From reflective learning to reflective practice; assessing transfer.

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Abstract

A key attribute of reflective practice is its capacity for ongoing purposeful learning in relation to changing and demanding professional work. The teaching of reflective learning techniques in management education is intended to promote deep-level learning and the application of critical thinking to oneself, personal experience and the work environment. However, we lack empirical evidence that the teaching of reflective learning leads to enhanced reflective practice in professional work. This study provides an examination of reflection in work post formal education. It reports on interviews with eighteen Human Resource professionals. Reflection does not get 'left behind' on completion of formal teaching but there is not an even or simple process of transfer to a work context. Likewise, there was not a slavish adherence to reflective techniques but rather some evidence that students were able to translate their learning into something meaningful for their practice.

Key words: reflection, reflexivity, higher education, transfer, critical reflection.

Introduction

Does Higher Education (HE) based teaching of reflective learning transfer into reflective practice in the workplace? This paper reports on research addressing this question. Extensive theorising, conceptual debate and discussion on a problematic curriculum have not been matched with empirical data about reflection as part of work. So, despite a strong discourse promoting the value of reflective learning within management education we know little about the impact of formal efforts to teach reflection following graduation. As a consequence curriculum design and teaching of reflection run somewhat blind.

As a key component of professional education and development reflection is claimed to improve both depth and relevance of learning for individuals (Moon 2004). However, reflection and the related terms, such as: critical reflection; reflective practice; reflective learning; reflexivity are subject to a multiplicity of definitions in the literature leading to a lack of conceptual clarity. Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983) are acknowledged as having seminal contributions to notions of reflective practice but they are not without their critics. We do not intend to explore the debate here but Kinsella (2010) provides a useful overview of the conceptual confusion of reflection and reflective practice. The focus of our research is reflective practice skills as essential to developing thoughtful and responsible human resource (HR) professionals. Students are encouraged to analyse experience to inform future practice and thus our definition of reflection derives from Boud, Keogh, and Walker's (1985) view of reflection as a bridge between experience and learning. This supports the view proposed by Bulman, Lathlean, and Gobbi (2014, 1220) that reflective education 'provides a way to learn from the complexities of practice.' Reflective practice therefore has a clear rationale and it can generate an understanding of situations and how change might be introduced and managed (Griggs et al. 2015). Mezirow (1998) suggests that significant personal and social transformations can occur from explicit critical reflection and Gray (2007) developing this critical dimension asserts 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. Consequently, at an organisational level critical reflective practice may offer organisations a better way of operating, and of functioning more ethically, equitably and inclusively (see, for example, Hill 2005).

Reflective learning has become a central feature of management and professional education, supported and influenced by many professional bodies. Anderson (2003) suggests that critical reflection is a 'hallmark' of Masters level management education, and 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. Yet the curriculum remains problematic. One of the challenges of teaching reflective practice that has been noted in the literature is a lack of student engagement. Relevance is questioned (see, for example, Halton, Murphy, and Dempsey 2007) and practices such as the need for learning logs perceived as unnecessary (Samkin and Francis 2008). There is evidence suggesting many students approach reflection very superficially (Betts 2004); indeed some are happy to 'fake it' (Hobbs 2007). Some studies contend that the formalisation of reflective learning within the professional curriculum may encourage simplistic explanations of reflection resulting in impoverished, prescriptive outcomes (Kotzee 2012; Bradbury et al. 2010). Furthermore, a somewhat opaque landscape emerges in terms of issues of engagement, assessment and reflective tools / techniques (Griggs et al. 2015).This raises a question about a potential disconnect between the teaching of reflective learning and the subsequent adoption of reflective practice in work.

Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod (2009) following a systematic review of the literature in the health professions argue that the evidence to support and inform reflective practice in curriculum interventions remains largely theoretical. Similarly, Moon (2004) highlights a lack of empirical data to indicate that the development of reflection in an academic context has long term and definitive benefits to a majority of learners. Over a decade later, and certainly in relation to management, little appears to have changed. We have glimpses of insight but in contrast to the plethora of literature on the teaching and learning of reflection the lack of evidence concerning transfer and impact is inescapable.

The limited research available does report reflective practice taking place at varying levels of criticality and usefully identifies different influencing factors such as supervisory support and the working environment (e.g. Hill 2005; Sykes and Dean 2013). Findings also highlight constraints, such as the organisational culture in which practice must operate (Rigg and Trehan 2008). Importantly, though, these studies are linked to specific initiatives within the workplace to encourage reflective practice; either linked to HE programmes or organisationally led workplace learning initiatives. They do not address transfer from formal programme to the workplace, following graduation.

This paper reports upon research with 18 Human Resource professionals to investigate whether the development of reflective practice skills on a professional course influences the extent to which reflection becomes a part of their subsequent professional practice. The participants graduated from professional Human Resource Management/Development (HRM/D) programmes across three universities. All three universities endeavour to address a reflective learning curriculum. Students are required to reflect on their personal and professional development during the course. Whilst there are a set of professional body standards which inform the curriculum, each course has a degree of freedom to determine how best to meet curriculum objectives. 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. Students are therefore introduced to theories of critical reflection (Reynolds 1998). 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 underpin teaching with a clear focus upon the development of practice skills rather than simply knowledge acquisition.

The paper provides an insight into the relationship between formal efforts to teach reflection and the nature and extent of transfer to the workplace, post programme.

Approach and methods

The research was a collaborative study involving three universities. Our guiding paradigm for the study was interpretivism an "inductive theoretical drive to make sense of, understand, and interpret" Hamlin (2015, 27). The intention was to explore the lived experiences of participants through conversations about their experiences at work to elicit perspectives and illustrations of reflective practice in a professional context. As such, a mono-method approach was adopted using exploratory interviews. Reflection is a complex notion and therefore problematic to operationalise so a relatively unstructured interview was appropriate to enable respondents to explore, in their own terms, the relationship between the programme and their current HR role.

A purposive sample was drawn from graduate students who had completed a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) approved professional programme in HRM/D between six months and three years previously. An e-mail was sent to a random sample of alumni inviting them to take part. Prior to commencing the research ethical approval was received from the three participating universities by means of an application to the ethical approval committees within each institution. Practice was guided by the percepts of: avoidance of harm and deception, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. These percepts are clearly defined within the researchers' institutional and professional (CIPD, Academy of Management) research ethics codes and are applied consistently across the social sciences (Bell and Thorpe 2013).

Participants were mixed in terms of gender, age and were drawn from the private, public and not-for-profit sector. The aim of the interviews was to generate a rich picture of the level of engagement with reflective practice post formal tuition. Each interview was conducted by two members of the research team. The first interviewer was a course tutor on the participant's programme. To ensure an element of consistency the second interviewer was constant in all 18 interviews. The interviews were semi-structured starting with a discussion about work and then focusing on aspects related to reflective practice. The interviewers followed the lead of the interviewee and probed for further information in appropriate areas rather than following an interview script. Typical questions included:

> Can you think of a situation where you have used one or other of the reflective techniques introduced on the course?
> Are there any aspects of working at xxxx which help this process of reflection on work and practice?
> Are there any aspects of working at xxxx which hinder this process of reflection on work and practice?

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the agreement of the participants. Data analysis was undertaken using template analysis: 'a style of thematic analysis that balances a relatively high degree of structure ... with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study' (King 2012, 426). Coding takes place through the establishment of an initial set of *a priori* or construct codes which were derived from the key themes which emerged from the literature review and the research objectives, this in turn produces a set of categories by which the data could be contextualised (Miles and Huberman 1994). This approach enabled both consistency across the research team as well as providing a link between the research questions and the data, with the aim of providing 'an analysis which directly answers [the] research question' (Saldaña 2009, 49).

Transcripts were explored by the 4 researchers using the initial template to code the data. The research team individually analysed a selection of transcripts, using the template as a guide while suggesting alternative or additional codes that more accurately reflected the language of the participants and/or the amalgamation of codes. At a subsequent meeting a second stage template was agreed. This final template is shown in table 1.

Table 1

Each team member then coded a number of transcripts and produced a case summary for each individual using this template. At a subsequent team meeting we shared our individual

case summaries and outstanding coding issues. This resulted in the production of an overall summative analysis. There were over 300 pages of interview transcripts so the summative analysis enabled compression of the data into a manageable form to compare and contrast the narratives from different interviewees. This was used as a guide to highlight points of interest and return to the fuller transcript for more detailed examination. It is acknowledged that interpretive analysis is subjective and open to bias. The collective process of analysis was undertaken to offer consensus of opinion from the research team. The results are also interspersed with direct quotes so that the reader can see the original narrative alongside our interpretation and determine whether they concur with our analysis. This supports Hopkinson's (2003, 1948) justification that 'By discussing my own interpretation and juxtaposing this with the words of the narratives, the reader's interpretation may take account of both.'

The table of respondents (table 2) below provides a brief overview of the interviewees as context for the subsequent findings.

Table 2

Findings

We turn first to the evidence of transfer: to what extent our graduates report engaging in reflective practice in work after their course has finished.

Transfer from the course to the workplace

For at least six of our respondents their HR programme was the first time they had been introduced to the concept of reflective learning. Difficulty was experienced and indeed some resistance is acknowledged. Tim captured such a sentiment when he says: 'It was the worst part of the course.... I struggled to see the relevance'. Gary talked about a 'rude awakening' and a 'culture shock' feeling awkward writing about his feelings. Encouragingly, though, it was only Brian who at the time of the interview remained largely ambivalent about any transfer of reflective practice from course to workplace.

For three of the respondents (Gary, Denise and Phillip) it was the introduction to reflective learning that characterised their lasting impressions of the course. Others referred to the course as a whole or specific modules; a sense that the knowledge generated had been useful to them in their work and career development since completing the programme. Testimony of respondents such as Kelly, Sue, Ed and Helen suggest the link is not so much a simple 'functionalist' transfer of an HR practice or technique but a deeper understanding of HR. Helen, for example, commented on how she felt the course had broadened her horizons and this had led to involvement in a wider range of projects. Similarly, Ed felt that reflecting on the business had made him realise the broader dynamics of situations, both currently and in the past.

All respondents purport, outwardly at least, to engage with reflection within their work. With different degrees of emphasis all were of the view that such practice held value for both individual and organisation. However the nature of the practice landscape was far from uniform. For a number of respondents reflection seems predominantly linked to overt, immediate and upfront issues; an exploration of what went wrong with a particular task or work problem. 'Did it work well' (Izzie); 'to look at it and see how it could work better'

(Denise); 'why didn't it work well, was it a fair outcome, what would I do differently next time …its action points' (Philip). It was sometimes undertaken in the midst of work but more often in perceived fit for purpose spaces; in a lunch break; on the bus; at home; or on the tube to work. Importantly, it remains far from clear whether tough questions get asked in this process as part of a search for underlying explanatory factors or behavioural patterns.

For others though there were glimpses of something more. Sue, for example, argued she has always reflected but 'not to the extent that I do now' and talked about 'looking at it sometimes from somebody else's perspective – which I probably wasn't very good at doing, probably before I did this course, but now I do'. Helen spoke about being much more conscious of 'lessons learnt' and Kelly referred to reflection helping her to understand emotions and reactions. Julie provided an interesting example of double-loop learning : 'what I'd missed is do they actually want to be a team….I had to re-think what I wanted and what my perception of these people was before we started….it was a proper shift'.

 A level of (critical) reflective practice may remain difficult to surface, an almost unconscious process which is intimately embedded in practice. Importantly though, aspects of the narrative suggest that for some a level of critical reflection may be emerging within their reflective practice. Sue, for example, forcibly made the point that she rarely takes things on face value any more. Thinking differently is referred to by several respondents. Kelly, for example refers to a 'massive shift in my thinking' whilst Marie commented that 'when we were going back to work it felt different…I perceived things differently'. A further dimension of this thinking differently dimension relates to continuous professional development and career decision making. Laurie, for example, described a fundamental re-evaluation of his role leading to a change of organisation.

Other important themes emerging from the findings in relation to the adoption and sustainability of reflective practice were the context, processes and transformation of the learner. These are each explored below.

Context

One of the main barriers to reflective practice was perceived to be the pace of work, and managing a multiplicity of tasks. It was evident that many of our respondents worked in a demanding, performance driven work environment. Brian, for example, described a period of rapid organisation growth with targets on turnover, absenteeism and managerial performance predominating. An almost oppressive lack of reflective space seems to result, as Izzie put it, 'it is easy get bogged down with just doing the kind of fire-fighting every day'. Interestingly, though, there was little challenge or questioning of such state of affairs. Similarly, Cathie said she is too busy to reflect, work is 'too fast paced' and 'I haven't got time to sit and think' and was disparaging of a colleague who seems to spend hours writing learning logs. Yet a closer reading of her transcript reveals a thoughtful, questioning approach. At one point she noted 'I'll come out of a meeting and think like 'I didn't like what I said in there' or 'I didn't like that'…but I don't reflect in the proper way.'

To a greater or lesser extent our respondents worked within communities of practice. For the majority this was a small team of other HR professionals. Denise described a weekly meeting of HR leads 'like a big reflective group'. However, for some of the respondents there was only limited evidence that the working team provided an important site for reflective practice.

Furthermore, even where group reflection is highlighted it seems to be predominantly at the instrumental level, for example Sue noted:

> I'd probably say that most of the reflection is on my own and occasionally, I'll talk to a peer or somebody else who's on a similar kind of level and talk to them about, 'well this has happened to me today, or yesterday and I dealt with it this, this and this way – what do you think? Would you have dealt with it like that? Or would you have done something differently? Or, what do you think? I don't think it went very well.

While evidence relating to group reflection was relatively limited, reflective practice as an interactive rather than a solo activity was seen as important to a number of respondents. Kelly mentioned journaling on a personal level but reflections at work were more of a social process through: one to ones with her line manager, focus groups, feedback, mentoring and coaching. Similarly, Helen commented 'I do it with other people' referencing a coach, a mentor and her line manager.

There was a suggestion from some of the respondents that as they progressed their careers reflective practice became more essential to their practice. Izzie referred to previous roles as 'the kind of jobs that were lower level, you didn't really need to think or reflect at all' and Helen stated that before taking the course 'I think I was just focused on the you know reactive day-to-day HR management'.

Processes

Analysis reveals scant evidence of the techniques of reflective practice introduced on the course being adopted in the workplace. Julie's dialogue demonstrates the reluctance to record reflections:

> I'm very much an internal processor and my problem with formal reflection always was and remains today, the process of it. I think it's something that I just do. I really do, so the writing it down and the thinking it, the discipline of actually taking the time to formally do it, I found quite, quite difficult to get my head around.

In that the processes, to a large extent, remained cognitive we were reliant on how our respondents constructed and purport to practice reflective practice. The question of the extent to which reflection at a deeper and more critical level benefits from, or even requires, written processes remains problematic. However, more than one of our respondents alluded to the point that although difficult and at times uncomfortable this requirement to write reflections on the course was important in encouraging a way of thinking that was reflective. As Naomi said 'the repetitive reflection that you have to do throughout the course…..it does embed in you'. This is also well positioned by Kelly who described reflection in the workplace as being reflective thinking rather than reflective learning:

> I'd say I'm definitely more of your reflective thinker and learner, having been through that and you know, doing all the journals and all the post mortems and all that kind of thing and actually it's still something I practice this very day. I practice, not reflective learning, but reflective thinking.

It might be implied that written reflection, with feedback, may be an important element in the early stages of a 'personally constructed' approach to professional HR work but once understood and adopted the reflective process may not subsequently require capturing and recording in the same way.

Whilst the formal techniques or processes of reflection were not usually adopted in the workplace, processes at work were cited as prompts or enablers to reflection. Cathie talked about the continuous professional development (CPD) requirements of her organisation becoming more reflective and Naomi mentioned departmental reviews and away days, whilst Izzie said a requirement to complete a personal development planner prompts reflection. For many, formal appraisal processes provide a basic framework of support for reflective practice and aspects of self-assessment required as part of the process were triggers for reflection (Paula and Tim). However appraisal can be infrequent and therefore at times somewhat limiting and deficient. It would appear not to permit the sort of space that encourages reflection beyond a relatively rudimentary process of taking stock of performance on an annual, or at best, six monthly basis. Of greater interest are what influences practice outside of such systems. A coaching style of management was noted by several respondents (Paula, Philip, Ruth, Amy, Kelly) as a facilitator of reflection. The line manager was a key figure for many of our respondents, certainly for instrumental reflection. However, whilst meetings might be frequent, often with an 'open door' policy operating, they nonetheless remain driven by the immediacy of a problem and for the most part a process geared to improving task based performance. Whilst Tim clearly owes much to his line manager for adopting a role akin to that of a critical friend, the capability of their manager to provide more critically reflective support is questioned by some respondents (Gary and Naomi). Naomi relies on discussions with a more experienced colleague whilst both Laurie and Marie resort to support outside of their work organisation. For Laurie it is the network established on the course, and one or two friends in particular, that provide him with an opportunity to look critically at the organisation he finds himself working within whilst for Marie it is her partner (also a working professional).

Transformation of the Learner

The narratives highlighted outcomes from the course relating to 'thinking differently' and 'enhanced confidence'. Thirteen participants commented on how the course had impacted in this way. Helen, for example, felt the course 'unlocked a lot in me from a personal perspective' and this came from a greater self-belief linked to expert knowledge, 'I can talk at a different level at the table, on a more senior level now'. Philip talked about the development of a reflective portfolio leading to greater self-awareness. For Kelly it was a confidence to formulate her own ideas whilst Amy indicated she had more confidence in dealing with ambiguity. Marie indicated that the course had made her 'feel differently' at work. She perceives things differently, is conscious of different perspectives and has the confidence to act on such change. This familiarity and self-confidence in a body of professional knowledge together with an enhanced self-awareness is important, we suggest, in the emergent landscape of reflective practice.

Remarkably, lack of engagement at the time of the course was not necessarily an indication of long-term transfer or adoption of reflective practice. There was evidence that a readiness to adopt the concept was also important, as the following two excerpts from Tim and Julie respectively demonstrate:

> …that part of the course is something you have to learn on your own and you have to understand, it wasn't until that became relevant to my own development in terms of holding me back and actually allowing me to grow and develop as an individual within the workplace and outside of the workplace that I actually thought (clicks fingers) 'yeah, I get that now'.

Julie felt she got greater insights from her reflections following a coaching course:

> It was positioned …….exactly the same. But I think it's me, it's what's changed in the interim. It's me that's changed and my understanding that actually, I find this more useful than I thought I did, so I'm willing to try a little bit harder.

Interestingly, at least three of our respondents had sought, or were seeking, to instil reflective practice within their organisations – perhaps some testimony to a growing confidence in the value of reflective practice within the workplace. Since completing the course Gary, for example, has instigated what he calls 'critical reviews' which are triggered by 'business contingency incidents'. He is also interested in shaping continuous professional development within the organisation to make this more than a record of training undertaken and extending towards recognition of more discursive, written reflection on informal learning and reflective practice itself. Marie has an aspiration to do something similar in relation to the other professionals working within her organisation. This role of HR as the possible custodian of organisational reflective practice warrants further attention both in respect to our data and more generally.

Study limitations

We have noted above that interpretive analysis is subjective and open to bias and as such a different set of researchers may have reached different conclusions. We hope the transparency of our approach and presentation of findings allows the reader to reach their own decision. Further, the sample was composed of participants who agreed to take part. Inevitably questions can be raised as to its representativeness of the wider student cohort. Similarly, the relationship between the interviewers and participants could have had an influence on how honest participants were in front of their ex course tutor.

We are also reliant on self-report data within the interviews and a further study might usefully supplement this by observation of work practice or asking respondents to keep a diary in the run up to the planned interview in order to capture more of the everyday work characteristics within which our research is critically located.

Discussion

Without exception an important impact of the course as a whole is the students' knowledge base; one that in the main is seen to be of value to them (personally and professionally) on completion of their programme and which also appears to be of a sustained value. For the part of the course that addresses, overtly and formally, reflection the value here is more diffuse. For some it remains something which is simply and routinely applied to the problems which crop up from time to time in their professional roles. It is reflection-on-action (Schön 1983) and perhaps reflection-for-action (Ghaye 2010). For others the formal teaching of reflection has engendered more transformative change and enhanced personal introspection (Doane 2003). They have been encouraged and taught to question and challenge, to see things differently, to look at other perspectives and consider things as more complex than first meets the eye. There are some glimpses of the personal and social transformations that Mezirow (1998) attributes to critical reflection. The combination of expert knowledge with teaching 'about' and 'how to' engage in reflection is contributing to the emergence of mature professionals with a changed perspective to that which they held prior to their professional programme. This supports the notion of transformation proposed by Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) about an ontological turn for higher education. They suggest a shift in focus from

knowledge and skills acquisition to 'responsive ways of being', with an emphasis on the dynamic and changing nature of practice (p.687). As such, the teaching of reflective practice forms an essential part of preparing our students for their future working lives.

Our reading of the data suggests a requirement to participate in reflection at university was a significant step in the development of reflective practice skills in professional practice. However, there wasn't an even or simple process of transfer to a work context. Our findings suggest a predominantly performance driven approach to reflective practice, looking for ways to enhance and develop current practice. This matched responses from students in an earlier study who placed 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 (Griggs et al. 2015). The value of this shouldn't be underestimated; this stepping back and reflecting 'privileges the process of inquiry, leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice.' Raelin (2002, 66).

For some respondents references to CPD and role reconsideration imply a broader focus than performance improvement, potentially indicating a level of reflection-with-action (Ghayle 2011). This raises an important point about the kind of reflective practice we are seeking to develop. We might speculate that what we are finding is that our respondents are at different points on a continuum as regards reflective practice. In the main they have the knowledge and appear to be 'signed up' to reflection being a worthwhile practice. What appears to be affecting their engagement is the environment that they find themselves in. The findings highlight a number of influencing factors for the integration of reflective practice to professional work, particularly prominent were the context of work, the processes to trigger reflection and the readiness of the learner. Boud and Walker (1998) highlight that the context has a powerful influence over the type of reflection which takes place. Without the opportunity, without the incentive and without the prompts and pushes that might be provided by a 'critical friend', for example, is it any surprise that reflective practice lacks depth and is limited to what went wrong with that task and that it rarely develops beyond a rather mechanistic process of how can we make it better? This was supported by the findings so where the culture of the organisation provided support and space for reflection the testimony of some of the graduates was encouraging but for others the pace and demands of the workplace allow little space for reflection (Raelin 2002).

Similarly triggers for reflective practice in the workplace were important. Gray (2007) suggested that reflective tools could provide an aid to critical reflection and certainly our findings suggest that the techniques were important in the development of reflective skills but it was processes in the organisation that prompted later reflective practice rather than transfer of the techniques themselves. These factors present a complex dynamic in the development of reflective practice skills.

Whilst most students were conscious of the academic rhetoric and at times somewhat critical of the practices we had enforced upon them, our interviews reveal a relationship with reflection which has been informed and influenced by the course. Whilst the reality of workplace reflective practice varied in terms of adoption, approach, frequency, level/depth and integration with work, there were links to, and results of, their formal teaching evident in their different ways of managing. Certainly the need to question fundamental assumptions and beliefs is hardly part of day-day, week-week activity. But drawing on the distinction made by Holmes et al. (2005) of two types of criticality, there is evidence of critical in the sense of critical thinking, and a sense of questioning but little evidence of critical in the sense

of critical theory. The narratives do not show the challenging of social and political power bases in organisations, but they do show a challenging of personal assumptions, of looking at things from different perspectives, of questioning their own behaviour and performance. As such, although the depth of critical reflection may be questioned perhaps what is emerging is a greater sense of reflexivity, that is, adopting strategies to question one's own attitudes, thought processes, values and assumptions in an effort to understand complex roles in relation to others (Cunliffe 2003).

Implications

The findings support the importance of teaching reflective practice on professional courses. This was an important step in developing reflective practice skills for students who were often unfamiliar with the concept prior to studying. Although we support a requirement to record reflections, the findings suggest the techniques themselves are not adopted in working practice. We would therefore recommend a varied and flexible approach to teaching reflective techniques, introducing written and oral techniques, individual and social reflection and encouraging students to try a range of different methods and find what works best for them.

We note a performance driven approach to reflection; to students who are generally working in HR and taking the course to achieve professional accreditation and enhance their career prospects, the focus on enhancing practice offers a way of positioning the value of this aspect of reflective practice teaching, perhaps through testimonies and examples of reflective activity in professional practice. Requiring students to reflect on real life situations that they encounter at work could also potentially aid transfer and sustainability.

The importance of workplace culture and organisational support has implications for the way we develop and support learning to encourage transfer from the classroom to the workplace. We need to look for ways of developing communities of practice or individual relationships which foster a critically reflective approach so that those students who are not challenged in this way at work are not discouraged or restricted in developing these skills.

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, 247). As part of this discourse the CIPD sees reflection as a component of 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. Similar practice is evident in many professional bodies. We propose a more demanding form of reflective practice would lead to deeper and more fruitful development. Professional body endorsement, indeed requirement, that its members engage in a level of critical assessment of their on-going development would strengthen the legitimacy of the claim that critical reflection is at the heart of CPD. It would assist a process of transition and transfer of CPD as a reflective and reflexive vehicle from an academic context to on-going practice in a work context.

Conclusion

This picture highlights an uneven and complex reflective practice landscape. There is evidence of practice at a simple level of reflection and for some respondents, there is also evidence of something more transformative in terms of perceptions of practice, self-awareness and how this is contributing to maturing professional practice. Crucially, in terms

of the focus of this research, the impact of the programme of professional education appears significant. However, it does not operate in isolation and the work context, the processes and the readiness of the learner all played an important role.

An insight into the extent to which reflection becomes a part of managing, post formal tuition, helps to inform the way that reflection and reflective learning are taught on professional programmes. The findings suggest the techniques themselves are not adopted in working practice so we propose a varied and flexible approach to teaching reflective techniques should be encouraged. However, we would argue that although the techniques were not directly adopted they were an important step in the understanding and development of reflective practice. As such there may not have been direct transfer but in some cases there was a more important transformation of the learner.

There are glimpses of reflexivity emerging within some of the respondents' practice. This is perhaps more difficult to record and assess on a course than the more common focus on reflection on action. A challenge for tutors, therefore, is how best to nurture and facilitate such reflexivity. The narratives highlight a different way of thinking, a more questioning approach and an awareness of different perspectives as catalysts to a more reflexive approach. This suggests teaching reflection requires engagement with critical thinking and concepts of reflexivity as well as the more traditional sequential models of reflection.

The research reported upon in this paper is set within the HR profession but reflective practice is common across many professions and taught on many professional programmes, consequently this research offers a contribution of relevance and interest to others involved in teaching reflective practice. The voice of the practitioner in our research ensures that 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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