Professional learning in Human Resource Management: Problematising the teaching of reflective practice

Abstract

Reflection and reflective practice are much discussed aspects of professional education. This paper conveys our efforts to problematise teaching reflective practice in Human Resources (HR) education. The research, on which the paper is based, engages with stakeholders involved in the professional learning and education of reflective practice in three UK universities to provide a critical understanding of the complexities involved. Our research surfaces a level of conceptual ambiguity which creates an uneven landscape in terms of the teaching of reflective practice. Workplace cultures which do not support reflective practice, a focus on performance review and disparate stakeholder views highlight competing discourses of performance based reflection and critical management reflection and suggest a fundamental dissonance between a perspective that reflection in professional work warrants a critical character, and one which is based on a relatively simple 'acquisition of knowledge' model of continuous professional development. The analysis helps assess the teaching challenge within HR professional learning. Similar intricacies may affect teaching in other professions and consequently this article offers a contribution of relevance and interest to others involved in teaching reflective practice.

Keywords: reflection; reflective practice; Human Resource Management; professionalism; stakeholders; ethics

Introduction

Reflection and reflective practice are regarded by many as essential components of professional practice (see, for example, Bradbury et al. 2010). Schön (1983) argued that a distinguishing feature of expert practitioners in a profession was their ability to reflect on their practice when dealing with unusual or particularly complex cases. This is widely recognised and consequently taught on many professional post-graduate programmes such as nursing and social work; also in more recent years, within management (Gray 2007). Indeed, Anderson (2003) argues that critical reflection is a 'hallmark' of Masters level management education, whilst authors such as Reynolds (1998) see a management curriculum embracing reflection as indicative of a more critical curriculum, challenging the traditional, functionalist orientation, with its emphasis on the transmission of knowledge. Whilst such aspirations are powerfully argued little is known about the realities of practice. Against such a background this paper questions the positioning and nature of reflective learning within the context of the professional education of Human Resource (HR) managers. As illustrated below such an issue has received scant attention within management research and thus the paper offers a perspective which is overdue in the development of critical dialogue about professional reflective practice.

Within post-graduate Human Resource Management (HRM) programmes, the professional body, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), has set requirements which ensure that universities delivering their accredited programmes seek to engage their students in reflective learning. However, the extent to which our efforts to teach reflective practice nurtures critically reflective Human Resource (HR) practitioners, remains largely a matter of faith. Without consideration and understanding of the context of practice and the stakeholders' requirements, even the most conscientious (and critically reflective) of faculty are running partially blind in terms of their decision making on the design and delivery of reflection within the management curriculum. The paper argues the need to question, review and understand the positioning of reflective practice within the HR professional curriculum. It reports on a research initiative to engage key stakeholders, involved in the professional learning and education of reflective practice, to provide a critical understanding of the complexities of the teaching of reflective learning on HRM courses. Thus, the paper seeks to problematise the teaching of reflective practice within this context.

The paper unfolds as follows: firstly in order to position the importance of our study we consider extant literature in relation to three areas: the background of reflective learning in education programmes; the significance of reflective learning in the current HRM landscape; the challenging character of teaching reflective learning. We then discuss our methodology and findings before turning to a discussion of how our research begins to unpack the intricacies of this mode of teaching.

Reflection and reflective practice

As a key component of professional education and development, reflection is claimed to improve both depth and relevance of learning for individuals (Moon 2004). Boud et al. (1985, p.19) define reflection as a generic term for those 'intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understanding and appreciation'. Authors such as Boud (1985), and from the management literature Reynolds and Vince (2004), are at pains to highlight the inadequacy of simple notions of reflection, stressing the importance of a critical dimension. Critical reflection enables the manager to critique taken for granted assumptions within a social and political context, while becoming more receptive to alternative ways of thinking. It engages participants in a process of drawing from critical perspectives to make connections between their learning and work experiences, to understand and change interpersonal and organisational practices (Rigg and Trehan 2008, p.374).

Whilst sharing many of the concerns expressed by authors, such as Vince and Reynolds, other authors have drawn a distinction between reflection and reflexivity. For Cunliffe (2003), for example, whilst reflection is learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion, reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values and assumptions in an effort to understand our complex roles in relation to others. Usefully, and with a clear resonance to a professional work context, Bolton (2009) suggests that to be reflexive is to examine the extent to which social or professional structures in which we operate may be counter to our own values. Understanding how we relate with others offers the professional means by which they can operate both effectively and ethically, in the often messy and ambiguous world of work.

Whilst it is useful to clarify the particular focus of reflexivity, its most useful positioning is not as something different from reflective practice but as one key component of critically reflective practice. Gray (2007) captures this powerfully with his argument that

critical reflection enables the manager to critique taken for granted assumptions within a social and a political context, while becoming more receptive to alternative ways of thinking and behaving. Reflective practice outlined in this way has a clear rationale. It offers both individual and organisations the prospect of insight into the complexities and messiness of modern day work. It can offer individuals and teams an understanding of their role in creating the status quo and, importantly, how change might be introduced and managed. At an organisational level, critical reflective practice may offer organisations a better way of doing things, of avoiding making the same mistakes over and over, and of operating more ethically, equitably and inclusively to the overall well being of the organisation and those who work within it (Hill 2005).

Reflective practice and the HR profession

As noted above, the professional body for HR in the UK is the CIPD. Importantly, and as with other professional bodies, it is the professional education system of the CIPD which defines 'the accepted discourse of the profession' (Rigg, Stewart and Trehan 2007, p.247). As part of this discourse the CIPD see reflection as a component of continuous professional development (CPD). The CIPD requires a commitment from its membership to CPD, and by implication reflective practice, both as a condition of entry and to remain in good standing.

Whilst it is important to note this formal positioning it nonetheless presents a partial picture of the realities and complexities of HR professional practice in workplaces characterised by change, uncertainty and ambiguity. MacKenzie et al. (2012) suggest that, although HR professionals are involved in managing the 'organisation's human intellectual capital' (p.354), they have been markedly missing from analysis into the origins of the global financial crisis. Similarly, criticism for the HR profession in the US raised concerns about the lack of accountability for recruiting and rewarding irresponsible chief executives and financial risk managers that directly contributed to the global recession (Morgenson and Rosner 2011). Van Buren and Greenwood (2013) highlight the fact employment issues frequently play a dominant role in the debate about organisational ethics; they draw attention to the ethical issues within HRM which have attracted legal and public attention in recent history, such as, executive compensation, fair treatment in selection and promotion, and other employment issues. Lawler et al. (2011) found that despite an awareness of the demands of ethical stewardship, HR professionals regularly struggle to fulfil this role because of competing pressures and perceptions of their role in their organisations. We would argue that

reflection and particularly critical reflection has a key role in ethical practice; helping to ensure 'ongoing scrutiny and improved practice skills' (Fook and Gardner 2007, p.234). This is supported by Harris (2008) who claims 'a capacity for personal reflection is essential for the development of ethical wisdom' (p.381).

The challenge of teaching reflective practice

Against such a backcloth it is perhaps not surprising that the teaching of reflection should be viewed as problematic and challenging. Formal recognition of reflection and reflective practice within any professional curriculum assumes that education can assist in the transition from concept to practice. Attention, therefore, to how best it might be delivered is inescapable. Our reading of the literature, both within management education and more broadly, suggests three inter-related dimensions to the challenge facing teachers of reflective practice: the approach to teaching and learning; issues related to engagement and assessment; the evidence of application and transfer

Firstly addressing the teaching and learning approach in management and leadership education where the dominant teaching paradigm is often one of knowledge/information transfer. Lawless and McQue (2008) and Holden and Griggs (2011) argue that fostering reflective practice requires an approach which is more than simply 'teaching about' reflection. Similarly Bradbury et al (2010) warn against what they call the 'worst excesses of a technical or instrumental view of reflection'(p192) questioning the value of educational approaches which adopt 'recipes', checklists and other instrumental means which they argue treat reflection as a separate enterprise, not one firmly situated within professional practice. If the curriculum, or at least part of it, requires recourse to a set of highly personal issues then a very different approach and relationship with the student becomes critical. The teaching and learning strategies adopted may need to nurture a relationship which is 'mutual, open, challenging, contextually aware and characterised by dialogue' (Brockbank and McGill 2007, p.209). Furthermore, that reflective learning requires time and space is a consistent implication in the literature (Corley and Eades 2006; Forneris and Peden-McAlpine 2006; Warhurst 2008).

Secondly, we turn to matters of engagement and assessment. Student engagement with, and the assessment of, reflective learning in professional education presents tutors with particular problems. Relevance is questioned (Halton et al. 2007) and practices such as the need for learning logs perceived as unnecessary (Samkin and Francis 2008). There is

evidence suggesting many students adopt a very instrumental attitude to such activity (Grant et al. 2006) and approach it very superficially (Betts 2004). Whilst a curriculum requirement to complete a process of reflective learning ensures engagement of a sort, it does not overcome the problem of a level of engagement which tutors may deem desirable and which provides the basis for depth, sustainability and transfer. Hobbs (2007) raises both practical and moral questions in relation to 'forced' reflection. Her research suggests that requiring individuals to be open and honest in the context of assessment can provoke a strategic response (contrived stories are developed for the purposes of the assessment) and often hostility. Any requirement to assess or 'measure' a capability in reflective practice may compound engagement difficulties (Samkin and Francis 2008). As Bourner (2003) notes reflective practice, as a process of curiosity and questioning, is not easy to assess or evaluate.

Elsewhere, though, the literature questions the negativity that has been targeted at techniques such as learning logs and portfolios. Drawing on research from a leadership programme Brown et al. (2011) argue reflective learning journals do indeed help learning and the facilitation of assessment and transfer. Likewise, in medical education O'Sullivan et al. (2012) found that the introduction of a summative reflective portfolio led to high student ratings regarding its impact on their development of reflective practice, understanding ethical and legal principles, and self-directed learning.

The final dimension and perhaps the most revealing observation that has been made in the literature on the teaching and learning of reflection is the lack of evidence concerning application and transfer or impact. In 2004 Moon argued simply that we lack empirical data to indicate that the development of reflection in an academic context has long terms and definitive benefits to a majority of learners. From a heath care perspective Mann et al's, (2007) research concludes that the evidence to support and inform reflective practice curriculum interventions 'remains largely theoretical', whilst Cole (2010 p.129) is emphatic in his identification of research failings, arguing that 'at a time when the discourse of evidence based practice holds such sway there is very little in the way of research that robustly demonstrates its effectiveness'.

Professional bodies, and indeed workplaces more generally, which require little more than a yearly update on courses attended hardly provides the context or encouragement for the application and transfer of a more demanding and, potentially, more valuable form of reflective practice (Holden and Griggs 2011). Working through similar tensions Rigg and

Trehan (2008) ask if critical reflection in the workplace is just too difficult. Whilst the focus of their research is teaching reflective practice in a corporate context, their findings are nonetheless important for highlighting such issues as organisational power relations and culture as significant constraints relating to application and transfer. A final concern relating to the application and transfer of reflection relates to its very popularity. It is legitimate to question if, almost paradoxically, reflective practice has lost its critical edge (Kotzee 2012), precisely because, driven by the powerful employability agenda (see, for example, Boden and Nedeva 2010) it has become an almost universal feature of undergraduate and post graduate education.

In summary this brief review is testimony to a difficult and complex landscape for teaching reflective practice. The research reported upon here seeks to explore this complexity within the specific context of HR and through the views, perceptions and positions of the key stakeholders involved in the process.

Approach and method

The research upon which this paper draws is the result of ongoing collaborative research, across three universities: Leeds Beckett, South Bank and Liverpool John Moores. The research seeks to question, review and understand the positioning of reflective practice within the HR professional curriculum. The research team comprises three researchers with responsibility for teaching and assessing reflective learning within their respective universities. This 'insider' perspective was complemented by the participation of the fourth researcher who, with no such ties, adopted a role as a relative 'outsider'. This enabled some distancing and comparison across contexts. The approach underpinning the collaboration is best described as 'self-ethnography' (Alvesson 2003). This approach to ethnography enables one to '…utilise the position one is in also for other, secondary purposes, i.e. doing research on the setting of which one is a part' (Alvesson 2003, p.175). The setting we focus on within this paper is the complexity of teaching reflective learning to students on CIPD accredited programmes. Our intention is to generate a better understanding of the tensions of teaching reflective practice to HR students; the majority of whom are employed and attend the programme on a part time basis.

We have utilised our positions as teachers and researchers, and in doing so have generated a wealth of material from and about ourselves as we strive to practice what we preach (Lawless et al. 2014). We have also generated material from our students and other

tutors involved with teaching and assessing reflective learning on CIPD accredited programmes. We have pragmatically utilised a range of methods (Watson 2012; van Maaean, 2011) to provide a deeper insight into the tensions experienced by tutors and students as they 'engage with' reflective learning. This paper reports our initial sense making, drawing on three stages of data collection:

Stage 1- The researchers' perspectives, including documentary analysis of course documentation, critical conversations within the research team and interviews with the three 'insiders', the researchers with responsibility for teaching and assessing reflective learning. This enabled some distancing as the 'outsider' conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the 'insiders' and undertook a detailed analysis of formal course documentation with a focus on the teaching and assessment of reflective learning.

This stage facilitated an exploration of the approaches to teaching and assessing reflective learning from the researchers' perspectives. These initial stages enabled us, as a research team, to surface and share the philosophies underpinning our approaches to teaching and assessing reflective learning. This surfacing, combined with the production of an initial literature review, enabled initial themes to be identified and explored at subsequent stages of the project. Thus, we explored the student and tutor viewpoints regarding: the definition/concept of reflective practice; engagement; assessment; application or transfer.

Stage 2: The students' perspectives incorporating an explorative open-ended questionnaire with 60 students across the three universities. Students were made aware of our research interests and were asked to complete a 'qualitative' questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to explore students' views on issues identified from stage 1. It focused on conceptual definition, students' engagement with reflective practice and key issues relating to measurement and transfer, including barriers and enablers.

Stage 3: The CIPD tutors' perspectives; drawing data from a workshop with 48 participants and an explorative open-ended questionnaire returned by 25 tutors. We took the opportunity of the CIPD Centres Conference 2013 to facilitate a workshop to generate this data. As discussed, the CIPD is extremely influential in shaping the teaching and assessment of reflective learning for HR students. Participants at the workshop were all involved (to varying extents) in teaching and assessing reflective learning within the context of CIPD accredited programmes. At the workshop, tutors were asked, in groups, to define their understanding of reflective practice and the reflective practitioner. A round table exercise

took place where participants were asked to discuss and record the issues that arise in the teaching, assessment, transfer and measurement of reflective practice. These outputs were captured on flipcharts and presented back to the wider group. There were 48 participants at the workshop. The final stage of data generation was an individual qualitative questionnaire which was distributed at the workshop. This focused on capturing individual tutors' voices in relation to the above themes. Twenty-five qualitative-questionnaires were completed by those who expressed an interest in collaborating further in the research.

Findings

The outcomes are presented relative to the three stages of data collection prior to a discussion of the emergent themes.

The researcher perspective

All three universities endeavour to address a reflective learning curriculum. Whilst there are a set of CIPD standards which inform the curriculum to which tutors must adhere, each course team does have a degree of freedom to determine how best to meet curriculum objectives. Thus the initial analysis of the three universities was to explore the concept of reflective practice from our own perspectives and establish some common understanding and identification of differences.

All three institutions share a broadly common view of the reflective practitioner, key characteristics were identified as:

- Someone who learns about themselves and develops an understanding of self (vis others).

- Someone who is comfortable critiquing behaviour (self and others in relation to self).

- Someone who identifies and questions assumptions.

- Someone who does not look at events and experience in isolation but sees or tries to see the bigger picture.

- Someone who understands the 'messy' nature of organisations and management.

- Someone who has developed a level of criticality in relation to themselves and the world they live in.

All of the institutions described a critical management philosophy underpinning their approach to critical reflection, revealing an evident tension here between the tutors and the CIPD's approach. The CIPD's espoused view associates reflective learning with accepting responsibility for one's own professional growth. Interestingly, the positioning of reflective practice within the role of a HR professional has changed over time. Prior to the launch of the CIPD Profession Map in 2009, the focus on the 'thinking performer' emphasised a critically thoughtful approach (Whittaker and Johns, 2004) conceivably giving reflective learning a more fundamental position in HR professionalism than the current focus on the CIPD Profession Map, which sets the benchmark knowledge and skills needed for HR practice. This shift in emphasis potentially aligns reflective learning towards the more instrumental end of the spectrum, in contrast to the tutors' requirements for greater depth and criticality.

To meet the aspiration of greater criticality, all three of the institutions aspire to develop depth in student's reflective learning, aiming to move learners from simple or instrumental reflection to taking a more complex or critical perspective, utilising a variety of reflective frameworks to achieve this aim. Thus, for example, one course team utilised a framework with five levels (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning and reconstruction [Bain et al. 1999]) whilst another used one developed by Reynolds (1998) distinguishing three levels (technical, consensual and critical reflection).

Teaching and learning strategies also reflect an attempt to develop the skill of reflection, not just theories about or an understanding of, reflection. Models, for example, Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle which consists of six stages of reflection and action following an experience (1998) underpin teaching with a clear focus upon the development of practice skills rather than simply knowledge acquisition.

There were differences as to how assessment might respond to students at different points in their reflective practice/CPD journeys. Whilst we acknowledged that the sorts of frameworks developed by the likes of Bain (1999), Moon (2004) and Reynolds (1998) do help identify distinctions in levels of attainment in relation to reflective practice (and these can be utilised both within teaching and within any marking criteria), there are still difficult problems of interpretation of student work and a further complication that the assessment is usually measuring multiple learning objectives. Thus there was accord that if the process of teaching and learning reflective practice is difficult, so is its assessment, particularly given the potentially different constructs provided by students and teaching teams. Furthermore,

students are at different points in their careers and if the assignment genuinely seeks to assess the individual's application of reflective learning then this is a unique piece of work, but any assessment criteria and/or marking scheme has to accommodate unique applications within clearly identified standards of performance. However, there was broad agreement across the three institutions that, although difficult, assessment of reflective practice is possible and thus provides something of a proxy measure of transfer. This assessment is assisted by:

- The 'anchor' of the workplace (the context in which students are attempting to apply their reflective practice skills); or at very least 'real' situations.

- Coherence between the teaching programme and the assignment brief.

- Students being taught the skills of reflective practice.

- Ownership and control remaining close to originators' and designers' of a module underpinned by reflective practice.

The student perspective

The students participating in this research are generally working in HR and taking the course to achieve membership of the CIPD. Whilst there is no requirement to hold the qualification in order to work, or 'practice', in HR, nonetheless, membership of the 'professional' body is increasingly an essential requirement for career progression in HR. The vast majority of student respondents were part-time and sponsored by their employing organisations to complete the programme. Such context is important when we consider our efforts to develop critically reflective practitioners.

The findings for this section will address the following themes in turn: conceptual definition; students' engagement with reflective practice; key issues relating to measurement and transfer.

In response to the question 'What does the term 'reflective practice' mean to you?' a range of responses were produced, although there was some general consensus with the most common terms used being: looking back, what went well, do differently, practice, future and situations. Perhaps, not surprisingly, given that the majority of the respondents were professional part-time students, the primary purpose of reflection was to support organisational effectiveness, and develop skills relating to 'best practice', with improvement as a dominant theme.

The findings also illustrate the clustering of responses around an individualistic perspective; we illustrate this with two specific student responses:

'... thinking about a situation' and '.... whether it was the best approach (or not) and why and see how you can improve things next time'.

'Undertaking something (maybe in your work role) and then afterwards looking back what you did and how you did it, and thinking about how well it went/how it could have been improved …'

Turning to student engagement with reflective practice, their dialogue indicated both tensions and enablers. They referred to the following factors as barriers to reflection: time, lack of knowledge, poor time-management skills, finding it difficult and struggling to analyse their own feelings, lack of understanding of both how to reflect, and the importance of doing so, difficulty balancing workload and learning, lack of confidence, finding it hard to accept they have done a good job. In contrast, other respondents were able to highlight how their workplace had helped them develop reflective practice skills, referring to enablers such as, support from co-workers, discussions with their line manager, and reviewing with colleagues. Interestingly, intrinsic enablers were somewhat more surprising, including issues such as anger-management and self-control as well as the more apparent self-awareness and understanding the value of reflection.

Measurement did not feature strongly in students' responses and some opposing views emerged, with some students suggesting being made to reflect had helped them develop whilst others felt understanding the expectations and the assessment structure had been a hindrance. Finally, regarding transfer a number of work place practices were noted where students consider reflection is most appropriately positioned, for example, appraisals, personal development plans and records, project management meetings. Perhaps the most encouraging was one student who said they saw reflection as an essential part of their job. When the students were asked if they had had opportunities to use the skills (of reflective practice) in the workplace, the responses confirmed that generally an instrumental and pragmatic approach was being taken. Furthermore, even where a more collective ownership of reflection is acknowledged the focus remained firmly on specific workplace tasks as illustrated here:

'.... when we have had issues with recruitment, we've resolved to identify what could be done next time and if any practices need to be introduced to prevent problems arising again.'

That is not to say that all students took this view – one student had taken a more 'critical' approach, that is, questioning assumptions, providing 'challenging the CEO viewpoint on organisational culture (successfully)' as an example of applying reflective practice and another cited 'share and learn' sessions involving the sharing of the output of their reflections. Nevertheless, overall the responses place an emphasis both on constructing and using reflective practice techniques as an individual, purposive activity to improve their effectiveness in the execution of their HR responsibilities.

Thus, while the data indicated some support within the workplace, work pressures were often a significant obstacle, with students claiming there was no time to review experiences at work or not always the opportunity to reflect immediately after an event or that the environment at work was generally unsupportive of such activity.

The CIPD tutor perspective

The final stage of this exploration of the role of tutors in the development of reflective practice was to identify the extent to which the initial issues identified by the researchers/tutors, were reflected in the wider community. The CIPD conference participants were all tutors on CIPD approved HRM programmes at Masters Level or equivalent; while not all the participants taught on a skills development/portfolio based module, the majority of those present integrated reflective practice into one or more areas of the curriculum.

Tutors were initially asked to provide a definition of reflective practice which was described as an additional skill, involving a mixture of experience and practice with a particular emphasis on being an ongoing process with the aim of improvement in specific areas. This was illustrated in the following comment:

'[reflection is] looking at good/bad actual experiences, and thinking about how to do it better.'

Overall, reflective practice was seen as a skill, involving a mixture of experience and practice with a particular emphasis on the ongoing process with the aim of improvement in specific areas. There was considerable emphasis on change, a term that cropped up most

regularly, and actioning, implying that while this is a process, nevertheless, to have value there needs to be an end result. However, in spite of the emphasis on change and actions, there was limited reference to questioning or challenging assumptions. Reflective practice also tended to be perceived as an individual rather than group or collaborative activity. It could be suggested that as with the student perspective, discussed above, there is a focus on reflection as an instrumental, individual activity. This may be partially explained by specific interest of the researchers/tutors in reflective practice whilst other participants may not be engaged to the same level with the specifics of reflection. However, other comments indicated that some tutors were aiming to develop a more critical approach, with the role of theory and its application to practice being an important part of the process; similarly when the tutors were asked via a questionnaire to consider their students' engagement with reflective practice more nuanced findings emerged, and there was greater congruence with the researcher/tutors perspective.

In response to the question 'How would you describe your students' engagement with reflective practice?' The most common response from 10 out of the 25 questionnaires returned was that engagement was variable. Some suggested reasons for the variable engagement:

'Mixed – some more mature students are highly confident and enjoy the process. Often younger or less confident students struggle';

'Those who are working or have worked tend to see the benefits';

'Cultural differences, personality'.

Interestingly, one of the lecturers who responded 'instrumental' commented that further learning was required for the tutors, suggesting there was perhaps a link between the lack of student engagement and the way reflective learning was positioned and taught on the programme, and indeed, support for the tutors themselves in the development of their own reflective practice. Another lecturer at a different institution commented that the students were very involved but that he himself was unsure of the value, again perhaps highlighting a tension in the teaching of reflective practice. Two contrasting responses to the question perhaps highlight most of all the tensions within the approaches to reflective practice. Of the more positive responses one Programme Manager commented, 'I feel this is an evolutionary

process across the programme that gets better', and at the other end of the spectrum a tutor commented that students saw the activity as 'a necessary evil'!

Turning to issues of measurement and transfer, the data supported the concerns previously raised about assessment, with a number of respondents raising questions about what was being measured. This is succinctly expressed as:

What are we marking? Theory or technique? What is our accountability when control lies with individual/organisation?

A number of respondents also commented on the difficulty of moving from defining and understanding the concept to its actual application. There was an implicit reference to the importance of needing (workplace) experience to support reflection. Thus context was clearly seen as relevant to both measurement and transfer; consequently identifying appropriate criteria was a challenge, as one respondent commented that reflections could only be marked on a pass/fail basis as the level of experience, which is not within the control of the student, impacted on the quality of the work.

Some tutors queried the value of assessing the output of reflective practice, noting the subjectivity of the activity; with one respondent commenting that reflective practice had little academic value, and another querying the value and ethics of assessing reflective practice.

Transfer was equally problematic, with a question raised whether this was within the academic remit - 'what is our accountability when control lies with individual/organisation?'; however, another respondent suggested this was perhaps worthy of further investigation as if 'employers are saying students don't have the skills they need …either the curriculum is not right or skills transfer not effective into industry'. Student experience was again noted as important here; for example, 'transfer is perceived by full-time students to be difficult when they have limited work experience'. One respondent commented on the difficulty of transfer when organisations have 'a short term focus and culture that do not appear to value CPD/reflection'. It was also acknowledged that transfer was difficult to assess without some means of measurement of learning back in the workplace.

Finally, as mentioned above, embedded within some of the responses was a questioning of abilities to teach reflective practice; there were comments about the need for further learning by the tutors, space for academics themselves to reflect, and that tutors themselves were unclear of its value and purpose.

Discussion

A common theme throughout the analysis is an acknowledgement of the challenges involved in engaging and assessing a diverse range of students in an equitable and ethical way. The findings indicate the difficulty with which some tutors and/or their students perceived reflection. Our research suggests some students are uncomfortable with the self-examination required for reflection and prefer modules with a focus on conventional knowledge. From the faculty perspective, a number of tensions inherent in teaching reflective practice are acknowledged. The data supported concerns previously raised about assessment (Stewart et al. 2008; Holden and Griggs 2011; Rae and Rowland 2012) in relation to what is being assessed and the appropriateness of assessing portfolios which may include emotional as well as factual content. Engagement was also a significant concern; moving from understanding reflective practice to demonstrating the skill was often difficult, and questions were raised about teaching capability in this area. Some of these difficulties could potentially be addressed through alternative teaching and learning strategies, more investment in tutor development in this area, and greater sharing of successful approaches. However, our considered reflection on both our critical research conversations and the data collected from CIPD tutors confirms to us that a fundamental conceptual ambiguity underpins much of the efforts to teach reflective learning to HRM students. This ambiguity is then compounded by curriculum constraints and inherent problems of assessing or measuring performance. If notions of reflective learning are indistinct, the process of teaching and assessing are undoubtedly problematic. A consensus amongst teaching teams is a prerequisite, which must then be articulated and rationalised to students.

There is an evident tension between a desire to develop HRM students to be critically reflective practitioners and a more conventional approach which rewards students for what they know (and perhaps linked closely to an orthodox, acquisition model of continuous professional development). Indeed, what is absent from the student voice is perhaps most revealing of all. Reference to issues of ethics, power, and conflict (the complex decision making and dilemmas [Schon 1983]) were in short supply. We noted earlier, the shift in the professional body's stance on reflection. In response to criticism of the profession in the past, the CIPD have sought to position a more strategic role for HR within organisations, and this has led to a more business oriented definition of standards. It could be argued that by aligning HRM strategy with business strategy in search for greater credibility in the workplace, the CIPD have moved away from a more critical approach (similar contentions have been made

regarding HRD practitioners, where Ardichvili and Jondle (2009) suggest it is ironic that an attempt to act more strategically may have resulted in a failure to be critically reflective.) This raises the question: is an aspiration of critical reflection at odds with both professional and student bodies who largely perceive reflection at a more instrumental level?

In terms of learner motivation, the students are generally working in HR and taking the course to achieve professional accreditation by the CIPD. Overall their responses place an emphasis both on constructing and using reflective practice techniques as an individual, purposive activity to improve their effectiveness in the execution of their HR responsibilities. Interestingly, although transfer was seen by some as problematic, there were lots of examples of application to the workplace. However, many students are beginning their careers and working at relatively low levels within their organisations, which can compound their level of conformity and reluctance to challenge established practices and power bases in their organisations. This raises an interesting point, if a key attribute of reflective practice is its capacity for ongoing purposeful learning in relation to changing and demanding professional work, to what extent is this the reality of contemporary HRM? To what extent is it a world occupied, or even recognised, by our students? Workplace dynamics are important here. We suggest a critical relationship exists between what we term 'student instrumentalism' and the work context in which students operate. While the data indicated some support within the workplace, work pressures were often a significant obstacle, with students claiming there was no time to review experiences at work or that the environment at work was generally unsupportive of such activity. This presents a layer of complexity as regards the transfer of reflective learning. Organisational cultures which deny the value of reflection, or workplaces which exclude reflective opportunities, could be major constraints beyond control of 'faculty' impacting on the effectiveness of teaching reflective learning. This raises an avenue for further exploration: the extent to which our exhortations to develop reflective practice skills are doomed to fail because a level of routinised and highly prescriptive HR practice may remove the legitimacy of our teaching aspirations.

Corley and Eades (2006) suggest the language of critical education challenges other discourses in management and management learning, and this, we suggest, is a factor of some real significance here. The findings highlight competing discourses of performance based reflection and critical management reflection. As we have already noted, the CIPD is extremely influential in curriculum design and development of the HRM programmes it accredits and we acknowledge the challenge of teaching reflective learning within a primarily

functionalist management curriculum, and in the context of a professional body perspective which may implicitly discourage and restrict critical reflection. This raises a question regarding the appropriateness of the critical stance adopted by some tutors (and notably the researchers) on a business course with a largely functionalist managerial curriculum.

However, whilst we acknowledge from our findings that our view would be contested by some tutors and students (and potentially the professional body), our stance is clear: critical reflection enables the individual to critique taken for granted assumptions within a social and political context while becoming more receptive to alternative ways of thinking, therefore if we require HRM practitioners to take a more prominent role in creating and sustaining ethical business environments, this skill is essential and some dissonance will be inevitable. We are not alone in our position; it has been argued that the majority of mainstream management theory offers descriptive or prescriptive theories which fail to meet managers' real needs (Grey 2005) while critical theory encourages the type of questioning needed to develop questioning insight and learning. Others (Dehler 2009) argue that critical management education offers a more appropriate skill set than does the mainstream and prepares managers for complexity, uncertainty, equivocality, and value conflicts by raising their level of 'complicated understanding'. This has implications for the way we develop and support learning to encourage transfer from the classroom to the workplace. In upholding the need to challenge the performance and managerial standpoint we need to look for ways to facilitate the flow of learning and develop a common language within the workplace (Corley and Eades 2006). Equally, we need to support 'an emerging community of critically reflective practitioners by ensuring an open dialogue about values and practice.' (Lawless and McQue 2008 p.323).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in problematising the teaching of reflective practice our research to date has surfaced layers of complexity, and a number of issues emerge. Importantly, a level of conceptual ambiguity makes for an uneven landscape in terms of the teaching of reflective practice. At worst it nurtures a fertile ground for simplistic notions of reflection and reflective practice to predominate. Workplace cultures which do not support reflective practice reinforce such notions and further detract from those tutors who do seek to develop critically reflective practitioners. Similarly a focus on performance review rather than a broader examination of socio-economic, political and cultural factors at play in the organisation

potentially creates HR practitioners who maintain the status quo rather than challenge practices within an organisation. Varied, and at times disparate stakeholder views highlight competing discourses of performance based reflection and critical management reflection and suggest a fundamental dissonance between a perspective that reflection in professional work warrants a critical character, and one which is based on a relatively simple 'acquisition of knowledge' model of continuous professional development. In HRM this is perhaps compounded by the professional body's positioning of reflection. We suspect that similar complexities may affect other professional areas. The value in this paper is in beginning, empirically, to map this landscape in HR, to surface the complexity and the issues affecting the efficacy of teaching reflection within HR professional education. Undoubtedly further research, involving an exploration of reflection in practice, in the context of the workplace and post formal efforts within HRM education, is required to inform ongoing curriculum development. Nor is such a research agenda the preserve of HR professional education. The problematisation within this paper ensures a sharper focus can be brought to this vital but under-researched dimension of transfer; both within HR and as regards professional work more widely.

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