic and critical. It is our view that Rodgers's cycle encompasses these types because as the process is repeated, rigour can be applied depending on the academic's level of experience.

## CONCLUSION

The article has sought to explore and show why it is important for higher education academics to reflect on their teaching and learning practices. We reported on our observations in interacting with our clients, namely, staff and students. Academics reported a variety of challenges and how they attempted to mitigate these. In reflecting on their teaching and learning, they noted that large classes impacted negatively on their efforts. The use of TeL, particularly, Blackboard in assessment and instruction mitigated the challenges associated with large classes. Academics also complained that students want to be spoon-fed instead of embarking on self-discovery and self-directed learning. Finally, the tutorial system at one of the institutions studied was said to be detested by students and staff with the former complaining that little credit and support was given for tutorial attendance. The latter opined that students had a general negative attitude towards tutorials.

The study also concluded that students were unhappy with the academic support they received from lecturers and tutors. The quality of instruction was reportedly poor. These classroom practices or challenges are in essence, influences of what happens in and 'beyond the classroom'. Resultantly, both the lecturers and students' performances are affected. Our reflections of what we witnessed in our daily encounters and our observations of staff and students constituted reflexivity. Such reflections are meant ultimately to assist in enhancing students' resolve to succeed in their studies. Reflective practice is thus a plausible approach for academics to use to enhance teaching and learning. If done systematically we can gain a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process in higher education.

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