

Reflection, practice learning and documentation

Keywords

Reflection

Needs analysis

Mentoring

Structured learning activities

Portfolios

Sequences of learning devices

Protocols

Abstract

This paper explores ways in which documentation in practice based learning programmes can support reflection in the workplace. It describes three forms of documentation generated in open learning contexts for professional programmes (Needs Analysis, structured learning activities and portfolios) and considers the extent to which these protocols can support and 'reflect' reflection and reflective models. While open learning is a specific type of learning, the requirement for documentary devices to be sound, workable and well structured for large numbers of people and their public nature offers educational professionals in other contexts an opportunity to assess learning transparently.

Introduction

Reflection is generally promoted in workplace learning and in many professions is specifically is an aspect of professional conduct, set out by professional bodies in codes of conduct, standards, proficiencies or competencies (see for example, the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2002). More than this though, practice and reflective practice has to be conducted in the workplace in such a way that employers who, along with the academy and professional bodies are educational stakeholders, can understand it to be relevant to the work they have commissioned. Consequently some thought needs to be given to the development of documentation within practice related curricula. It should also be noted that for audit purposes (national quality assurance bodies, professional regulatory bodies, employer contract reviews) learning in general and reflection as an element of that need in some way to be documented. Not only does reflection in workplace settings need to be done it needs to be seen to be done. The paper discusses three different elements of learning which can occur through established processes and documentation which may support reflection in the workplace.

Background

There is, of course, a huge literature which addresses adult learning (see Knowles 1975, for example) one aspect of which is around practice-related learning, for example, situated learning in the context of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). Similarly, beginning with Schön (1983) there is a very substantial literature on reflective practice, by way of the important work of Mezirow (2000) and others on transformative learning. Practical applications of reflective practice theorising have tended to focus on three different areas: looking within oneself, looking outside oneself at context (see for example various iterations of Chris Johns' work i.e. 2000) and exploring an event with some recourse to the temporal. Gibbs' reflective cycle (well summarised in Bulman 2004) hinges on describing an event and one's relationship to that event but also proposing supplementary activity (other things you might have done in those scenarios) and recommendations for engaging with such an event again in the future. As will be seen under-pinning these preoccupations are structures which are essentially reflexive for individual

positioning in events relevant to practice and engagement, with alternatives based on having taken a mindful approach to an event one has experienced, to be followed by re-positioning.

Reflecting on reflecting

Reflective practice and its articulated models have been very important in practice education. We can see that not only are they a way to think about the world they are also a way to write about the world. They encompass the self, context, the passage of time and ways of engaging with the world. However, as far as I can see in most professional programmes, at least, they tend to occupy a discrete place in the learning programme. Moreover, the majority of papers on reflection tend to focus on reflective practice as an individual experience (see for example the contents of the journal *Reflective Practice*). My argument in this paper is that the sorts of documentation which are common in practice-based learning programmes can actually be seen as 'reflecting' the preoccupations of reflective models quite closely and thus providing an account of overall learner positioning in professional education. So a third element of the background here is work around protocols (in other words templates or guidelines for narratives of various sorts which are developed to accommodate an entire population in this case learners, such protocols include most of the documentation referred to in this paper). Investigation into protocols and how they work (see Berg 1997, Lynch, 2002, Garfinkel, 1976, Suchman & Jordan, 1990) recognises the interplay between the actual protocols and the way people make them workable. (If you have ever constructed a form or questionnaire and found that some people write you notes, cross out questions and fail to follow instructions it means that the participant is having difficulty in inhabiting the account of the world that you require from them. That is a quintessential problem of protocol formats.) Not all protocols enable people to fit into them given the circumstances of their lives.

And this other interest I have in protocols set me thinking about the extent to which learners who have documentation to fill in can be reflective via that documentation (that is, does the documentation let you?).

From the programme design end of things most practice learning developments promote the notion of a series of structured learning opportunities which enable students to position themselves in relation to the workplace, and to engage with the setting in some pro-active and meaningful way both relationally and in terms of events, to find some way of relating to the standards and norms of this workplace and its

associated professions and finally to rehearse and practise (including talking) in a professional way and move towards bringing off a professional identity. Well designed practice placements take account of non-negotiable protocols such as professional standards while at the same time giving students a chance to experience real context based practice. To this end structured programme documentation needs to aim to enable students to understand and integrate a complex experience from beginning to end.

While I recognise the strengths of many reflective models, in this paper I want to look at them in the context of programme components and take the stance that all opportunities to articulate/document the practice experience offer an arena for reflection or aspects of the reflective process. Recognising all documentation as having this potential gives an opportunity to enrich reflection. It seems to me there are three 'places' where different sorts of structured learning and their accompanying documentation usefully 'reflect' reflection: needs analysis, structured learning devices for practice and mentoring and finally portfolios.

The paper discusses the significance of each of these devices as related to a different time in the workplace experience chronology, need analysis being prior, social interaction and structured learning materials relate to the real time experience and portfolios being post-real time.

Needs analysis

Needs analysis is essentially a protocol filled in by students before they begin practice-based courses and/or qualifications in which they assess their current level of skill, experience and expertise and what they think they need to do before they are deemed competent by the standards of their profession. Needs analysis is an initial positioning device for students relating to the difference between their current skill/identity and their desired skill/identity. For example, at the UKOU it is used in teacher training to enable students to map personal subject knowledge, HE curriculum and relevant school experience with a view to specifying the nature and scope of the work they need to do to achieve teacher standards (see Hutchinson & Shakespeare, in preparation). Needs analysis is probably most effective for mature participants who have a practice background but it has some use for anyone who recognises the relevance of their previous practice experience (for example second, third and fourth year students). It offers the opportunity for a piece of acute and precise self-reflection about practice and professional identity. Needs analysis is an effective device to enable learners to assess for themselves their engagement both with the

workplace and its relationship to other elements in their learning programme. It is in itself a form of reflection, offering both personal positioning and the kernel of a plan for learning. Needs analysis offers a safe place for student learning and feedback from tutors enables learners to adjust their views of their own identity in a sheltered environment.

One feature of needs analysis that is crucial but not always recognised is that it offers the learner a structured opportunity to place themselves on what Wenger (1999) calls a landscape of practice. It legitimises the *learner* as part of the overall resources for learning. It recognises experiential capital but also that the capital needs specific development to be fruitfully 'grown'. All of this is familiar territory when we think about adult learning, that people need to see a point in what they are doing and so on. (What better way to do this than to get the learner to articulate their life as a learning resource?)

Structured learning for practice and on site learning

Social interaction, in the form of mentoring, practice supervision and buddying is a key aspect of workplace learning. For this paper focus on documentation related mentoring, which is part of a professional learning audit trail, linked into the chain of practice evidence through the frequent use of portfolios which students and mentors use to map out significant of the practice events and of their social interactions relating to these. In this context the interaction and feedback is channelled into the available documentation, usually a portfolio (which offers both mentor and student an 'acceptable' version of competent behaviour). Reflection can be supported through observation, conversation, rehearsal and the joint 'filling in' of the portfolios (Shakespeare & Webb, 2008, Webb and Shakespeare, 2008). Such collaboration offers opportunities for immediate feedback in real time. In some professions such as social work, and nursing mentorship/supervision of students on practice placements directly reflect the structure of the profession, collegial work being structural. Mentoring, buddying and supervision are all interactions which are on the cusp between context-based practice and of protocolised generic standards descriptions of practice. Berg notes that protocols are effectively a single solution, offering one route only through practice. But, of course, practice exists locally. And mentors can act as brokers between practice/reflective practice and protocols. For example, in nursing, mentors (nursing's name for assessors in the UK) model, observe and rehearse with students how proficiency (to the required standards) is 'performed' in practice, often feeding back, analysing a practice event and showing how each element of it is tackled proficiently

and establishing what more the student has to do to become proficient. So here we have practice activity elucidated through social interaction and made auditable through record.

Practice, however, is usually mediated by more than the interaction between experienced and novice practitioners. Programmes also support practice through structured learning. Not all education programmes offer structured learning which can be used *on site* to enhance learning. I'm raising it here as it is a standard procedure in open learning where learning devices can be very near the practice site. Indeed unlike a classroom tutor they can actually be taken on site. However good practice curricula will offer formal classroom learning about practice and or skills/labs/simulations which also help learners structure their experience in practice. Structured learning materials which can be accessed on site or which direct learners to learning activity and reflective activity on site enable learners to take a proactive stance on their workplace learning.

Structured learning activities tend to be one or a combination of three types: sensitisation (for example, cue-ing the student as to what may happen in an event, what its significance will be and so on), practical (rehearsal and experimentation in practice) and evaluative (reflecting post event). Learners frequently have opportunities to record their responses to learning activities. It will be seen that the combination of these three sorts of activities is effectively most of Gibb's reflective cycle but with an additional anticipatory phase. Such activities provide a template for how to articulate practice (also on how to fill in portfolios, write essays answer examination questions!) Structured learning support and mentoring is a very powerful combination to assist reflection. The former offering approaches and the latter offering a context bound interpretation of classroom and structured learning materials. Both are anchored in documentation.

Portfolios, stories and retrospectives

Portfolios often seem to take centre stage in work-based learning as the documentation of choice.

Professional bodies frequently require them to be produced as a form of assessment. Portfolios often have two distinct elements: firstly an orientation to standards and secondly an orientation to reflective models. They require learners to take a position. The portfolio may essentially be a protocol, built round standards, proficiencies or competencies, where learners document how they have undertaken a piece of practice work to a particular level. Along the way they may offer evidence, exemplars and accounts of their work so that the portfolio tells a story of how they moved to competency in practice. And this documentation is

then countersigned by a competent practitioner. Such evidence can be seen as a demonstration of standards in local context (on the ground). In some portfolios the structure of the narrative required maybe two fold, first the standards and second the reflective model. Thus learners may be encouraged to structure the narrative according to features such as those laid out by Johns (2000, for example aesthetics, personal, ethics, empirics, reflexivity). A portfolio offers a framework both for on-site documentation (and a tool for students and mentors to work together) and for post workplace analysis and learning.

The above description is largely of a product based portfolio. It orients to 'after the event'. Use of exemplars, signed and endorsed by competent practitioners suggests a completed experience. And what all this suggests is a 'tidied up' story.

However, portfolios have the capacity to be both process *and* product based. By their very nature they are or should be reflective documents. Portfolios are often a central plank in assessment and therefore address the wherewithal of professional requirements, including direct imperatives through standards to reflective practice (remembering that of course reflective practice legitimately includes retrospective commentary) . However, all competent practitioners know that the ongoing process is a lot more messy and 'squeezed' in workplace settings than a product-oriented portfolio would imply (Phillips, Tyler and Schostak, 2002, for a discussion of the idea of 'busyness', a state that is actually structural to professional work but frequently seen by professionals as an unfortunate accident of the moment). So a process-based portfolio 'warts and all' is also a reflective document. Most students are aware, however, of the identity management issues that portfolio work throws up. 'Warts and all' is an uncomfortable place to be even though it probably is a better representation of living in a practice environment. Many programmes get round this by encouraging students to use a learning journal or diary. This usually does not see the light of day formally and its messiness really does reflect the fact that there is an issue about the relationship between on the ground experience and formal documentation of experience.

Discussion

Reflection is essentially a cerebral activity. The majority of the literature about reflective practice is individually oriented and offers ways to structure thinking around practice activity and change thinking to improve practice. However, terms of formal education it is useful and in some contexts imperative (i.e. in

assessment) to have ways to see where and how it has taken place. I should note here that even though reflection is an individual activity inevitably beginning with experience and local context this does not mean however that it cannot be recognised structurally in the construction of programme documentation. As I have noted previously there are two elements to this, firstly the protocols or templates which are developed for documentation and secondly the ways that students engage with protocols. Protocols are generic and have difficulty in assimilating messiness and things which are difficult to articulate. So the engagement that learners have with protocols needs handling carefully. However, I do think that a broader understanding of the possibilities for different documentation in different parts of a programme is worth pursuing. I have proposed that learning structures and documentation, while not themselves reflection as such, are locations where we can hope to see mindful practice articulated. I have outlined three documentary locations where I think we can hope to see reflection either recorded or represented. It is interesting that these three locations can also be understood as a loose chronology of the process of reflection. So there are initial understandings (needs analysis), experience worked up and articulated through social interaction (mentoring which takes place during practice) and structured learning devices (which further support reflection during events and depending on purpose may model ways of thinking about practice) and finally portfolio work (a process portfolio being an ongoing messy account of events as they unfold and a product portfolio being a retrospective). Each offers a protocol or protocols for the learner to engage with.

I'm intrigued by the possibility of using a reflective model (or models) more seriously and explicitly to design programme documentation thus 'forcing' reflection in like a word through rock. As I have hinted there are shadows of this already. In regard to the element of temporality which is evident in such models as Gibbs Reflective cycle and Kolb's experiential learning model (see Bulman 2004 for a précis of this), courses do start at the beginning and end at the end. Portfolio work does 'follow the event', Needs analysis does precede it. There seem to be some possibilities for being more systematic about this in protocol design. Similarly the sort of work Chris Johns is engaged with, through careful categoric analysis offers 'alternatives' for re-positioning of the learner. All of these structures have a potential in course programme documentation, which are not just administrative necessities but have real educational potential. The structures I have described above support the notion of reflection as a recordable activity which is a

process where mini-events and the mindfulness that accompanies them can accumulate into a narrative about mindful practice over a long period of time, that is the unfolding of a professional programme.

Pam Shakespeare

Emeritus Professor: Practice Based Open Learning

UK Open University

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