

Learning through reflection: the critical role of reflection in work-based learning (WBL)

The critical
role of
reflection in
WBL

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the critical role reflection plays in work-based learning (WBL).

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents an contextualist examination of reflection in the WBL environment.

Findings – People consciously reflect in order to understand events in their lives and as a consequence hopefully add and enhance meaning.

Research limitations/implications – Reflection is associated therefore with “looking back” and examining the past in order to learn from what happened and perhaps not repeat mistakes. However, it is also increasingly associated with reflecting on action (Schon, 1983) and encourages an exploring of thoughts and feelings; looking for insights; and maximizing on self-awareness which all tie the process closely to identity formation (Lacan, 1977).

Practical implications – If used effectively and purposefully reflection facilitates ongoing personal and professional learning, and creates and develops practitioners capable of demonstrating their progression towards learning outcomes and required standards. Reflection can also provide a structure in which to make sense of learning, so that concepts and theories become embedded in practice, and constant thought and innovation are simultaneously fostered.

Social implications – By actively considering the thoughts and actions one becomes aware of the power of reflective thinking as a tool for continuous improvement, and one that has implications beyond the personal.

Originality/value – This paper represents the first study which examines the role reflection plays in WBL.

Keywords Work-based learning, Learning, Graduate employability, Reflective practitionership, Teaching reflective skills

Paper type Research paper

Graduate employability

Employability is a complex term. It is sometimes used to summarize job-seeking skills, such as writing an impressive resume and mastering good interview techniques. It is also used to encompass the generic skills that all employers look for when deciding who to employ and who to promote (Confederation of British Industry, 2012; Helyer and Lee, 2014). In addition to these two categories of skill many employers will also expect candidates to be accomplished in a certain defined discipline or sector – such as medicine, law or engineering. Adecco (2012) describe being employable as, “[...] having the skills, attitudes and belief necessary to win a job, succeed in that role and move on



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to an even more fulfilling role in the future” (p. 40). In a rapidly evolving, highly technological world employees increasingly need to develop skills categorized by these various elements. The emphasis on particular skills differs from job to job, but with the same basic outcome, they help to create a desirable employee. In the fast-moving society of the twenty-first century being adaptable and multi-faceted are naturally prioritized amongst these skills, as opportunities, companies and societal needs rapidly evolve. With many higher education graduates finding it difficult to become employed in the sectors they were aiming at (Brooks *et al.*, 2011; Bridgstock, 2009) and workers finding themselves undertaking several different jobs throughout their career the need for reinvention is real. It is the receptive and self-aware job seeker who will find the most success in what is currently a highly competitive and congested global market (Helyer and Lee, 2012, 2014). Higher level skills are associated with higher education study and graduates have always been attractive to employers due to their skills of analysis, critical debate, ability to make connections and read widely. Graduates also have the opportunity, via higher level study, to develop broader multi-faceted skills including creativity, imagination and entrepreneurship. Whatever subject specialism the graduate chooses they should have the chance to develop this broad base of useful life-enhancing skills.

The reflective practitioner

Due to the current and future jobs market described above, where workers need to adapt to fit changing roles, continuous learning is required. Learning to learn is therefore a crucial skill (Bridgstock, 2014; Barr and Tagg, 1995) alongside accepting responsibility for one’s own learning and development. This applies whilst at university or college but also in the world of work. Billett’s research illustrates how the evolving relationship between self and work impacts powerfully upon the development of self-identity, self-awareness and personal agency (Billett, 2010). Reflection is part of this progression and the development of reflective skills assists with the process of knowing how to learn, and the acceptance of the individual’s centrality to their own learning (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Maudsley and Strivens, 2000). Reflecting on learning achievements can empower the learner to make intelligent decisions about how to move ahead with their learning needs. Working towards becoming a reflective practitioner enhances what a worker can bring to their job role, as well as the development of their future career plans (Schon, 1983).

Reflection

Workers can hone their reflective skills in order to critically appraise what has been experienced via practice. This in turn enables them to improve ongoing practice, by using the information and knowledge they are gaining from experience. Billett (2011) reiterates the power of experiential learning and emphasizes the breadth of its reach, to include, work-based learning (WBL), ships and work placements (which may be part of a work integrated learning programme such as co-operative learning) (see also Department for Business for Innovation and Skills, 2011).

Research suggests that this is most effective when it involves others and as a consequence the chance to collaborate and share ideas about changes, alterations and new ways of operating (Gray, 2007). Reflecting critically, and sharing the outcomes of this, can be frightening and can cause feelings of vulnerability amongst those exposing their thoughts and findings; working in groups and networks with fellow workers or other students can offer the support and multiple input needed to help deal with this

and provide evidence that the process is worthwhile, even if it feels daunting at first (Urdang, 2010; Walker *et al.*, 2013). Dewey (1933) discusses this requirement for open-mindedness and willingness to listen to others and act upon criticism. The key point to remember is that although much of this thinking and activity around reflection stems from academia this does not need to be academic thinking, it needs to be more than theoretical or hypothetical. What makes reflection on practice such a powerful tool is the combination of more scholarly theorized thinking with practitioner's real-world experiences and learning. The synergy created by the combination of sources relies on different elements. Brockbank and McGill (1998) sum this up in terms of an interaction between a practitioner's experiences, feelings and emotions, with their activities and achievements. Ideally reflective practitioners will harness and combine the intellectual and the emotional with their operational practices. Rather than a one-dimensional response this catalyst will produce an ongoing process where thinking, acting, questioning and collaborating are brought together in a supportive combination, creating nuanced, smart responses and superior results.

Credit for reflection

Within the UK there are institutions that offer degree programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level focusing on WBL. For example:

- Teesside University – www.tees.ac.uk/sections/parttime/work_based_studies.cfm
- Middlesex University – www.mdx.ac.uk/about-us/our-schools/institute-for-work-based-learning
- University of Chester – www.chester.ac.uk/wblu
- Lancaster University – www.lancaster.ac.uk/fhm/study/cpd/professional-practice/
- University of Derby – www.derby.ac.uk/corporate

These programmes are designed to recognize and acknowledge workplace learning (i.e. relevant in subject area and level to the current course of study) and have titles such as work-based studies; professional studies; negotiated learning route and so on. This means that relevant learning already accumulated away from formal education can be documented and awarded credit through established processes and therefore help the student to progress. This is one way to create appropriate routes to HE-level qualifications for busy employees who want, or need, to study and can offer them a time (and money) saving device; they will probably be required to undertake less modules (hence less fees) and complete far less campus attendance than a traditional full-time student. The recognition of prior learning is widely practiced internationally (Perrin and Helyer, 2015). Universities and colleges use processes that facilitate a “credit claim” (HE awards and qualifications consist of a certain number of academic credits). Students can be provided with help in making this claim – but only the student knows the details of their past learning and therefore in order to be successful in this claim students must look back and critically reflect on their past learning. This self-audit is crucial if the student is to gain the maximum credit possible. Undertaking such activities facilitates active reflection on work activities. Adopting this reflection as an inherent part of continuously evaluating, reviewing and improving their performance, satisfaction and results would be the ideal outcome. It can be useful for students to approach this skills audit as a personal training needs analysis (TNA), something many work-based learners are

familiar with. Combined with their growing academic skills, critical reflection encourages work-based students to change practices within the workplace, hence enhancing their personal performance, but also the overall performance of their organization. Such organizational developments focus on the learning that naturally occurs at work, and emphasize that all levels of employee are work-based learners. It is not a lower level or derogatory term but rather an indication of lifelong learning. Many work-based learners discover that, as learner workers, they are already using critical reflection in an intuitive way without realising and this can be very empowering for them as it provides a strong starting point to enhance this skills-set.

Teaching reflective skills

Teaching reflective skills in academia has steadily grown in importance (Schon, 1987; Schunk and Zimmerman, 1998), from strong beginnings in professions such as nursing it became more apparent how useful the practice was for work-based learners generally. Teaching reflective skills is beginning to appear across the curriculum, with many different kinds of students being asked to compile reflective essays, reports, journals, logs, diaries, or portfolios as part of their assignments in UK universities (Helyer and Kay, 2015). Assistance with this reflection is often found in student handbooks, as part of induction days, by allowing access to past students' successful reflective work and through stated sessions containing learning theories and styles, meta-cognition, self-analysis of strengths and weaknesses and the writing of personal statements (Helyer and Price, 2015).

Established WBL programmes (such as those mentioned above) have long included active reflection within the core modules; learners might typically compile a series of short narrative statements (500-1,000 words) in which they purposefully reflect upon their learning processes during different work and study activities. These statements are often transformed into a "Portfolio of Active Reflection", which includes their experience of various modules, their current and past activities and their future plans – all situated within a framework of personal and professional development. These activities will facilitate the development of reflective practitioners who can share their critical reflections and analysis, together with their higher-level ideas, with their work colleagues. The aim of these modules is to create practitioners for whom it is the "norm" to continuously reflect, plan and develop; routinely revisiting the manner in which activities are conducted, rather than assuming that the "old way is the best". Innovative practice in this area can be seen, amongst others, at Plymouth University, UK – www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/1/1,717/Reflection.pdf, and the University of Portsmouth, www.port.ac.uk/media/contacts-and-departments/student-support-services/ask/downloads/Reflective-writing—a-basic-introduction.pdf

Instructions given to students to help them to reflect on what they have done and learned, and on how they intend to build on that learning, often include illustrations of a circular format based on the work of Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1998). Kolb's (1984) model is based on his experiential learning theory and used extensively in education and training to encourage participants to reflect on both concrete experiences and abstract concepts. This means that feelings and senses are used as well as thought processes. Furthermore, attention is given to thinking about information, but also doing something with the information. Reflection is therefore not passive but leads to active experimentation, creativity and progression. Kolb suggests that reflective observation transforms concrete experiences into learning experiences. As practitioners stop, think, reflect and consider they ask themselves questions such as: "How can I use this information?" and "How will it help

with my daily work tasks and enhance my work role?” The experimentation stage tests out new ideas to help decide how and where the new learning can be used practically. Kolb’s cycle does not have to be used in the cyclical manner it is usually reproduced, with each step, from experience to experimentation being followed. The cycle is continuous and can be joined at any stage. Reflection is more iterative and messy than a neat circle suggests. There is a certain circularity to moving through the stages of review, research and reflect but it is a forward moving loop of enquiry – rather than a “closed off” or “fenced in” circle. To prevent an emphasis on looking back (despite this being needed) some prefer the term “reflecting forwards”, which foregrounds the developmental nature of the process (Helyer, 2015).

Gibbs (1988) further developed the idea of a reflective cycle to encourage learners to systematically think about the phases of an experience or activity. The headings he suggested to encourage debate around making sense of a situation, and its outcomes, including, what else could have been done, what could be done different/better next time and so on, are: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan (for further development of these ideas of review, research and reflect, see Table I).

One of the most important things that tutors of work-based learners can do is develop good listening skills. They need to listen and also to respond appropriately. This response might include prompts and encouragement rather than instructions. There is no point forcing ideas, plans and priorities on a work-based student, who knows their own workplace better than you do. A relationship built on respect and reciprocal learning needs to be fostered, rather than a more traditional learner/teacher relationship where the teacher claims to hold the knowledge that they may (or may not) filter out to the “empty” student.

Revealing aspects of job activities, thoughts and ideas can be unnerving but as a student’s confidence and self-awareness grows they will become more inclined to share aspects of their practice with their tutor. This will mean that the tutor in turn will need to develop their own teaching methods to include knowing how to tease out important information from their students. The vital elements in this “teasing out” process are the facets of the student’s practice that align with the current course of study. These facets need to be thought about, discussed and worked on in order to make future enhancements, via planned actions.

Merely learning about theory and then attempting to apply it afterwards is increasingly criticized (Schon, 1983). If tutors share their expertise and knowledge of theory with the student practitioners, they are directly helping them to enhancing their work practice by showing the potential of combining expertise, experiences and knowledge of theory and working towards filling what Schon termed the “theory practice gap” (Schon, 1987). Eraut (1994) stated that HE prioritizes scientific over professional knowledge and deemed “off the shelf” theories as not useful. Theory should be used and interrogated, in order to transform and enliven it. This is particularly pertinent to work-based learners who similarly find “off the shelf” university courses not at all useful and instead require a far more tailored and individual, yet collaborative learning experience.

When experience, learning, theory and practice are merged there is a far greater potential for innovation than viewing any of the aspects separately. Gray (2001, p. 24) indicates that reflecting actively and usefully is a process that generates the development of “a dynamic synergy and dialectic between academic learning and work-based practice”. The results are worth the tutor walking their delicate tightrope between provoking students into thinking, looking back and being critical, whilst supporting, encouraging and guiding rather than telling. The traditional notion of knowledge as being finite and capable of being owned or held by one party and passed on to another is increasingly challenged (Freire, 1972). Students do not come to

Scrutinize your successes and your failures

What happened?

Event 1

Event 2

Event 3

Event

Activity

Incident

Experience

Consequence?

Result

Outcome

Product

Thoughts

Feelings

Reactions

Impressions

Be proactive

Contemplate

Think

Deliberate

Interrogate

Analyse

Question

Consider the thoughts/feelings of other parties

Evaluate

The details

What, Why, When, How, Where and Who?

Which skills helped you succeed?

Which skills areas felt lacking?

Did you “think on your feet” (“In action”)

and amend things as you went along?

Or did all your analysis come at the end? (On action)

Looking to the future – develop

Strategies

Approaches

Tactics

Would you do exactly the same next time?

Table I.
Using reflection as a
development tool

Source: Helyer and Kay (2015)

university as empty buckets waiting to be filled up with what the lecturer knows already. Knowledge is co-produced in all sorts of venues and in all sorts of ways and these WBL tutors’ methods become the exact opposite of “filling empty buckets” style teaching, and could instead be compared to a midwife role – with the tutor helping the student to give birth to what is already in them. Guidance might include such tips:

- reflect strategically on where you have learned through past experiences;
- remember that the activity and the learning process are entwined – not separate entities;
- reflect not just on your current study but more generally along your life path;

- make the most of your programme's guided self-audit – treat it like a TNA;
- establish where exactly you are – in terms of career, personal development and learning;
- acknowledge what you are already good at – for example “writing reports” – this feeds into academic writing, more than you might think – so do not convince yourself that you know nothing about academia;
- reflection makes you realize that you already have a good base on which to build your next stage of development;
- reflective skills can be “taught” and measured; and
- become a reflective practitioner – actively strive to continually improve your practice (Helyer and Kay, 2015).

Postmodern timescales

In HE-level WBL there can be a definite emphasis on looking back. However, what experienced work-based learning tutors try to do, as the core to their interaction with work-based students, is acknowledge what has been, is being and will be learned by employed students. This questions the “correct” order of things, as there is much looking back, forth and across, via the work-based learner's experiential learning. This postmodern approach to learning can be seen as simultaneously liberating, because of the opportunities it offers and frightening, as it removes boundaries and the purported “safety”, they bring (Helyer, 2007). Teaching innovations such as massive open online courses and flipping the classroom (Bergman and Sams, 2012) equally play with the order of learning and prove that the order of learning and the location of knowledge are flexible and changeable. WBL programmes inevitably involve a personal and professional “stocktake”, an important element of this is “looking back” to analyse past learning experiences. This can feel uncomfortable because many WBL students are older than the average student, and feel the need to “catch up”; they want or need this qualification (perhaps others in their workplace are graduates, or their career has changed into a graduate profession since they joined). Despite some employees having vast knowledge and expertise they can start to feel insecure about being on a university course but not being 18, with the usual academic entry requirements. Students never enrol to look back; they want to move forwards towards a qualification. Being genuinely reflective takes time, it can be painful and is invariably more difficult than students anticipate; some facets of their practice may need to be “un-learned” or at least amended (Helyer, 2015). As Cox (2005, p. 461) states, “encouraging reflective practice at all levels is beneficial for students undertaking any kind of work-based activity, even though [...] there is often resistance to the process and difficulty in initial development of the reflective and analytical skills required” (Cox, 2005, p. 461). This is why tutors must become facilitators and guides, and students must learn to trust their tutors, and often their peers within the course cohort, in order to be open and honest with them, “To engage in reflective practice, people need a sense of security” (Osterman and Kottkamp, 2004, p. 68). It is all too easy for students to feel that tutors and peers are judging them, and perhaps trying to alter and amend their practice for less than altruistic motives; the spirit of reciprocity must be highlighted.

Reflecting “in” and “on” action

Postmodern theory disputes grand narratives and questions accepted dominant discourses and histories; this suggests that time is not strictly linear, and nor do events

happen in any “correct” order or timescale (Lyotard, 1984). Reflection is more all encompassing than just “looking back”. People instinctively reflect on events, perhaps to better understand what has happened and make sense of it; the idea of learning from the past, especially trying not to repeat mistakes is well established. Schon referred to this process as, “reflecting on action”, but also conceded that reflection does not need to stop with looking back, useful though it is to learn from experience in this way. It is possible to reflect on what is happening in the present moment, within the context of thoughts and feelings as they occur. Schon summarizes this as, “reflection in action”, and points out its expediency, “reflection in action is where we may reflect in the midst of action without interrupting it. Our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it” (Schon, 1987, p. 26). There are some overlaps here with the principles of mindfulness that may be worth exploring. One of the main reasons for sharpening reflective skills is that it is these skills that enable intelligent and informed analysis of how our other skills are doing. Without some honest reflection, how would anybody know that they needed to polish, for example, their time management or organisational skills? Other than noticing that things frequently seem to be going badly.

By consciously focusing automatic reflection into a structured response its usefulness is maximized, encouraging the reflector to become a reflective and self-aware person. This means looking both backwards and forwards (and sometimes sideways) to make connections with current undertakings. This kind of evaluation can feel fragmented and disjointed, this is normal; the process is utilizing the knowledge which lies deep within (tacit knowledge) – so deep it is often taken for granted and not explicitly acknowledged, but it is the data humans use to make instinctive decisions based upon accumulated knowledge from past actions and experience. Eraut (1994) discusses the subtle nuances between the tacit, that which is implicitly acknowledged and referred to, rather than that which is explicitly pointed out. Because reflection is a vital part of personal development, HE WBL programmes encourage learners to be actively and analytically reflective.

Lacan and identity processes

Reflection begins almost as soon as we are born and has always, even if subliminally, influenced how we view ourselves and define our identities and profile. Lacan’s (1977) theories around, “the mirror stage” centre on the idea that once humans have seen their reflection (as an infant) they develop an enhanced self-awareness and begin to view themselves differently. Rather than the disjointed arms and legs we look down upon as a small baby, we begin to consider ourselves as a complete entity. Reflection is closely tied to how we view ourselves both physically and mentally. By actively considering our thoughts and actions we become aware of the power of reflective thinking as a tool for continuous improvement and this obviously has implications beyond the personal. If used effectively and purposefully, reflection facilitates ongoing personal and professional learning; developing and creating practitioners capable of demonstrating their progression towards learning outcomes and required standards, whilst also providing a structure in which to make sense of their learning, so concepts and theories become embedded in practice, whilst constant thought and innovation are simultaneously fostered for improvements to take place in a continuous cycle of enhancement (Helyer, 2015).

Reflection as a development tool

Try this exercise – think of a time when an experience and its outcomes have had an effect on your actions – this will happen all of the time but we do not always acknowledge the process. Learning, especially in the workplace, does not always occur

as a “light bulb moment”, it can be hard to pinpoint due to its gradual and ongoing nature. This means that it is often hard to track back where that learning came from, and you may even struggle to remember when you did not know how to do a certain thing. This gradual learning means you do develop skills – but you do not always give yourself credit for them or acknowledge when and where you use them or when they might need polishing. Complete the grid below with a situation or happening – it might be from work, study or your personal life. What was the outcome? Was it deemed a success? Did you learn anything? Did you change your methods and thoughts because of your evaluation of your experience? Questioning and considering our learning experiences is an extremely powerful way to develop future strategies, approaches and tactics in order to build skills to tackle future similar situations, as well as further enhancing the skills which made you successful on this occasion.

Exercises like this are designed to make you think critically about past actions, within the context of what is happening in the present and what may happen in the future. Structuring a reflective response to an event embeds good practice for future continuous professional and personal development activities. Developing an ongoing ethos of reflection means that an individual begins to automatically challenge and question why tasks were undertaken in a certain way rather than how they were carried out, and furthermore they will become accomplished at recognizing that they are learning and building skills continuously; it is not a standalone process. Employers have much to gain from encouraging staff to actively reflect on their work practices, as Cox (2005, p. 471) claims, “learning through work” is integral to the whole reflective practice process and can provide valuable opportunities for individual action research in the work context”. Barnett (1997) describes the traditional view of HE where critical thinking and all things cerebral are championed and prioritized. He goes on to suggest that the development of good reflective practice will help to disperse this notion of criticality from institution to individual, an action he feels is crucial in the process of supporting professional workers to develop themselves, and adopt the notion of learning continuously from one’s own practice, for continuous self-development. This concept can be applied to all professions and work activities, as it allows for individual complexities and characteristics.

Support – peers and mentors

Whilst reflective practice can be a solitary pastime, peers have a definite role to play in helping and supporting each other. This might be done on a one-to-one basis by “buddying” or in a more formal mentoring arrangement, where pairs are decided using appropriate expertise and experience as a guide rather than seniority or management status, for example ex-WBL students can be used to mentor new WBL students. Alternatively a mentor may be appointed from the student’s place of work, or sector. This could be a colleague, supervisor or line manager and does not need to be someone working directly with the student although sometimes this might be useful; judgments need to be made for individuals’ cases but the mentor needs to be a person the student feels they can discuss their anxieties honestly and safely with. Mentors can become inspirational role models.

Action learning sets (Revans, 2011) and communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) are also proven methods of “learner to learner” support. Within such groups and networks students can explore issues arising from reflective practice with their peers and utilize debate and discussion in a safe and supportive environment. This can be helpful when the reflection prompted by what is happening at work is contradictory, or becoming too challenging and rather than empowering the work-based learner, it is worrying them. Having a supportive group to discuss this with can make all the difference. The ethos of

action learning (Revans, 2011) includes this idea and claims that support and insightful questioning from peers can help the worker to move beyond what seems like a blockage, to constructive and active reflection. This is particularly helpful if a learner feels they cannot discuss what is bothering them with colleagues at work. They can feel secure in a non-judgemental CoP where they are all operating confidentially. One of the other major benefits of taking part in such CoP is that a great deal of learning occurs socially with other people and whilst much reflective practice can be undertaken alone it is more productive to share the learning outcomes of it with others – the learning might have happened already – via experience at work – but it can come to life and be given meaning through sharing it with others who use and adapt it. Such sharing also allows for different cultural and professional translations to enrich and transform the learning, taking it to many different and new levels (Smith and Smith, 2015).

Conclusion

The jobs market is changing, and will continue to change. This is due to many variables, some of which have been discussed above. They include a fast-moving technological world, a global recession and many more graduates from higher education. In the UK participation rates for individuals up to the age of 30, have risen from 12 per cent in 1979 to 30 per cent in the early 1990s, 39 per cent by 1999-2000 and 49 per cent in 2011-2012 (Parliament briefing papers, 2013). Graduate job applications have increased by between 9 and 25 per cent (High Fliers, 2014, p. 3). Such constraints upon employment mean that employers expect more from each employee that in turn has an effect on how much an individual can afford to specialize. The modern workforce requires adaptable all-rounders, with an entrepreneurial attitude, who are willing to continuously learn. This kind of employee is likely to view change as an interesting opportunity rather than a negative or frightening occurrence.

Smith and Martin (2014) show how findings from their research illustrate that “being professional” is strongly associated with skills of reflection and lifelong learning (Smith and Martin, 2014, p. 295), reiterating that it is impossible for individuals to keep developing themselves without skills of reflection. Being reflective enables practitioners to change in action, in the present moment, fully utilising observations, articulations and theorisation to strategically transform and re-conceptualize practice.

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