Supporting the reflective practice of tutors: what do tutors reflect on?

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Abstract

Effective self-reflection is a key component of excellent teaching. We describe the types of self-reflection identified in tutors' reflective statements following a peer observation of teaching exercise. We used an adapted version of the categories developed by Grushka et al. (2005) to code text from 20 written statements as technical (26% of comments), practical (36% of comments) and critical (33% of comments). Tutors also wrote about the affective aspects of the exercise and the majority of such comments were positive. Most tutors reflected in a holistic way about their teaching, noting the importance of getting the technical aspects right while also being concerned about pedagogical matters and issues beyond the classroom. The exercise was an effective way to prompt tutors to reflect on their teaching and helped tutors articulate and formalise their learning from the peer observation activity. Suggestions for further exploration of the reflective practice of tutors are provided.

Introduction

There has been a substantial increase in the number of part time teaching staff, including tutors, in universities in the UK (Nicol 2000; Muzaka 2009), the USA (Quinn 2006) and Australia (Kift 2003) and a corresponding need to provide support for such academics. Effective self-reflection is a key component of excellent teaching (Kane et al. 2004). While there is a substantial body of work on reflective practice within academic development, our literature review reveals a scarcity of published research on reflective practice as an aspect of tutor development.

We previously studied the value of peer observation of teaching within a tutor development program and found that this was an effective development activity (Bell and Mladenovic 2008). Reflection is a key part of the peer observation cycle (Bell 2001) and the aim of this new study is to determine the types of self-reflection in which tutors engaged following peer observation of teaching. We wanted to evaluate the effectiveness of the self-reflective component of the peer observation exercise in supporting reflection and to explore the aspects of teaching practice that tutors were focussed on.

Our framework for academic is described in full in Bell and Mladenovic (2008). The two key elements of the framework explored in this study include peer observation and self-reflective exercises which provide opportunities for what Åkerlind (2007, 36) terms 'conceptual expansion'. Kahn et al. (2006, 18) note that 'approaches based on conceptual change are often distinguished in the literature from approaches termed "reflective practice"' yet that some studies on conceptual change clearly fit within the reflective practice framework, as they employ 'specific reflective processes as applied to aspects of practice.' The self-reflective activity in our tutor development program was a directed reflective process that was aimed at supporting conceptual expansion.

Literature review

Definitions of reflection

There are many definitions and models of reflective teaching, with a notable absence of a single definition (Harrington el al. 1996). At the simplest level, reflection is 'a form of response of the learner to experience.' (Boud et al. 1985, 18). Boud et al. (1985, 19) go on to say that 'reflection in the context of learning is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations.' Reflective practice is an iterative process rather than a one-off event, involving 'repeated cycles of examining practice, adjusting practice and reflecting upon it, before trying it again.' (Grushka et al. 2005, 239). We have adopted Young's (2006, 1) definition of reflection, which draws on the work of Kahn el al. (2006): '…reflective processes involve creating meaning around practice. This is inherently collaborative. The resulting understanding …provides a starting point for adapting practice.' This definition fits well with the collaborative nature of the peer observation exercise and with our aim of supporting tutors to improve their teaching and their understanding of their teaching.

Reflection as part of academic development

Kahn and colleagues' review (2006) noted the following benefits of reflective practice for academic development: increased capacity for reflective processes; enhanced capacity for practice; development of personal qualities (e.g. increased self-confidence); establishment of supportive relationships between those involved in the reflective processes; and transformation of practice. Reflective practice can also enhance academics' ability to mentor and develop others (Bell 2001).

Although academics might often reflect on their teaching in a spontaneous and natural way (Eley 2006), reflection can be facilitated using what Kahn et al. (2006, 8) called 'directed reflective processes'. Their review identified action research, learning journals and portfolios as the most commonly used tasks used to direct reflective processes, with many other activities also noted. Interestingly, reflective activities, such as keeping a reflective diary or informal reflection, were mentioned but not highly ranked by the

lecturers as valuable for academic development in Ferman's study (2002). Instead, collaborative activities were regarded by academics as highly professionally enriching (Ferman 2002). The importance of the social aspect of reflective processes was also identified in literature review by Kahn et al. (2006). Similarly, Boud (1999a, 3) argues that formal academic development activities 'must take careful account of …the influence of learning among peers' in recognition of the collegial nature of academic work.

Peer observation of teaching has been successfully used by academics to 'inform reflective practice and to support development' (Kuit et al. 2001, 134). Peer observation of teaching is usually used as part of a range of developmental activities. For example, most of the neophyte teachers who completed an academic development course that included a peer observation component and production of the portfolio of evidence felt they took a more reflective approach to their work (Rust 2000). This is confirmed by Clark et al. (2002, 131) who assert that 'if reflection is to lead to change, then locally observable alternatives may be particularly effective; hence a culture of comparing one's teaching with that of one's disciplinary colleagues will be helpful.'

There are few published studies on reflective practice as an aspect of tutor development. Most of the 2401 part-time tutors surveyed at Open University had learned to teach 'on-the-job' and wished they had learned how to teach by '"social learning" – learning through consulting others' (Knight et al. 2006, 324). The expert observation of 48 new teaching staff, including graduate teaching assistants, encouraged critical reflection (Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker 2006).

Categorisation of reflection

There is no one ideal way to categorise types of reflection. We have selected a modified version of van Manen's framework (1977) as it is cohesive and 'can help individuals more clearly articulate interrelationships among the variety of other positions on reflective teaching already considered' (O'Donoghue and Brooker 1996, 103).

The three categories of reflection identified by van Manen (1977) and further developed and renamed by Zeichner and Liston (1987) are technical, practical and critical. Our coding system was based

on the modified version of the categories described by Grushka et al. (2005, particularly Table 1, 242). We also drew on Killen's (2007) descriptions of van Manen's categories.

Technical reflection is 'concerned mainly with means rather than ends' and a 'technical application of educational knowledge' (van Manen 1977, 226). This type of reflection is focussed on timing, equipment and resources (Grushka et al. 2005), and on maintaining order and achieving pre-determined outcomes (Killen 2007).

Practical reflection has a 'focus on an interpretive understanding both of the nature and quality of educational experiences' (van Manen 1977, 226-7), on connections between principles and practice (Killen 2007) and on student engagement (Grushka et al. 2005).

Critical reflection involves 'the question of the worth of knowledge…a constant critique of domination, of institutions, and of repressive forms of authority' (van Manen 1977, 227). This type of reflection is about extending awareness beyond the classroom to moral and social issues (Killen 2007). We included an awareness of the teaching community and common issues faced by tutors, and also empowering and trusting the student as per the student-centred learning literature (e.g. Biggs 2003; Ramsden 2003).

While it may be implied that these three categories give an indication of the quality of the reflection, the categories should not be seen as hierarchical. The practical and technical issues are part of the reality of teaching and reflection on these aspects of teaching is valuable (Killen 2007, 90; referring to Zeichner 1990).

Several other researchers have used van Manen's framework to explore the reflective processes of teachers. Pultorak (1996) used van Manen's framework to determine the categories of reflection found in reflective journals and interviews with new teachers. Pultorak (1996) found that novice teachers reflected more at the technical level at the beginning of term, with increasing amounts of practical and critical reflection as the term progressed. Griffin (2003) used van Manen's model to assess modes of reflective thinking in 135 critical incident reports written by 28 preservice teachers over six weeks. She coded 61% of

the reports as technical, 37% as contextual (practical) and 2% as dialectical (critical). The use of contextual reflection doubled over time. Van Manen's modes of reflection were used by Power et al. (2002) to categorise several sources of reflective data generated by 13 student teachers during an internship program. All participants reflected at the technical level, several at the practical level, and one teacher 'touched on' critical reflection (8). Similarly, Collier (1999) found technical reflections to be common among the four student teachers in her study, with some practical reflection and only one student demonstrating critical reflection. Although van Manen's framework is not mentioned in her paper, Bell (2001) found three very similar categories when analysing tutors' written reflective statements about a peer observation exercise. Bell does not report exact numbers, but of the 28 participants, a 'small number' made technical changes to their teaching, about half made practical changes and at least two made critical changes.

The study

Our Faculty employs a large number of casual tutors who are employed from semester to semester to teach small groups of up to 20 undergraduate students (classes can be larger at postgraduate level) and undertake associated marking and one-to-one consultation with students. The Faculty provides a professional development program for tutors that, at the time of this study, consisted of four two-hour development sessions per semester plus a peer observation and self-reflective exercise (Bell and Mladenovic 2008).

In 2006, 25 tutors completed self-reflective written statements following their participation in the peer observation of teaching exercise. Tutors responded to four prompts: what I learned from observing my colleague; what I gained from my colleague's feedback: what will I apply to my own teaching; and any other comments on the exercise. Once tutors had completed the peer observation and self-reflection they attended a development session where they shared and discussed their experiences and the collated, anonymous data. The academic developer facilitated the discussion and provided guidance in relation to the areas of most interest to the tutors.

University ethics committee approval was granted and permission was sought from tutors in order to publish the results; 20 of the 25 tutors (i.e. 80%) gave their permission. Eleven of the 20 tutors were new

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to tutoring that semester; the remainder had some experience of teaching, having previously tutored for one or more semesters.

Coding process

We used content analysis to analyse tutors' self-reflective reports. Content analysis involves the systematic analysis of documents through the development and use of coding systems to identify and quantify information in documents (Cozby 1997). We used Table 1 in Grushka et al. (2005, 242) as a reference while coding, and we also added our own notes to this table. We decided to allocate a code to each 'text segment' i.e. any section of text that expressed a single idea or consistent theme. Each researcher individually coded one reflective statement and we then compared our coding, discussed any differences and came to a shared agreement about the categories of reflection for that statement. Each researcher then individually coded all twenty reflective statements. A few (33/129 - 26%) instances arose where there was disagreement, but agreement was reached after discussion.

Results

Tutors' self-reflective comments were fairly evenly split between the three categories of reflection (Table 1). Most tutors reflected in all three modes (Table 2). Six tutors did not reflect at the technical level and three tutors did not reflect at the practical level. All but three tutors had at least one critical reflection in their reflective statements.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Upon coding the reflective statements, we noticed that tutors also made comments about the affective aspects of exercise, often alongside or incorporated with the technical, practical and critical reflections. Several tutors wrote about how they felt about the exercise, e.g.

'X's comments were really helpful. I think I was aware of his presence too much and was a bit nervous at the beginning.'

'About the development program in general, its biggest contribution is that the program makes me so excited about teaching. And that is the main thing any tutor should have.'

'It was a very interesting process both watching and being watched while tutoring.'

'As this is the first time I have taught in an educational arena, I really appreciated his support and feedback…'

This emotional aspect was not surprising, as we recognise that reflection is not a cognitive process that excludes emotions (Boud 1999b).

The details of what tutors reflected on can be seen in Table 3. Improving the use of visual aids was the most common technical reflection. Practical reflection focussed on student engagement and participation, along with several other teaching and learning activities. The critical reflections showed a focus on student understanding and an awareness of the teaching community.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

Types of reflection

We found that tutors' written reflections on the peer observation exercise spanned all three reflective categories: technical, practical and critical. We were pleased that most tutors reflected in a holistic way about their teaching, noting the importance of getting the technical aspects right while also being concerned about pedagogical matters and issues beyond the classroom.

Given that just over half of the tutors were new to tutoring that semester, perhaps we might have expected more reflective comments in the technical category (Pultorak 1996; Collier 1999; Bell 2001; Power et al. 2002; Griffin 2003). The spread of our results across the three categories could partly be because we took a broader view than previous researchers of the practical and critical modes of reflection.

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Unlike the previous researchers, we used an adaptation of van Manen's framework (Grushka et al. 2005), rather than van Manen's framework itself.

We acknowledge the tension between saying that the three categories of reflection are non-hierarchical and the notion of the quality of reflection. However, rather than view the technical reflections as symptomatic of a transmission approach to teaching (Bell 2001) and as 'token observations focussed on minor technical aspects of …teaching' (Grushka et al. 2005, 239), reflecting on the technical and practical aspects of teaching is necessary and valuable (Killen 2007, referring to Zeichner 1990). We note that one of Ramsden's (2003) six key principles of effective teaching in higher education is making the subject interesting and explaining it clearly. Teaching skills such as the effective use of visual aids obviously assist tutors in making clear explanations.

Knowing what tutors reflect on as important aspects of their teaching helped us to better support their professional development. Many tutors wished to enhance student engagement and participation and this aspect has been emphasised within the tutor development program.

Affective aspects of reflection

While one of the benefits of reflection is that it can help academics transcend a purely emotional response to teaching incidents (Richert 1990; Brookfield 1995), reflection can certainly encompass and help make sense of emotions. Several researchers (e.g. Boud et al. 1985; Kember et al. 1999; Schuck et al. 2008) note the importance of acknowledging feelings as part of reflective practice. Wong et al. (2001) found that students had both positive and negative feelings about reflection, and that a supportive environment was important in facilitating students to make the transition from negative to positive statements about reflective practice. Wong and colleagues' hierarchical categorisation of affective responses to reflection shows some similarities to our findings. For example, it is common to at first feel anxious and uncomfortable about reflective experiences, and one of the tutors in our study wrote that they were initially nervous in the presence of the observer. As the students in their study became more comfortable about reflective practice, Wong et al. (2001) noted responses such as enjoyment, increased

confidence, perspective modifications or transformations and valuing the reflective experience. The majority of the affective responses in our study fell into this positive category.

Effectiveness of the exercise in supporting reflection

We agree with Adler (1991, 148) that there is no 'one best way' of promoting reflection; however it does seem that this exercise was an effective way to prompt tutors to reflect on their teaching. The short exercise helped tutors articulate and formalise their learning from the peer observation of teaching exercise and created an opportunity for reflection, without which it might not otherwise occur (Pedro 2005). The voluntary nature of the activity and the high level of participant control (e.g. choice of observer, form of feedback and confidentiality of data) most likely enhanced the benefits of the exercise (McMahon et al. 2007; Schuck et al. 2008). Jones and Stubbe (2004, 190) thought that guided reflective activities might be more powerful than other forms of developmental activities because 'the resultant learning [is] rooted in [participants'] own experience and workplace contexts' and is therefore more meaningful and more likely to be applied.

A significant strength of the self-reflective exercise was that it occurred as part of a comprehensive development program for tutors. As Knight (2002) asserts, reflection should be seen as part of professional development activities. Reflection on its own is not sufficient; a range of individual and collaborative professional development activities are needed.

There are no doubt ways in which we could make the exercise even more supportive of reflection. For example, the prompts could include questions such as 'Have your values, beliefs or assumptions been challenged or changed based on your experience? (explain how and why)' and 'How has this activity changed you as a person and/or your thinking?'. Tutors could also be asked to reflect on the role of the observer. Martin and Double (1998, 165) suggest reflective questions such as 'In what way was the teaching/learning influenced by the observation? How could this be improved next time?'. Pultorak (1996, 288) found that when provided with specific reflective prompts (e.g. 'Did any moral or ethical concerns occur as a result of the lesson?'), novice teachers were able to reflect critically. Alternatively, we could

consider not using prompts at all but allowing for 'free' reflective writing triggered by whatever the tutor wishes. Hobbs (2007) criticises reflective prompts that are leading and suggestive.

Shared nature of the experience

The fact that the exercise occurred on a large scale and was discussed as a group meant that the activity impacted on organisational learning and change, rather than just the individual reflective practitioner (Vince 2002). The exercise enhanced tutors' awareness of the teaching community and common issues, which is particularly important for tutors, who are often isolated in the academic community (Marginson 2000). The importance of importance of sharing and discussing experiences – a social model of reflection (Schön 1983; Raelin 2001) – is particularly effective for academic development (Kahn et al. 2006). The exercise provided students with a model of reflective practice: both learners and academics need to be reflective and evaluative, and employers value these attributes in graduates (Macfarlane and Ottewill 2001). Indeed our own university has the graduate attribute 'personal and intellectual autonomy', one of the aspects of which is for graduates to 'be independent learners who take responsibility for their own learning, and are committed to continuous reflection, self-evaluation and self improvement' (University of Sydney 2004).

Limitations and further research

In this research we have begun to explore the nature of tutor reflections. We aim to use interviews further investigate whether the self-reflection exercise supports change in tutors' teaching practice. The interviews will allow us to explore in more depth tutors' reflections on their teaching practice. In addition, verbal interviews may suit some tutors more than written reflection (Pultorak 1996; Carnell 2007).

Other future research could by usefully guided by the recommendations in Kahn and colleagues' (2006) review. For example, we could consider revisiting the outcomes of the previous semester's peer observation and self-reflection tasks as a way of ensuring progression. We could also encourage tutors to continue with self-reflection by providing more opportunities but also by encouraging them to create their own opportunities. As well as structured activities, we could look at how to encourage and support

individual ways of reflecting. The exercise described in this paper is only one suggested model and although it can be collaborative, self-reflection is also 'a highly individualised path' (Yip 2006, 782).

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. Types of reflection identified in tutors' reflective statements about the peer observation exercise.

Type of reflection	Number (% in brackets)	Representative quotations
Technical	33 (26%)	'I will definitely start using slides for graphical explanation more often – or a combination of slides and white board.' 'I think I will definitely work on my overheads – trying to find the right balance between too much and too little information.'
Practical	46 (36%)	'I will work on how much I interact with the students by maybe having more class discussion before I put up the answers to the questions.' 'I was very happy with the feedback; she recognised some of the subtle but planned actions I did during the tute (such as intervening to add to the presentation, and asking leading questions at the end).'
Critical	43 (33%)	'The areas my colleague pointed out were sometimes difficult for me to see as a tutor. By implementing things from my colleague's feedback and my own observation, it would not only improve my teaching but also enhance my current and future students' learning.' 'I also learned that there is always something new to learn from the styles of others, and that teaching is a continuous learning process. One can never stop improving his/her craft.' 'I will ask students questions more frequently. Also I will try and ask not only homework answers but how they might apply a certain theoretical concept in the business practice – this will not only encourage class interaction but will get the students thinking on their feet and it will hopefully improve their own presentation and communication skills.'
Other / unknown	7 (5%)	Too general e.g. 'There are areas I can fix quite easily that will have good impact.'
Total	129	

Table 2. Types of reflection identified in each statement.

Reflective statement	Number of technical reflections	Number of practical reflections	Number of critical reflections
1	-	3	1
2	1	6	3
3	2	2	2
4	4	2	5
5	5	-	3
6	-	1	3
7	3	-	2
8	2	6	1
9	-	1	-
10	1	2	3
11	1	2	4
12	2	3	1
13	-	2	3
14	-	-	2
15	2	2	1
16	-	2	-
17	3	2	5
18	4	3	-
19	2	5	2
20	1	2	2
Totals	33	46	43

Table 3: Collated, grouped comments from tutors in response to the four reflective prompts (The numbers in brackets indicate the number of comments made).

A. What I learned from observing my colleague
Technical
Good use of visual aids (5)
Essential to use a tutorial plan (1)
Usefulness of knowing names (1)
How to cope with interruptions (1)
Get students to move / stand (1)
Logical and precise explanation of material (1)
Practical
How to better structure the tutorial (4)
How to facilitate discussion (3)
Ask questions of students (2)
Balance friendliness & approachability with authority (2)
How to give feedback clearly & confidently (1)
How to improve my teaching (1)
Dynamics change when there is an observer (1)
Critical
Use of hypothetical and practical examples (2)
Other tutors are experiencing similar issues (2)
Differences & similarities in teaching styles (3)
Find own teaching style – everyone is different (2)
Outsider perspective of teaching (1)
Importance of integrating tutorials with the whole unit (1)
Help students consolidate their understanding & grasp important concepts (1)
Contemporary press reports to give topic greater relevance (1)
Teaching is a process of continual learning & improvement (1)

B. What I gained from my colleague's feedback
Technical
How to improve use of visual aids (5)
Don't tell students about observer til the end (1)
Ensure I can be heard at back of class (1)
Practical
Ideas on how to engage the class more (7)
Confirmation of effective teaching skills (3)
Be a bit more strict to cut down on noise (2)
Use a variety of techniques (2)
Weaknesses in my teaching style (1)
Large classes require an active presence by tutor (1)
Use random homework checks (1)
Critical
Ways of ensuring student understanding / learning (1)
May have intervened too much – trust the students more (1)
Observer can see things that you are not aware of (1)
Validation of and increased confidence in teaching skills (1)

C. What will I apply to my own teaching?
Technical
Improve visual aids (7)
Try harder to learn students' names (2)
Slow the pace a bit (1)

Set ground rules e.g. for mobile ringing in class (1)
Get students to move around (1)
Arrange seating to suit learning activities (1)
Repeat key points more (2)

Practical
Encourage students to participate more (4)
Integrate theory with problem solving (1)
Reduce level of intervention during student presentations (1)
Use a mini-lecture at beginning of tute to consolidate knowledge (1)
Consider a more relaxed approach (1)
Story telling (1)
Use a calm approach to deal with problems (1)
Continue to build a good relationship with my students (1)
Better structure of tutorials (1)
Introduce more variety (1)

Critical
Incorporate real world applications of theory so students have a better understanding of the concepts and how theory & practice are interlinked (3)
Use more hypothetical and real examples (2)
Get students to look ahead and see the tutorials from a more macro level (1)
Balance between what students must learn and what students might want to learn (1)
Refer to material outside the assigned readings (1)
Give students more space and autonomy in constructing their own answers (1)

Any other comments on the exercise?

Technical
Easier to do peer observation exercise this time due to longer timeframe (1)

Practical
Good to observe an experienced tutor and get feedback (1)
Want to integrate structured learning techniques with my fun style of teaching (1)

Critical
Observing a colleague and getting feedback from a colleague's perspective gives a different view than student feedback and helps my improve my teaching and enhances the student learning experience (11)
Saw I have the same issues as other tutors and that together we could work out some strategies (2)
Good to see that we've incorporated what we both valued when we were students (1)
Helps get me energised about teaching (1)
Helps give me an idea of what the students might be thinking of the tutorial and tutor (1)