How tutors understand and engage with reflective practices

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Interviews with six tutors revealed the ways in which they thought about reflection, and what

forms of reflective practice were part of their teaching. The tutors saw a variety of benefits of

reflection, including improving their teaching. There was a focus on reflecting before and

after teaching, but few examples of reflection while teaching. Reflection was triggered by

negative events and by positive feedback. Reflection on teaching was mainly an individual

process; however some tutors engaged in proximal, informal discussions about their

teaching. Implications for practice, such as how to support reflection-in-action, are

considered.

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Introduction

Regular, purposeful reflective practice is a key characteristic of excellent teachers in higher education (Kane, Sandretto & Heath 2004). Kane and colleagues proposed that reflective practice was the process 'through which [excellent teachers] integrate the various dimensions of teaching' (300). Reflective practice has many potential benefits for academic development: enhanced overall effectiveness; increased capacity for change; transformation of practice; development of personal qualities (such as increased self confidence); and establishment of supportive relationships between those involved in the reflective processes (Kahn et al. 2006; Rogers 2001). Reflective practice can also enhance academics' capacity to mentor others (Bell 2001).

While reflective practice is a widely researched area, there are few investigations of the reflective practices of tutors (also known as casual academics, sessional staff, hourly paid staff, graduate teaching assistants, and adjunct faculty). In our roles as academic developers of a professional development program for tutors, we wanted to explore tutors' conceptions of reflection, and when and how they reflected on their teaching.

Our framework for academic development is described in full in Bell & Mladenovic (2008). The focus of the framework is on providing opportunities for 'conceptual expansion' (Åkerlind 2007, 36). Reflective processes applied to teaching practice can be linked to conceptual expansion (Kahn et al. 2006, 18). The aim of this research was therefore to explore tutors' reflective practices so that we could better support their conceptual expansion.

Literature review

Editorial note: we've made substantial changes to this section

Our literature review covers four areas: 1) what is reflection? ; 2) triggers for reflection; 3) development of reflective practice; and 4) reflective practices of tutors.

What is reflection?

There are many models of reflection (e.g. Schön 1987; Dewey 1933; Zeichner & Liston 1987; Kember et al. 1999), and critiques thereof (e.g. Ixer 1999). At the most basic level, reflection is 'a form of response of the learner to experience'. (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985b, 18). Schön (1987) discussed the idea of two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, to which has been added a third type, reflection-for-action (Killion & Todnem 1991). Zhu (2011) neatly summarises these as interactive reflection, retroactive reflection and prospective/anticipatory reflection.

Reflection-in-action describes the constant monitoring by the teacher of the classroom situation. Teachers respond to incidents, decide whether to change the activity, and are 'alert for opportunities to tackle difficult issues.' (Eraut 1995, 19). Reflection-in-action is an improvisational skill that needs to be learned (Ghaye 2011) and then becomes automatic for experienced teachers. Expert teachers adjust and may even abandon their plans during a class, sometimes without being conscious of why they are doing so (Claxton 2000; Knight 2002). A major benefit of reflection-in-action is that it can 'change teachers' instructional behaviours almost instantly, and thus have immediate effects on classroom dynamics.' (Ghaye 2011, 772).

Reflection-on-action occurs after teaching has taken place. Reflecting-on-action enables teachers to think back on the class and perhaps explore why certain things happened the way they did. Reflection-on-action may take the form of questioning assumptions, actions or attitudes, researching solutions to teaching quandaries or debriefing with a colleague. Questioning one's assumptions and attitudes can be difficult and may not happen without a framework (Brookfield 1995).

Reflection-for-action is reflecting on the nature of the teaching practice that one wishes to develop (Williams & Grudnoff 2011). Killion and Todnem (1991 p15) describe reflection-for-action as the 'desired outcome' of reflection-in and reflection-on-action. It is possible that reflection-for-action is both more valuable and more accessible for beginning teachers, as new teachers cannot easily reflect-in-action and do not yet have the expertise to question their assumptions via reflection-on-action (McIntyre 1993).

There are of course critiques of Schön's categories of reflection. For example, Eraut (1995) contends that Schön conflates reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and that he 'fails to appreciate the importance of the time variable' (p14). Eraut points out that sometimes responses to teaching situations must be rapid but at other times while teaching there may be time for deliberate reflection, such as when students are working in groups and the teacher is observing the process. Despite these criticisms, the categories of reflection –in, -on, and –for-action resonate with us and offer a useful perspective for analysing reflective practices.

Triggers for reflection

Reflection may be unplanned. Unplanned reflection is often triggered by problems or critical incidents. Ghaye calls these triggers jolts: '...a jolt is an experience which causes us to consciously pause (if only momentarily) and reflect upon a current encounter or experience' (2011, 82). Reflection may also be planned and purposeful. As a teacher prepares for the next class, s/he may deliberately look at what occurred in the last class – what worked and what didn't (reflection-on-action), and adjust the lesson plan accordingly (reflection-for-action). Regular and purposeful reflection may require a commitment to reflection, learning how to reflect, and supportive conditions in which to reflect (Boud et al 1985b).

Development of reflective practice

We know that reflective practice can be valuable, and we have some understanding of what it is and that it can be planned or unplanned. How then can we best support reflective practice? Some ways in which reflective practice may be developed and supported include: action research and learning journals (Kahn el al. 2006), peer observation of teaching (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008), modelling reflective practices (Loughran 1996), and mentoring (Schön 1987).

The notion of a collaborative aspect of reflective practice is emphasised by many researchers and practitioners. For example, Convery (1998, 202) says that '...reflection must be recognised as an activity that can only be developed in conducive social and emotional circumstances.' Simon et al. (2011) confirm the importance of discussion with trusted colleagues to help new teachers reflect on their practice. Similarly, almost half of surveyed part-time tutors wanted more 'social learning in the form of guidance from a mentor, and nearly 40% wished there had been more conversations with ... colleagues' (Knight et al. 2006, 323)

Reflective practices of tutors

There are few studies on the reflective practices of tutors. Here we examine three studies of the reflective practices of tutors, and two relevant studies of the reflective practices of pre-service teachers, who we consider to be similar to tutors in that both are novice teachers. When Bell (2007) asked new tutors (n=63) 'what are the characteristics of excellent tutoring?', the tutors identified many of the qualities of excellent teaching as recognised in the literature, but did not mention reflection on teaching. In contrast, Bell, Mladenovic & Segara (2010) found that most tutors reflected on technical, practical and critical aspects of their teaching, even though just over half of tutors were new to tutoring that semester.

A study of tutors' conceptions of their development (Hendry 2009) found that only tutors with more sophisticated conceptions used reflection as part of their development. Åkerlind (2007) made a similar finding in a study of lecturers: teachers who had more complex views of approaches to teaching – with a focus on finding out what works from the teacher's perspective or from the students' perspective – had a strong focus on active self-reflection.

Other researchers speculate that lack of reflection, particularly lack of reflection-in-action, is due to lack of experience, rather than differences in approaches to teaching (e.g. Simon et al. 2011). In Zhu's study of 12 student teachers, he found that 'reflection in action was a vague concept for most teachers and was rarely initiated during practicum.' (2011, 768). The students were 'too busy to find a chance to reflect during teaching, because there were too many things going on during the class.' (770).

In a study where pre-service teachers said they reflected-in-action, they had been introduced to a reflective framework, and, perhaps more importantly, their instructor had modelled reflection-in-action (Freese 1999, 899). In addition, mentors observed the pre-service teachers' classes and discussed reflection in action both before and after the lesson. Videos of the students teaching were also used to explore reflection-in-action.

Overall it seems that the reflective practices of tutors can be developed via mentoring, seeing reflection-in-action modelled, peer observation and guided self-observation. A complementary approach is that of conceptual expansion.

Our aims

As seen above, while reflective practices are an important aspect of excellent teaching, there is little published research on what tutors think reflection is, and the nature of their reflective practices. We wanted to interview tutors to explore in depth how and when they reflected on their teaching practice. Although we had previously analysed tutors' written

reflections, we felt that verbal interviews may suit some tutors more than written reflection (Carnell 2007; Pultorak 1996).

The study

Our previous papers (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Bell et al., 2010) describe the context in which we conducted our research. In brief, a large number of casual staff in the Business School of our university (100 in semester 1 2007, compared to 217 full time academics) are employed each semester as tutors. The tutors participated in up to four two-hour development sessions each semester plus a peer observation exercise with a self-reflective component. While reflective practice was introduced in the development program, and was part of the peer observation exercise, there was no in depth discussion about the various models of, and ways of engaging in, reflective practice.

In semester one 2007, we invited all tutors who had completed the previous semester's peer observation exercise (n= 25) to participate in interviews in order to explore in more depth their reflections on their teaching practice. Six tutors volunteered to participate in the study: four men and two women from the disciplines of Marketing, Econometrics, International Business, Government and Economics. All tutors had been tutoring for at least a year. The tutors were interviewed individually by one of the authors, in interviews ranging from 14 to 42 minutes (a total of 141 minutes). The same questions were used for each interview, with occasional extra questions asked for clarification:

1. What do you think reflection on teaching is?

2. What do you think is the value of reflection on teaching? (or not)?

3. Is reflection part of your teaching practice? If yes, what does that mean for you? What aspects do you reflect on?

4. What triggers reflection for you?

5. How does your reflection occur?

The interviews were recorded and the transcripts analysed. The tutors were paid for their time in acknowledgement that this was a professional development activity. University ethics committee approval was granted and permission was sought from tutors to publish the results. Participants were assured that the interviews were confidential and that pseudonyms would be used when publishing interview extracts.

Method

The interview transcripts were analysed thematically in five phases: (1) familiarising ourselves with the data (2) searching for themes (3) reviewing themes (4) defining and naming themes (5) producing the report (Braun and Clark , 2006). We separately carried out the first two phases, by closely reading each transcript and distilling the main points made in response to each question. Together we then reviewed and agreed on the themes, and selected quotes to illustrate each theme. The themes are detailed in the results section below.

Results

Tutors had a range of ideas about what reflection involved. The interviews showed evidence of reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action, with one tutor discussing reflection-in-action. Reflection was triggered when something went wrong in their teaching, or when positive feedback was received. Conversations about teaching usually occurred serendipitously. The tutors suggested several benefits of reflection on teaching

Tutors' conceptions of reflection on teaching

Tutors thought that reflection on teaching involved seeing whether they had achieved their teaching goals, making sure everything was going as planned, and looking at ways to improve teaching for themselves and for their students.

> ...just sort of regularly checking up on what you're doing, to make sure that everything's on track, based on your opinion as well as the students. (Luke)

> I think it's looking back at the way you teach and thinking what you do well that works for yourself and the students, and what you could improve on for yourself, but also for the students. (Tyler)

Two tutors, Charlotte and Mariam, also mentioned the idea of objectivity or taking a third person perspective.

> It's looking at yourself as a teacher objectively, and assessing as objectively as possible whether or not you're achieving the aims of teaching. (Charlotte)

> I think reflection on teaching is kind of taking a third person perspective. So kind of like coming outside of yourself and taking a third person perspective and kind of seeing what your teaching experience is like. (Mariam)

Reflection occurs before, during and after class

One tutor mentioned reflection-for-action; reflection that takes place while preparing for the class:

> ...when I'm preparing tutorials I think how I'm going to explain this. If I think it's not understandable I just change it and I write it out. (Zach)

One tutor described in detail reflections that she made 'in action'; during a class. However she doesn't mention any changes that she might have made as a result of her reflections.

> Like you see students slouching, looking away, not paying attention in class, and that triggers a whole series of reflections. What am I doing wrong? Is it me or is it the student? Is it me who's having a bad

day or is it the student who's having a bad day? Is it just one student having a bad day, or is a whole bunch of students having a bad day, because if it's a whole bunch of students that aren't paying attention and aren't participating in class, then it must be me. So this feeling that you get in the classroom, as you go through the class and after the class, triggers a whole series of reflections. (Charlotte)

Mariam explained why she found reflection-in-action difficult:

So when you're teaching, I mean yeah, you do pay attention, but often you're too engrossed in conducting the classroom that you don't really make the time to think, okay, well, what kind of classroom am I creating? How can I make different people engage with each other? (Mariam)

All tutors spoke about reflection-on-action; reflecting after the class in order to change things for the next class:

I have six tutorials in a row so I say something in one tutorial and I think that I could say that a better way so next tutorial I improve. I say that in a better way. By the end of the day, basically the last tutorial is an excellent tutorial. Always the students they suffer the first two tutorials..not suffer [but] I think that students in the fifth or sixth tutorials are in a better position in a sense. (Zach)

At the end of each tutor you kind of reflect on how you can improve on that before the next tute, because I essentially do it in a five-hour block thing. So you do kind of think, well, have I done what was needed? What did they struggle with? How could I have improved that? (Mariam)

Reflection happens when something goes wrong, and when things go well

A theme that was mentioned by all tutors was that reflection is triggered by making mistakes or when something goes wrong.

I often look back on stuff I do, and the bad habit of trying not to make too many mistakes, so reflection is I guess, part of what I do. Like if I mess something up, I'll try to make sure that I won't do it again. (Luke)

You learn as you go...As you become more experienced you become better. You don't usually make mistakes twice. You make mistakes but you learn as you go so it's always correcting itself. (Zach)

...when I go through that reflection at the end of the day, I feel bad about the not very smooth teaching incidents. But then I always tell myself that there's always tomorrow...and I make mental notes as to what to do at the next session, so that it's not painful to both the students and to me. (Charlotte)

...when something goes wrong in your day, the next natural question is, well why did that happen? (Mariam)

As we delved further, tutors said that reflection didn't only occur when things went wrong. Both Tyler and Charlotte talked about reflection being triggered when something went well or when they received positive feedback from students:

I try to make sure that if [something] works, you just replicate it. If [the students] suddenly start to have conversations with you and you get a good discussion going, then you know that that topic really worked. (Tyler)

For example, if a student sends me an email and says I really appreciate the way that you've been very inclusive in handling this class...then that triggers a whole reflection process, have I been doing this enough, have I been doing this consistently across all of my classes? (Charlotte)

Luke used reflection in order to keep improving his teaching so that he wouldn't get bored:

I find if you do the same thing again and again over time, you just get bored with it. So if you can improve it, then there's that sort of motivation to keep doing it. (Luke)

Opportunities for informal, collaborative reflection

The tutors are busy and don't have much time to discuss their teaching with colleagues.

...everyone is just that busy with marking assignments and everything else, you don't get enough of a chance to really have those conversations. (Tyler)

When conversations about teaching do occur, they are usually serendipitous:

In most cases around 90% of the time, it's a solitary thought process, 10% of the time it involves ... fellow tutors, whom I happen to bump into [in] the corridors after class. (Charlotte)

...you'll finish your four tutes and you'll bump into another tutor and I'll go look, my tutes this week didn't go as well as I'd hoped, I didn't get through all the material..., the students were talking a lot...or something like that. (Mariam)

In Marcus' case, the proximity of a fellow tutor in the next classroom means that they can regularly discuss their teaching:

After class, one of the other tutors is next door as well; we usually discuss how the class went. (Marcus)

The value of reflection on teaching

Tutors suggested several benefits of reflection on teaching: continuous improvement, teaching running 'more smoothly', recognition and validation, students receiving better marks and seeing what dynamics are being created in the classroom.

I sort of seem to be getting better. Things run a lot more smoothly, I think because of reflection, looking back on what I've done and analysing it, helps me better my teaching skills. (Luke)

I'm always very happy if I can see actually students commenting on me very well [in student evaluations]. Also when students stop me in the street and say how am I going and all these things; everybody knows me... (Zach)

Well, you end up as a better teacher and I think students should get better marks out of it. (Tyler)

I think that only by doing reflection and actually consciously making the effort to step outside of

yourself can you really see what kind of dynamics you're creating in the classroom. (Mariam)

Discussion

Tutors' definitions of reflection varied. This is to be expected and has been found in other

studies of teachers (e.g. Pedro 2005), and in the literature where there is no one agreed

definition of reflection (Rogers 2001). Tutors saw a variety of benefits of reflection, mainly

based around improving teaching/student experiences, some of which concur with the

literature. However tutors did not mention aspects such as development of personal qualities

(Rogers 2001) or enhanced ability to mentor others (Bell 2001). These aspects point to the

possibility of deepening tutors' understanding of the benefits of reflection.

As found in other studies (e.g. Teekman 2000), tutors said that reflection was mainly

triggered after they had made a mistake. Given that '[n]egative feelings, particularly about

oneself, can form major barriers towards learning' (Boud et al. 1985a, 11), focussing on the

positive while reflecting can help balance the frustration that may be experienced when trying

to develop competence (Ghaye 2011). For two tutors, reflection was triggered by positive

experiences. As academic developers, we don't want reflection to only happen when

something goes wrong – we want tutors to be able to learn, grow and change even when

they're doing a great job.

Only one tutor regularly spoke with a colleague about teaching. The other tutors

occasionally had reflective conversations with peers about teaching, though only when they

had happened to "bump into" another tutor. The absence of reflective conversations about

teaching has been noted by McCormack and Kennelly (2011), who found that such

conversations need to be supported in a structured fashion. Haigh (2005) offers a

counterpoint: informal conversations about teaching are often serendipitous, and are an under-valued form of learning.

The tutors in our study had a strong focus on reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action, as found in other studies (e.g. Pedro 2005). There was only slight evidence of tutors being able to reflect and adapt practice during class (reflection-in-action), confirming that '[e]ducators as well as human beings in general...are better at reflecting after the fact than reflecting in the moment' (Rogers 2001, 54). The tutors, as relatively inexperienced teachers were, to paraphrase Mariam, too engrossed in conducting the class to make the time to think about what kind of classroom they were creating. Being able to reflect and change while teaching is a sign of an experienced, masterful teacher.

Implications for practice

How then might tutors be supported to develop the ability to reflect-in-action? Given the evidence that teachers' conceptions of teaching change with experience (Norton et al. 2005; Prosser et al. 2003), and that reflective capacity increases with higher levels of conceptions (Åkerlind 2007; Hendry 2009), then a developmental approach needs to encompass both opportunities for conceptual expansion and gaining teaching experience. "On-the-job" professional development such as peer observation is therefore ideal. Other developmental activities could include modelling reflection-in-action while conducting development sessions for tutors, participation in "mock" tutorials, and practice teaching sessions (microteaching) for new tutors.

Tutors could also be helped to prepare in advance to reflect-in-action by anticipating possible scenarios and various options in response. Hartman (2010) talks about monitoring students' body language as a way of gauging student comprehension and engagement, so that could be one avenue into reflection-in-action for tutors. Helping tutors to collaboratively

develop their teaching repertoire within the safe environment of the development program may give tutors the space and confidence to try different things in response to class feedback.

Limitations and future research

A possible limitation of our study is the small sample size; however this allowed us to carry out in depth interviews and collect rich qualitative data. The interviewees were self-selected, and so may be the tutors who are most interested in improving their teaching, and who engage in reflection more often than others. Our interview questions could be seen as too general; more specific questions may have elicited more information about the different forms of reflective practices (-in, -on, and -for action). The interviews provide just one source of data. In future it would be useful to collect other sources of data such as videoing tutors or observing their teaching, and then discussing the video /observation with the tutors in order to prompt tutors to recall whether they were reflecting-in-action.

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