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Enhancing teaching skills and fostering critical reflective practices in the professional development of university teachers.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades or so, important new initiatives have been introduced into undergraduate education to advance learning. These initiatives bear witness to the fact that there are higher education professionals who are intimately interested in the transformation of approaches to teaching and learning in the academy (Chisholm, 2007; Costa & Kallick, 1993; O'Banion, 1997; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). Some are also interested in thoroughgoing transformation of the teaching and learning through faculty development initiatives. Many of these innovative practices hold out great promise for real advances in student learning and even for changing the culture of higher education (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Smith, 2004). In this regard, reflective teaching and learning is important in professional development and for better teaching practices. The use of critical friends can also assist the processes of reflecting on teaching and learning from teaching and the overall advancement of teaching in higher education.

The origins of the critical friends' concept and associated group processing activities can be situated in the critical pedagogy education reforms of the 1970s and it is also linked with various approaches to faculty self-appraisal. This term 'a critical friend' is a reference to a colleague or mentor providing support and challenge on a one-and-one basis or within a support group network. A critical friend might also be a detached outsider who supports one's professional development by questioning the individual about himself and professional/academic engagements, causing reflection and challenge. The critical friend will also offer alternative perspectives, prompting deeper reflection and reappraisal, in fact at times causing persons to get out of their comfort zone by engaging in a conversation that might be uncomfortable but one that advances the individual. The critical friend is extremely concerned about the learning of the individual that is being engaged and of course with the success of the project. Some important attributes of the critical friendship include trust, provocative questioning, an alternative perspective, constructive critique and advocacy (Costa and Kallick 1993). Allen's (1991) suggests that reflective thinking or practitioner programmes should provide information on teaching, guided practice, teaching experience with guided reflection, peer visitations and consultations, consultations with faculty and supervisor and self reflection. This paper will therefore provide space for the investigation of reflectivity in faculty development initiatives in terms of reflection in-teaching and reflection-on-teaching in higher education. Reflection is concerned with knowledge of self (including knowledge of self as a

university teacher), knowledge of content, knowledge of teaching and learning, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of the context where teaching and learning will take place and of course, the larger societal and global contexts. Of course knowledge of context is inclusive of the institution of higher education and society.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the role of a transformational and critical friends approach in a faculty development project. The study provided an opportunity for the investigation of reflectivity in faculty professional and continuing educational development within the context of academic adult education. Reflection in the programme was concerned with knowledge of self (including knowledge of self as a university teacher), knowledge of content, knowledge of teaching and learning, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of the context where teaching and learning took place and of course the larger societal and global contexts.

This study contributed to our understanding of transformational and critical professional development. The approach to professional development has the potential to develop university teachers who will be critically attuned to teaching in ways that fosters transformation and will continually engage in critical reflection on their own pedagogy and some of political and social concerns in teaching in higher education.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives and Relevant Literature

Transformational learning was important in providing theoretical foundation for the study (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). This was used with much support from the critical friends approach to faculty development. The critical friends approach in professional development has been used in many sites of education, in fact in both teacher education and higher education (Costa and Kallick 1993; Dahlgren, Eriksson & Gyllenhammar, 2006, Stenhouse, 1975; Swaffield, 2008). Indeed it has been important in fostering change in teacher practice and perspective. The origins of the critical friends' concept and associated group processing activities can be situated in the critical pedagogy education reforms of the 1970s and it is also linked with the self-appraisal activity. This term 'a critical friend' is a reference to a colleague or mentor providing support and challenge on a one-and-one basis or within a support group network. A critical friend might also be a detached outsider who supports one's professional development by questioning the individual about himself and professional/academic engagements, causing reflection and challenge. The critical friend will also offer alternative perspectives, prompting deeper reflection and reappraisal, in fact at times causing persons to get out of their comfort zone by engaging in a conversation that might be uncomfortable but one that advances the individual. The critical friend is extremely concerned about the learning of the individual that is being engaged and of course with the success of the project. Some important attributes of the critical friendship include trust, provocative questioning, an alternative perspective, constructive critique and advocacy (Costa and Kallick 1993). Handal (1996) used the concept to emphasize the importance of reflection and continuous professional development in medical education especially as colleagues evaluated each other.

Allen's (1991) suggests that reflective thinking or practitioner programmes should provide information on teaching, guided practice, teaching experience with guided reflection, peer visitations and consultations, consultations with faculty and supervisor and self reflection. Schon (1987) underscored the role of reflection-in-action in ongoing professional situations and reflection-on-action as important in investigating professional actions in the past. Both forms of

reflection are useful in stimulating professional development and getting in touch with inner self. However, when teachers are engaged in critical reflective dialogue the possibility for worldviews to change dramatically is enhanced. But this must be specifically addressed through critical approaches (Brookfield, 1987, Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1990). Indeed education, if it is understood as having transformational potential can be so practiced that it becomes a vehicle for social change and serves as a catalyst for individual responsibility for social justice (Freire,1970). This might become a real possibility when a reflective model of faculty development is employed.

In a reflective faculty development model, reflective teaching is engaged. At the heart of the model is a cyclical process leading to the construction of meaning. Meaning is constructed when awareness is created by observing and gathering information (1) by analyzing the information to identify any implications; (2) by hypothesizing to explain the events and guide further action and; (3) by implementing an action plan. In terms of professional practice the "doing" dimension of the university teacher behaviour is important. Performance will include and involve the tasks of planning, implementing, and evaluating. Incorporated in the conceptual framework are attributes or dispositions deemed critical to professional development. They must be nurtured. These include the affective dimensions of the teacher (IDU, 2008).

Research Design

This was a qualitative research project which proceeded after the necessary institutional review board protocols were approved. The participants were selected by purposive sampling and criteria for selection included willingness and availability to participate and of course they were adjudged to be information rich (Patton, 2002). They were information rich since they were some of the more committed members of the programme who had demonstrated deep interest in the programme, high levels of critical self reflectivity and clearly shown that they were highly invested in the programme.

The model of the teaching practicum of the faculty development programme was rooted in critical reflection. The faculty development program, the Certificate in University Teaching and Learning (CUTL) was developed to help each university teacher participating in the program make meaningful connections between theory and practice. Each participant was expected to ask significant questions in the context of classroom and field experiences. Throughout the CUTL reflective thinking and teaching were engaged in a sequential curriculum pattern with initiatory, developmental, and culminating phases. Courses were arranged within the professional education sequence around six questions:

1. Exploring Myself- Who am I as a university teacher?
2. Exploring Teaching- How should I think about University Teaching?
3. Understanding Learners—Who are the students I teach?
4. Organizing for Teaching-How Shall I Teach?
5. Reflecting on Teaching-How can I learn about teaching from teaching?
6. The Context of My teaching – What are the Societal and University issues that affect my teaching? (IDU, 2008).

Data was collected with the use of semi-structured conversational interviews with five faculty members completing the faculty development programme or CUTL at research intensive university in the Caribbean. Another of the key components of this faculty development programme was the orientation to the critical friend approach. The individual university teacher

was to be involved in critical reflection of his or her teaching and the critical friend was to assist the process. Each participant was assigned a critical friend. In the teaching practicum, the critical friend was expected to review lesson plans and visit the classrooms of his or her colleague and provide feedback on his or her pedagogy. It was after the teaching practicum that the research participants were interviewed. These interviews lasted for approximately one hour.

The semi structure conversational interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim. In addition, data gathering was also done by making notes while observing the teaching practicum, from observations before the interviews and informal discussions with the participants. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did you feel about the reflection component of the programme?
2. What role did the critical friends play in your reflection and learning?
3. How did you think teaching and learning were advanced by the programme?

Analysis of the data was continuous and ongoing. Attentiveness and deep listening characterized the data gathering phase of this research. The transcripts were analyzed through multiple readings to identify conceptual categories, patterns, and themes to facilitate a coherent synthesis of the data. Additional data probes for contradicting and sanctioning evidence was done. Research participants were called upon to assist in the verification and interpretative process by doing member checks. Analysis of the transcribed interviews followed a modified pattern outlined by Giorgi (1985, 1989) and demonstrated by Wertz (1983, 1985). The essence of this pattern is to break down transcribed texts into units that can be more easily analyzed. Each analysis consisted of analyzing the descriptions until patterns emerge.

The analytic goal was to illuminate and better understand the meanings participants assigned to their experiences as they reflected on them. Data analysis occurred in three phases. The first phase involved the careful reviewing of each transcript to identify thematic categories. Following Straus & Corbin (1990) the transcripts were read and unique themes noted and open coding done. This entailed labeling parts of each transcript for their meaning. Having developed thematic categories, lists of items that reflected each label or could be subsumed under the label were identified. This was really a process of refining the coding. The final phase was to identify direct quotes highlighted sub-themes. This step provided a richer description of the phenomena and helped to establish trustworthiness of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The stages of analysis were not linear. At each stage revisions were done as deemed necessary and examination and re-examination of the data proved worthwhile. Further key approaches in qualitative research methodology were employed including bracketing and horizontalization (Patton, 2002).

Findings and Discussion

The findings suggested that the participants' experiences were multifaceted and multilayered. Learning by doing was enhanced by reflection in-action and reflection-on-action. The interviewees felt that the fact that they had to observe a colleague and then be observed by a colleague was extremely useful. When they were observing colleagues they immediately thought about their own teaching and hence were provided with an experience that forced them to be more critically engaged with their own teaching. In fact, they were able to recognise some of their own peculiar characteristics in teaching as they observed others and were forced to think about their own teaching.

The work of the critical friend in reviewing lesson plans and observing classes were generally highly valued. They felt that the critical friends helped them to make necessary adjustments to their teaching style and rethink aspects of their pedagogy that they felt warranted it. Of interest was the fact that some critical comments were not readily accepted, hence their own sense of their professional competence and the worthiness of pedagogical activity was important in deciding how to respond to critical comments. They agreed that the critical friend was there to assist them in their professional development. There was one respondent who felt that the critical friend might have demonstrated some amount of politeness and tried as best as possible not to be offensive. Hence there was some risk in using the critical friend because aspects of the feedback might have been superfluous.

Overall this project underscored the need for pedagogical support space and critical friends in professional development were underscored. Each participant was able to reflect on his or her teaching in more meaningful ways. Indeed these provided needed support for meaningful and effective teaching. It was evident that it was more challenging to be a critical friend than to be a critical friend. To execute ones responsibility as a critical friend, one must try to be honest and certainly not superfluous.

There were also opportunities for the university teachers to see good teaching and poor teaching and instinctively some persons recognise what to emulate and what to avoid. Obviously, there might have been some reluctance to provide really negative feedback in a situation where persons were critical friends. They also found that the positive reviews were more useful than the reviews of their students since they felt that colleagues were able to analyze the teacher with greater incisiveness.

Professional development was enhanced since knowledge of self and the professional act of teaching was advanced. This was accomplished through the feedback from critical friends since the individual in giving and receiving feedback was challenged to revisit one's own teaching. Critical social learning was also enhanced through intentional efforts to push learners to think about aspects of their practice for instance, power relations in the classroom and issues of social justice. Creating space for critical reflection on teaching, collegiality and mentorship must therefore become hallmarks of good professional development programmes seeking to advance teaching and learning in higher education. There is also space for critical engagement with social justice issues in the higher education landscape. Formulaic understandings about teaching and were undermined through intentional transformational critical reflection. Hence their image of themselves as university teachers became increasingly clear as they observed and reflected on their teaching throughout the programme. Self image was solidified and self understanding was enhanced.

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The critical friend concept might be one approach to enhance professional knowledge in faculty development initiatives. Teaching is not an easy task and there must be ways to use peers to assist the process of improving pedagogy. Honest peers can add to personal self knowledge and professional self knowledge. Further, the fact that a professional is committed to reflective engagement about professional acts is very important because the critical comments of a colleague can be used to engage in greater levels of personal critical analysis that might be

helpful. Reflective dialogue with a colleague can lead to greater intellectual engagement with aspects of professional life and also lead to positive action.

This study revealed that education is never neutral and professional development initiatives are fertile grounds for transformative adult education. Adult educators who are involved in professional development activities for university faculty need to infuse and inform professional development activities with critical and reflective perspectives. These can enhance professional development if employed meaningfully.

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