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Reflective learning in training mental health practitioners

This article explores the critical, collective reflections that promoted the learning process. Action research has been applied to gather data by means of observation, individual interviews and video recordings. Learners and facilitators co-constructed a containing environment while engaging in reflective discussions. Learning processes involved the modelling of interactions, the development of shared values and the creation of safe spaces. The learning community developed from a position where they mainly complained about challenges to a co-operative position in which they explored alternative ways to promote the shared purposes of the learning community, as well as the communities in which they have engaged.

Nadenkende leer in die opleiding van geestesgesondheids-praktisyns

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die kritiese, kollektiewe nadenke wat die leerproses van geestesgesondheidspraktisyns bevorder het. Aksienavorsing is gebruik om data deur middel van waarneming, individuele onderhoude en video-opnames in te samel. Leerders en fasiliteerders het gesamentlik 'n geborge omgewing geskep deur deelname aan reflektiewe gesprekke. Leerprosesse het die modellering van interaksies, die ontwikkeling van gedeelde waardes en die skep van veilige ruimtes ingesluit. Die leerdergemeenskap het ontwikkel van klagtes oor uitdagings tot samewerking in die ondersoek van alternatiewe wyses om die gedeelde doelwitte van die leerdergemeenskap sowel as die gemeenskappe te bevorder.

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Learning in community contexts creates opportunities for learners to integrate theory and practice, which is particularly relevant for learners who want to become community mental health practitioners. By being involved in community contexts, learners develop an understanding of complex interactions, relationships and processes, while they meet the real needs of the community. This is a collaborative effort between the educational institution and the community (Van der Merwe & Dunbar-Krige 2007: 302). The practical involvement of learners in community contexts contributes to the development of learners' competencies through participation in a range of experiences (Valo 2000: 151). Such experiences facilitate an understanding of the complexity of reality (Du Preez & Roos 2008: 706-7).

The traditional individual approach to training is no longer adequate if mental health practitioners intend to address the complex psychological problems in South Africa (Pillay 2006: 182). Engagement in an interactive learning environment that promotes collaboration and the relinquishing of autocratic control enables learners to develop their own problem-solving skills (Willis 2007: 4). This article suggests that there should be a move beyond the traditional approach to training, which mainly focuses on external theoretical knowledge transmission from an educator to passive recipients by providing the required instruction (Pring 2004: 78, Silberman & Auerback 1998: 1). The proposed training approach is based on the participatory world view which regards the learning contexts as a co-construction of relational and ecological processes (Reason & Bradbury 2006: 7, Valkin 2006: 77). According to this view, different kinds of knowledge are part of the learning context of community mental health practitioners, such as representational knowledge that explains the relationships between variables; relational knowledge that fosters community life, and reflective knowledge that sensitises learners by means of consciousness-raising processes of "what ought to be, what is right and what is wrong" (Reason & Bradbury 2006: 9). This study focuses on the enhancement of reflective knowledge by co-constructing a learning context as a space in which learners take ownership of their learning, thereby gaining not only knowledge about the "what" and "how", but also an awareness that knowledge emerges from within a social

context (Osterman & Kottkamp 1993: 39, Reason & Bradbury 2006: 9). Reflective learning is thus regarded as an integration of thinking and acting (Osterman & Kottkamp 1993: 1).

In an attempt to facilitate a reflective learning context in which the integration of theory and practice can be practically experienced, collective reflective discussions are applied to explore the interactive, dynamic processes between people and the systems in which they are involved. In this dynamic process the challenge is recognised that learners are expected to "learn from reality that is not yet embodied in manifest experience" (Senge & Scharmer 2006: 203). Collective reflective discussions support relationships because learners can talk about the issues they encounter in practice. These discussions also facilitate the exploration of the uncertainty and confusion that are often evoked by the complexities of practice, and they contribute to insight into the underlying beliefs and assumptions of learners, which are either challenged or confirmed (Forde *et al* 2006: 69, Gould & Masters 2004: 57). Very little is, however, known about the co-constructed processes that are involved in reflective learning contexts. The following questions are posed: What are the issues that emerge in collective reflective discussions? What processes can facilitate a transformative learning context? What context-sensitive interactions emerge in the process? The aim of this study is to explore collective reflection discussions as a way of developing appropriate contextual interactions in a group of learners in higher education, who want to become mental health practitioners in a specific social context.

1.   Research design

A qualitative exploratory method was used to study the phenomenon in its natural environment and to seek insight into how the learners experienced the collective reflective sessions within the context of investigation (Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 10). Action research has been described as a participatory process that focuses on the development of practical knowledge, aiming at bringing together action and reflection, theory and practice (Reason & Bradbury 2006: 1). Phelps (2004: 3) argues that reflection, as a key aspect of action research, can

be a productive method for studying and "working with" complexity in educational contexts.

1.1 Research context

The study took place in a higher education context. Learners registered for a fourth year postgraduate degree in Psychology. After completing an internship in a community context, they could register as registered counsellors in community mental health with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Learners study personality theories, developmental, abnormal and community psychology, as well as the facilitation of community mental health and positive psychology as part of the theoretical curriculum. During their training learners also engaged with the community-based institutions, where they were required to assist the community with counselling of adolescents challenged with personal, relational and contextual issues, assistance with study methods, self-, time and financial management as well as the facilitation of life skills by introducing HIV/Aids awareness programmes.

1.2 Participants

The 19 participants in the co-construction of a reflective learning context were all white learners, of whom two were males and 17 females. The participants were in their fourth year of study and their ages ranged between 22 and 35. They had been registered for a degree course in the Faculty of Health Sciences at a South African university. The completion of the course would enable them to register with the Professional Board of Psychology as Registered Counsellors. The study was conducted during 2005.

1.3 Procedure

Learners demonstrated skills and knowledge as part of the formal assessments of the theoretical content of the academic curriculum and the practical involvement with the community-based institution. In addition to the supervision they received at the community-based institution, they also engaged in collective reflective discussions for two hours per week for the duration of the academic year (28 weeks).

The collective reflective processes aimed to raise their awareness of themselves in relation to others and the social context in which they were engaged. Learners were requested to participate in the reflective processes to explore enabling learning contexts. After ethical permission and informed consent were obtained from the University and the participants, the latter engaged in the research. It was agreed that the research process would not form part of their formal assessment, and consequently they did not obtain marks for any aspect of their participation in the process. An independent observer was involved in the process.

1.4 Data gathering

Learners were observed during the collective reflections over the course of the year. An external observer recorded the processes during the collective reflective sessions and conducted voluntary individual interviews. Observations were made about the type of issues that learners introduced during the reflective sessions, the behaviour of learners, and the different ways in which they reflected about the process. Individual interviews assisted the researcher to identify the subjective experiences and attitudes of people (Peräkylä 2005: 869). Learners were also asked to reflect on their development since the beginning of the year and they decided to produce video material in which they discussed their experiences during the year. Holliday (2007: 262) argues that "video diaries afford participants the potential for a greater degree of reflection than other methods, through the processes of watching, recording and editing their diaries before submission".

2. Data analysis

The strategy described by Peräkylä (2005: 870) was followed in the data analysis. By reading and re-reading the data, key themes of the material were determined. The themes were identified according to a thematic content analysis. During open coding, the data was divided into smaller segments to identify themes. These themes are normally used to describe the phenomenon under study. After completion of the open coding, axial coding took place, where interconnections

were made between the identified themes. Finally, the themes and their interconnections were combined during selective coding to form a storyline. This storyline gives a rich description of the phenomenon under investigation (Leedy & Ormrod 2005: 141).

2.1 Trustworthiness

The following strategies were applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, as suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985: 290-331) and Krefting (1991: 214-22). Credibility was ensured by means of member checking, prolonged engagement, and field notes. During member checking, not only were follow-up individual interviews conducted to validate the data obtained from the observations and video recordings, but the participants also confirmed that the final report was an accurate reflection of the data they had provided. Meetings took place for an hour once a week for a period of 28 weeks, which ensured prolonged engagement. Finally, non-verbal cues were observed and recorded in the field notes. The second strategy to ensure trustworthiness was transferability. The video recordings obtained "thick descriptions", while the use of metaphors assisted in the gathering of rich descriptions. Confirmability was achieved by means of an audit trail and triangulation. During the audit trail, the researchers had access to all the information and they both analysed the data in order to verify the conclusions, interpretations and recommendations. Investigator, interdisciplinary, and data triangulation were visible in this study. Investigator triangulation was achieved as both researchers were involved in the research process, while interdisciplinary triangulation was also achieved by involving more than one discipline. Data triangulation was obtained by using multiple data sources, including individual interviews, video recordings and observations.

2.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical permission was obtained from the North-West University's ethical committee (05K14#). Learners agreed that an external observer could be present at the reflective sessions and, although the learners participated voluntarily, they were assured that the information would be treated with confidentiality, and that they could

withdraw from the research at any stage. The reflective group discussions were also excluded from the formal assessment of learners.

3. Integrated discussion of the findings

Table 1: Visual presentation of the findings

Emerging issues during collective reflective discussions	Processes informing the transformative learning context	Skilful social interactions
Being in an uncertain context	Facilitator as model	Ownership and responsibility
Critical assessment of the self	Development of collective values	Adaptation and growth
	Creating a safe space	Openness to experiences

The trends that emerged in the collective reflective discussions, which consisted of the issues that emerged from the collective reflective discussions, the processes that informed a transformative learning context, and the skilful contextual interactions that emerged will now be discussed. There is no direct link between the three topics of discussion and the aim of the study is not to indicate causal explanations. The discussion is triangulated with appropriate references.

3.1 Emerging issues during collective reflective discussions

3.1.1 Being in an uncertain context

The theme of being in an uncertain context focuses specifically on the initial feelings of learners as well as the manner in which they dealt with it. Learners initially expressed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. The following metaphors illustrated these experiences:

> This learning process can be described as a white river-rafting experience. At first, we were excited but also a little bit scared, scared to experience the challenge, scared to exceed our comfort zones, scared to make mistakes. At the beginning of our experience, we compared ourselves to a sachet of jelly that was thrown in the unknown, unexpected, unfamiliar bowl.

Du Preez & Roos (2008: 706) also indicated in their research that the initial feelings of learners in a counsellor training programme were associated with uncertainty. Bloch (2005: 198) confirmed that living in a nondeterministic world of complexity is confusing to human beings. Although it is noted that developmental processes do not necessarily occur in the same manner for all the learners (Pring 2004: 77), it was more important for the purpose of this study to focus on the manner in which the learners dealt with the initial feelings. They tended to complain about the unstructured social contexts in which they were engaged. They complained, for example, that there were no schedules and that their assignments for the day were often given to them only when they arrived at the community-based institution in the morning. They also generally blamed their misperceptions and uncertainties on external sources and people. The primary mode of relating to the problems was thus on a shifting of responsibility and an external locus of control.

Towards the end of the collective reflective discussions, a transformation of the views of the self and the context was observed. Although the learners were still engaged in an uncertain context, their options for making different choices expanded and they felt more content:

> We learn how to paddle with fury, how to sit back and enjoy the ride, and how to keep afloat.
>
> We climbed the steps and found our way through the maze of confusion and frustration.

3.1.2 Critical assessment of the self

The theme critical assessment of the self refers to the learners' ability to gain more insight into their own feelings and actions in the community-based institution.

Prominent changes were noted as these related to the position and choices of learners. Learners learnt to think critically about their positions and their roles in the unfamiliar contexts in which they functioned. Learners were transformed by cognitively assessing relational and contextual realities, which redirected their capacity to engage with the context. One learner stated the following:

And when we thought about it, we realised that when we started this practical work, we were very scared of what was coming our way.

Through this experience, we also broadened our perspectives, and reached new worlds with different cultures, languages, and situations.

It was something that we were not used to, we haven't done it before.

This obviously encouraged us to start doing something we know nothing about.

3.2 Processes in the transformative learning context

Processes in the transformative learning context include the facilitator as model, the development of collective values, and the creation of a safe space in which collective reflections can take place.

3.2.1 Facilitator as model

The facilitator mirrored the position of learners in the social context. Learners were challenged in a supportive manner to reflect critically on their perceptions of themselves, the group and the contexts. For example, learners were challenged to consider different alternatives when they felt at a loss by critically reflecting on the assumptions on which they based their decisions and actions in the particular context, by describing the plurality of the contexts in which they function, by assessing their own experiences, and by exploring different options for possibilities to plan and implement a number of plans. They were encouraged to explore the different roles and functions they had in their group that could be used to the advantage of the group, and to explore the alternatives that exist in order to pursue their own learning while helping the community members to pursue their needs. In this process learners made themselves known to the group and approached the social context differently; this constituted different relational points. This supports the view of Park (2006: 89) that action is an integral part of reflective knowledge. Learners worked out what to do and then acted on the insight and understanding they had obtained. Kolb (Senge & Scharmer 2006: 202) refers to the learning process as a sequence of action, concrete experience, reflective observation, active conceptualisation and new action.

The collective reflective sessions provided an opportunity for feedback, which Badenhorst (1995: 13) describes as crucial in the

process of self-organisation. The pull of learners to ask for advice and recipes to deal with challenges was constantly reframed. Learners were challenged to reflect on their own positions as well as the contextual realities, to become facilitators of change, and to interact more creatively with contextual limitations. They were challenged to consider the questions "What does this say about us? Or about the context?" (Reason & Marshall 2006: 318). The focus was not only on the content but more on the social processes that could be manoeuvred and renegotiated.

Within these reflective spaces, clear ground rules for dialogue were also established, such as dialogue based on a principle of give and take, it is not a one-way communication, all involved should contribute to the dialogue, and the dialogue should generate decisions that provide a platform for action (Gustavsen 2006: 19). It was observed that participants eagerly wanted to use the reflective opportunities. One participant observed that "usually everybody desperately needed to say something, even overriding others to do so, during the sessions". Furthermore, both the learners and the facilitator jointly explored the events, feelings and plans for further actions.

The support of the supervisor is a crucial part of the co-construction of collective reflective spaces (Kelly 2007: 98). To promote reflective learning, it is imperative to create opportunities in which learners are encouraged to take ownership, constructing their own meaning through reflecting on it (Van der Merwe & Dunbar-Krige 2007: 300). Creating opportunities should also be accompanied by assistance to process the learning experiences and to become critical examiners of practice and not simply problem-solvers (Arman & Scherer 2002: 80, Friedman 2006: 133).

Learners should be challenged to create their own meaning and to learn from one another while validating their experiences. The facilitation of such authentic learning experiences should be "a concerted effort between the facilitator and the learner to ensure transformative learning" (Van der Merwe & Dunbar-Krige 2007: 299). Transformative learning develops when learners are guided to move from understanding and making sense of experiences to a level where critical reflection challenges their presuppositions about their

experiences, and to deeper levels of awareness and to define their own practice (Forde *et al* 2006: 66). This becomes possible when educators involve learners as co-creators of their learning experience by moving away from an expert position (Roos *et al* 2005: 20).

3.2.2   Development of collective values

The learners also grew towards a collective unit with common values. Through the collective reflective discussions, learners realised their dependency on each other, which are illustrated in the following quotes:

> Okay, now because of all these frustrations the group created more space for themselves by standing together.
>
> Spaces were also created in the group by using our strength in a corporate way and we created a synergy, like one plus one equals three …

The reflective spaces enhanced respect for diversity within the group. Senge & Scharmer (2006: 196) made similar findings in their research. Wilson *et al* (2007: 10) mentioned that collective values guided learners in their development as community mental health workers. Resources within the group were mobilised and, in negotiating their own learning, the group built cohesive strength, enabling them to become active participants in the co-construction of the learning process.

The group reached their "destination", which refers to the point where everyone is accepted for who they are and is acknowledged for their strength. According to one participant, the group also broadened their perspectives and reached new worlds with different cultures, languages and situations:

> With all the accelerations, unexpected waterfalls and the occasional bump or two we finally reached our destination.

Senge & Scharmer (2006:197) refer to the development of a learning community as a diverse group of people working together to nurture and sustain a knowledge-creating system based on a disciplined approach to discovery, enhancing people's awareness and capabilities and working together to achieve outcomes.

3.2.3   Creating a safe space

In the collective reflective interactions, safe reflective spaces were co-constructed (Burchell & Dyson 2005: 291-300). Learners realised

that they could freely express their emotions, frustrations and concerns in the collective reflection spaces. They described these as safe places that provided them with space to grow. The reflective spaces were utilised as places of negotiation and exploration:

> When you put the jelly in the refrigerator it needs a safe place to be put, to set and in the same way, we as [a] group needed some time and some space to grow and to experiment with who we became today.

The safe collective spaces were facilitated by negotiated authority as equal partners to co-construct the learning experience, agendas which were agreed upon, shared responsibility, acknowledgement of needs, the freedom to choose and the opportunity to express opinions freely. Wilson et al (2007: 8) emphasised that negative relations with supervisors seemed to reinforce anxiety and did not contribute to the learning process.

3.3 Context-sensitive interactions

3.3.1 Ownership and responsibility

Learners took ownership and responsibility for themselves on an individual and group level. They realised that they needed to grow from a stage of being dependent on having recipes to the stage of doing something on their own:

> And taking responsibility, also ownership and for getting things done without someone telling them where to do it and how to do it.

The group took ownership by creating their own structure and accepting responsibility for its members. The group facilitated feelings of competence and the ability to mobilise more opportunities for negotiation of spaces in other contexts. They were, for example, able to challenge power relationships and to "bec[o]me more confident about ourselves and we can say our say and be comfortable with that. Soon our authority figure turned into a plain supervisor — only because of our own paradigm shifts".

3.3.2 Adaptation and growth

The learning upon which the learners reflected led them to recognise themselves in relation to others, the contexts and the reciprocal

interactions between them (Flood 2006: 118). One learner expressed her experiences as follows:

> We compare our visits to the process of making jelly because one of the biggest struggles we face is being able to adapt to the context. Therefore, we focused on the adaptation and growth that took place — not only within ourselves but also within our context and by successfully adapting to the context, growth may take place.

3.3.3   Openness to experiences

The learners' taken-for-granted frames of reference were replaced with an understanding that knowledge construction lies in relationships. Changes within the self and the system are therefore evident and should be accepted as part of reality and as being socially constructed by interconnected patterns of ongoing actions.

Despite the contextual realities which could be described as limiting and which contributed to the learners' feelings of being at a loss, they came to realise that the quest for knowledge is about finding more complex and creative ways of interacting with reality:

> We were free to make choices and do things our way and problems specifically experienced in the context were handled more effectively.
>
> Through this experience, we also broadened our perspectives; we reached new worlds with different cultures, languages, and situations.
>
> We climbed the steps and found our way through the maze of confusion and frustration with the final turns in our reach.
>
> We provided seed and water, and growth has taken place within ourselves and others. We used our skills, leadership, creativity, teamwork, problem solving, determination and confidence to achieve our goal.

4.   Discussion

Mental health practitioners are continually confronted with multiple complexities. During the reflective sessions learners had the opportunity to integrate theory and practice and to develop an understanding of the various processes and interactions involved in human interactions. The reflective sessions contributed to a greater awareness of the dynamic interactions between the self, others and the contexts in which they function.

Reflective learning facilitated greater awareness, competence and self-authenticity. The process of co-generating relevant knowledge enabled the learners to learn, take actions and interpret the results of their actions. The containing reflective spaces enabled learners to see themselves as mediators of personal growth in the context within which they worked. They also acknowledged the importance of their own growth.

In training mental health practitioners the reflective spaces emphasised that knowledge is constructed and maintained by the relationships between people, contexts and the self. Through a greater awareness, learners become more flexible in dealing with challenges, such as reframing the power positions of people and being able to move from their comfort zones. They moved from being at a loss ("jelly") to climbing steps and exploring avenues in a maze. The reflective insights promoted an inner knowledge which emerged in actions and changes in attitude. This process did not only reflect on an understanding of the world, but also on ways to change it through active and conscious reflection.

Collective reflection promotes the integration of different knowledge systems by acknowledging that all role players in the learning context have legitimate knowledge, actions are developed collectively, learners have a shared interest in the outcomes of interventions, and learners are involved as active participants in their struggle to know how to act in certain contexts (Greenwood & Levin 2005: 51). The study illustrated that collective reflective discussion assists learners to realise that knowledge and theory are not neutral, but that they should be transformed to fit the context in which they are applied (Wilson *et al* 2007: 3).

5. Implications of the study

To obtain collective reflective learning it is suggested that time be set aside for participants to process and share their experiences with their peers. Burnett *et al* (2005: 158) point out that the process of giving and receiving feedback will facilitate the efficient integration of the service learning experience. Educators should rather take on

the role of facilitator who involves learners in collaborative experiences and who challenges power relationships (Gaventa & Cornwall 2006: 72). The same values that the participants are expected to exercise with the clients should be exercised within the learning context, and the educator-learner relationship should be similar to the relationship between therapist and client to ensure consistency in the learning model.

6.   Conclusion

Through collective reflections, learners develop an awareness of the complex interactions, relationships and processes in different contexts. By having the opportunity to share and reflect upon their experiences in containing collective and reflective spaces, learners were assisted in engaging in critical approaches to dealing with contextual and interpersonal challenges in alternative and creative ways. The learning community contributed to a greater awareness of the self and facilitated the potential in learners to move between spaces, offering more and different ways of interaction and applying the self.

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