Reflective practice: is there transfer from classroom to workplace?

Does HE based teaching of reflective practice transfer into management practice in the workplace? This paper reports on research addressing this question. Initially the research is set in context. Extensive theorising, conceptual debate and discussion on a problematic curriculum have not been matched with empirical data about reflection as part of managing. Interviews with eighteen HR professionals provide the data upon which initial findings are drawn. Management practice is influenced by their professional programme and, in the main, reflection is an important element of perceived change. For some transfer appears restricted to instrumental practice. For others, however, a more complex picture emerges; one where glimpses of criticality are evident but where the link to the formal teaching of reflection is less straightforward. This, together with factors influencing the reflective landscape observed, warrant further analysis as a precursor to consideration of curriculum implications

Introduction

Despite a strong discourse promoting the value of reflective activity within management education we know little about the impact of formal efforts to teach reflection post programme, i.e. *in situ* and *in practice*. Extensive theorising and conceptual debate has not been matched with empirical data about reflection as part of managing; we have heard little of the manager's voice. As a consequence curriculum design and teaching of reflection runs somewhat blind. The paper reports upon explorative research with 18 graduates from professional HRM/D programmes, across three collaborating universities. Data collection is complete and data analysis has commenced. The paper provides an initial perspective - hence its developmental status - on the relationship between formal efforts to teach reflection and the nature and extent of transfer to the workplace, post programme.

From concept to practice
Reflective practice has become 'de rigueur' in management and professional education, supported and influenced by bodies such as AMED, BAM, CMI, CIPD, HEA. Yet its curriculum remains problematic. The teaching of any curriculum requires choices and in relation to reflective learning it is of fundamental importance. Just what are we are trying to teach? The formalisation of reflective practice 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).

In any consideration of reflection as part of managing it is the workplace that provides the crucial 'site of practice' but it is here where we remain poorly informed. The limited research available does report reflective practice taking place at varying levels of criticality and usefully identifying different influencing factors such as supervisory support, 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 (Lawlor, 2013; 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, post programme. We note also a handful of research studies that have sought to utilise quantitative techniques (e.g. Woerkhom and Croon, 2008). Whilst such studies conclude with assessments of reflective practice within the workplace they are reliant on a sense of reflective practice drawn from the theoretical literature rather than grounded in the everyday actions and behaviours of managers.

Moon (2004) highlighted 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. 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.

Methodology and Methods
In seeking to shed light on the extent to which reflection becomes a part of managing, post formal tuition, a qualitative design was implemented. Our principal method of data collection was the interview. Reflection is a slippery notion; 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 management role. A purposive sample was drawn from past students who had completed a CIPD approved professional programme in HRM/D between six months and three years previously and who agreed to take part in the research. Participants were mixed in terms of gender, age and were drawn from the private, public and not-for-profit sector. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

An initial template, in part utilising a priori codes derived from the key themes emerging from the literature and the research objectives, has provided the basis for a 'stage one' data analysis (King, 2004). Nvivo has been used to assist this process and a rich picture of dialogue is emerging. One such code is 'transfer' and it is the analysis on this theme that we report here. A 'second' stage analysis will be pursued on the basis of a refined and developed template.

Transfer from course to workplace

Respondent reactions
An initial topic of discussion was a 'look back' at their HR programme. We asked respondents to consider what appeared most significant one or two years on. For three (Gary, Denise and Phillip) it was the introduction to reflective learning and practice. In the main, though, this first part of the interview provoked reference to either the course as a whole or specific modules (e.g. talent management; resourcing). A mostly positive response was forthcoming; a sense that the knowledge generated had been useful to them in their work and career development since completing the programme. Reference to 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 which had led to involvement in a broader 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. Closely linked to this is a narrative of 'thinking differently' and 'enhanced confidence'. Thirteen participants commented on how the course had impacted in this way. For Helen, for example, 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". 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.

The question we face is the relationship between this enhanced professional perspective, emanating from the course, and any emerging sense, and practice, of reflective practice. We might speculate that this holistic understanding of HR, this openness to embrace alternative perspectives, is a perquisite for reflective practice to take hold and flourish. This is for subsequent consideration. We turn now to what further discussion revealed about the extent to which reflective practice was indeed part of their management practice.

'Constructing' reflective practice in the workplace

None of our respondents encountered any difficulty in discussing reflection within the workplace. For the most part reference to such was raised by them, enabling us to seek further insight without overtly leading questions. First, we identify a tension as regards our teaching of reflective practice. Seven of our respondents (e.g. Laurie, Marie, Tim, Brian) noted that whilst on the course they either viewed reflective practice as difficult and/or of questionable significance. Tim comments: "It was the worst part of the course.... I struggled to see the relevance". Encouragingly, though, it was only Brian who at the time of the interview, admitted that it was not really a part of his professional practice. All of the other respondents argued they now saw the value. Kelly, for example, reports "I'd say I'm definitely more of your reflective thinker and learner" and Tim says "…my mind set's shifted – if you like. Whether the company see the benefits of it or not; I see the benefits of it."

Secondly, we note scant evidence of the techniques of reflective practice introduced on the course being adopted in the workplace. Whilst arguing they did reflect at work only Ruth, Izzie and to a lesser extent Kelly, indicated they engaged in any sort of reflective writing as part of their reflective practice. In the main, it was something our respondents felt they processed cognitively. Clearly this presents a limitation of evidence to indicate the nature of such reflective practice, leaving questions of depth etc to be gleaned through further questioning. Nonetheless, and developing this point, our reading of the data suggests two broad groups. For the first reflection seems predominantly linked to overt, immediate and upfront issues; an exploration of 'what went wrong' with a particular task or work problem. It is reflection-on-action but it remains far from clear whether 'tough' questions get asked in this process as part of a search for underlying explanatory factors. For the second group there are glimpses of something more. We noted above the significance of a professional knowledge base and implications as regards approaches to work and self confidence. Aspects of the discourse suggest a critical reflexivity may be emerging within their reflective practice. Sue, for example, is acutely aware that she rarely takes things on face value any more, whilst for Jackie her reflective activity has become an essential part of her cpd. Interestingly, although specific written techniques were not transferred from the course to the workplace some of the respondents attributed the course requirement of recording reflections as a catalyst to the changes indicated above. "Keeping a diary got me into the habit of thinking about it" (Marie).

The data on how respondents made sense of reflection within their own practice is also interesting in a number of further respects, including: an uneven time line of transfer (course to workplace), individual v social reflective practice and in relation to a notion that HR may be a natural custodian of organisational reflective practice. These are issues for further exploration.

Rhetoric and Reality

We noted in the introduction concerns that a slavish and overly simplistic advocacy of reflective practice might, paradoxically, undermine its value. The teaching of reflective practice – without a solid grounding in practice – may assume the status of academic rhetoric; models of reflection perceived as divorced from reality; something to be learnt, recalled in assessed work, but not practiced. Despite the well intentioned efforts of ourselves as tutors, and on the back of a professional body imperative, is the reality that reflection gets 'left behind' once course requirements are concluded? Our initial reading of the data suggests not but nor does it suggest an even or simple process of transfer to a work context. What was

the reality?   What was the language of practice? How did practice square with teaching? Interestingly, whilst a small number of students overtly drew on the Kolb model this was not the norm. A developed language of '*critical* reflection' is not evident from a first reading of the data. Reality suggests a performance driven approach to reflective practice, looking for ways to enhance and develop current practice; certainly the need to question fundamental assumptions and beliefs is hardly part of day-day, week-week activity. This said, and as alluded to above, there are glimpses which suggest the need for a more nuanced second and third reading of the data. If we take Kelly or Paula, for example, outwardly they hardly appear champions of reflective practice. Indeed, Kelly is disparaging of a college who seems to spend hours writing learning logs. Yet a closer reading of both these transcripts suggests thoughtful, questioning, politically astute professionals at work. Furthermore, Laurie describes a fundamental re-evaluation of his role leading to change of organisation. The extent to which a level of criticality may indeed be a feature of several of our respondents' reflective practice is an issue for further analysis.

Whilst this signals one avenue for further analysis of our data other requirements are the search for greater clarity about the influencing factors on the picture of reflective practice we draw. Here, the nature of work, the triggers to reflection, the barriers to and enablers of reflection, need attention. The goal here is explanatory interpretation of the landscape of reflective practice, post course, and which can then be scrutinised as regards implications for the teaching of reflective practice. Such intentions shape the agenda for the development of this paper.

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