

AN INQUIRY INTO BENEFITS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Innovations in learning with conscious thinking result in conceptual and effective learning. New strategies and techniques of learning aim at bringing about change in behavior that might help in solving problems of the individual at local and global level. This paper inquires into benefits of Reflective Practice in Open and Distance Learning in Pakistan. A questionnaire was administered among 40 students doing masters in Education, autumn 2009, at Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad.

Collected data were analyzed by calculating percentage and Mean scores of each item. An interview was conducted to validate the quantitative data. Findings showed that Reflective Practice helped learner in solving their learning problems and learners were able to cope with problems with their conscious effort. The respondents were agreed that consultation with friends and discussion with senior colleagues benefited them in solving problems involved in their learning. The respondents acceded that counseling for selection of subjects and institution, their past experiences and self-reports were useful in teaching-learning process and solving their learning problems. The respondents were of the opinion that reflective practice helps in solving learning problems and in bringing improvement in their behavior.

The findings also indicated that lack of counseling, time and resources caused problems in becoming reflective and committed person. Keeping the findings in view, it is recommended that reflective practice might be promoted among students with the help of counselors, teachers, senior students, books and journals. Extensive counseling be provided to students at postgraduate level and curricula should be made innovative.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Counseling, Behavioral change, Distance Education.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching aims at bringing behavioral change through reflection and counseling. It desires to produce dynamic, reflective and inspirational individuals who believe in guiding and counseling the ignored segments of the society. According to Sharma, R.A (1993, p.22) "teaching is a social and professional activity. It is a process of development. Teaching is a system of action which induces learning through interpersonal relationship."

Teaching and learning process requires special knowledge, skills and experiences. The knowledge, skill and experiences are prerequisite for the professional growth of an individual.

When one deliberately thinks about his performance once in his practice, it will give birth to the improvement of the whole teaching and learning process. According to Karen et.al (1993, p .19):

“Reflective practice is viewed as a means by which practitioners can develop a great level of self awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth.”

Reflective practice creates problems solving competency, critical, constructive and original thinking among the learners .It also frees teaching from impulsive routine behavior and makes teaching intentional and deliberate. Reflective practice is perhaps best understood as an approach which promotes autonomous learning that aims to develop students' understanding and critical thinking skills. Techniques such as self and peer assessment, problem-based learning, personal development planning and group work can all be used to support a reflective approach.

Schön (1987) has given reflective practice currency in recent years, using and applying a basic principle of reflecting on experience to improve action and professional practice. However, this is not a new or original idea; it has been developed by education such as Dewey and Lewin and can be traced back to the work of Socrates and a form of learning through questioning and feedback. It forces us to question what it is that we know and how we come to know it. More currently, it is suggested that learning to learn, or the development of learning power, is getting better at knowing when, how and what to do when you don't know what to do (Claxton, 1999). This lack of certainty forces the individual to examine the basis on which s/he believes something to be true.

It also helps students to understand that learning is individual, and that only they can make the connections to existing knowledge such that they make sense of law for themselves.

Reflective practice is driven by questions, dialogue, and stories Reflective practice is fundamentally structured around inquiry. We tend to recognize the importance of allocating time to reflection when we can see it as a means for gaining visibility on a problem or question we need to answer. To gain visibility, we examine experiences that are relevant to this problem or question.

The most powerful “technologies” for examining experience are stories (narrative accounts of experience) and dialogue (building thinking about experience out loud). Journaling is similar to dialogue in the case of individual reflection. Stories and dialogue can be effective technologies for the reflective process because they provide cognitively complex and culturally potent systems for conveying the way we think about, feel about, and make connections in experience (Clarke, 1995).

The term ‘Reflective Practicum’ is for the educational setting, or environment: “A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning a practice”.

This is where students learn *by doing*, with the help of coaching. The practicum is ‘reflective’ in two senses: “it is intended to help students become proficient in a kind of reflection-in-action; and, when it works well, it involves a dialogue of coach and student that takes the form of reciprocal reflection-in-action” (Schön D,1987).

Reflective practice can be a beneficial process in teacher professional development, both for pre-service and in-service teachers.

As defined by Schon, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline (Schon, 1996). After the concept of reflective practice was introduced by Schon, many schools, colleges, and departments of education began designing teacher education and professional development programs based on this concept.

More recently, Boud and Walker (1998) also noted shortcomings in the way SCDEs were applying Schon's concept of reflective practice to teacher education. They took issue with what they considered to be a "checklist" or "reflection on demand" mentality, reflection processes with no link to conceptual frameworks, a failure to encourage students to challenge teaching practices, and a need for personal disclosure that was beyond the capacity of some young teachers. Boud and Walker suggest that these weaknesses can be addressed when the teacher-coaches create an environment of trust and build a context for reflection unique to every learning situation.

Reflective practice is used at both the pre-service and in-service levels of teaching. Coaching and peer involvement are two aspects of reflective practice seen most often at the pre-service level. In a 1993 study of how student teachers develop the skills necessary for reflective teaching during their field experiences, Ojanen explores the role of the teacher educator as coach. Teacher educators can most effectively coach student teachers in reflective practice by using students' personal histories, dialogue journals, and small and large-group discussions about their experiences to help students reflect upon and improve their practices.

Kettle and Sellars (1996) studied the development of third- year teaching students. They analyzed the students' reflective writings and interviewed them extensively about their reflective practices. They found that the use of peer reflective groups encouraged student teachers to challenge existing theories and their own preconceived views of teaching while modeling for them a collaborative style of professional development that would be useful throughout their teaching careers. Formal system of education has a wide range of opportunities and pathways to introduce and practice reflective practice but on the other hand, non-formal system, distance and open learning system faces challenges to fully meet the requirements of developing reflective practice among learners of open and distance system of education. In Pakistan, Allama Iqbal Open University provides education to a large number of students from matriculation to PhD programs through open and distance teaching and learning. The university employs non-formal method of correspondence, radio and television broadcasts, special textbooks and reading materials prepared on self-learning basis, part-time teachers (tutors) engaged nearest to the student's residences. And a system of study centers for applied training is spread throughout Pakistan.

In distance education, Serving as a coach or mentor to peers is another form of reflective practice for in-service teachers. Uzat (1998) presents coaching as a realistic and systematic approach to ongoing teacher improvement through focused reflection on teaching methods. Uzat also relates the concept of coaching to self-efficacy: Teachers' beliefs that they affect students' lives as well as the school motivate them intrinsically to grow.

BENEFITS OF REFLECTION IN PRACTICE

The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style and ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. Other specific benefits noted in current literature include the validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice. Freidus (1997)

describes a case study of one teacher/graduate student struggling to make sense of her beliefs and practices about what constitutes good teaching. Her initial pedagogy for teaching was based on the traditions and practices of direct teaching. Her traditional socialization into teaching made it difficult for her to understand that her views of good teaching were being challenged in her practice. But the opportunity for exploration through reflective portfolio work enabled her to acknowledge and validate what she was learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to inquire into benefits of reflective practice at postgraduate level in open and distance learning. More specifically the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is Reflective Practice significant in Open and distance learning?
2. What are students' perceptions towards reflective practice?
3. Does reflective practice help solve their learning problems?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Various studies on reflective practice and counseling show that they are essential to develop a balanced personality. In teaching-learning process, students are in direct contact with their teachers and they depend upon teachers for social, emotional and intellectual development and adjustment through guidance and counseling.

Davis, J. R. (1997, p.2)

"Teaching involves a teacher and a student interacting over a subject in a setting."

Reflective practice is not conducive to teaching situations if it is not perceived accurately (Boud & Walker, 1998). Rogers (1995, p.11) defines innovation in social perspective, which is as follows:

"An idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption, it matters little, so far as human behavior is concerned, whether or not an idea is objectively new as measured by the laps of time, since its first use or discovery. The perceived newness of the idea for the individual determines his or her relation to it. If the idea seems new to individual, it is an innovation."

Despite these criticisms reflective practice has become the major model for continuing professional development in higher education (Bleakley, 1999). Reflective practice generates a form of knowledge that lead to creativity and critical thinking (Sue Clegg, 2000). Guidance and counseling services are provided to learners to solve their problems, to face their difficulties and to learn effectively. The success of counseling process mostly depends upon the efficiency of the counselor, so counselor should be a guidance-minded committed and skilled person. Counselor is the nerve center of the guidance program. He should have a well-balanced personality, a broad outlook, an understanding attitude and a genuine interest in helping students. According to Orbach (2003, p.11):

Counselors are seen-always to some extent-as authority figures, knowledgably, wise, reliable and able to take on the full force of the clients fear and pain, as well as burden of their intimate secrets. This work is of mature counsellors, already qualified and in general counselling practice.

Karen, F.Etal (1993, p.19) Writes:

“Reflective practice, while often confused with reflection, is neither a solitary nor a relaxed meditative process. To the contrary, reflective practice is a challenging, demanding, and often trying process that is most successful as a collaborative effort”.

The origin of reflective practice comes from Dewey's work on reflective practice, in this context John Dewey (1933,p.6) maintains:“Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends...”

Bartlett (1990, p.204) states:

“Improvement of teaching may be achieved through reflection. Reflection is more than “thinking” and focuses on the day to day classroom teaching of the individual teacher as well the institutional structures in which teachers and students work”.

The problem solving counselling is very useful in solving the problems of the learners i.e. dealing with system breakdowns, improving concentration and reading speeds, anxiety and clarifying motivation etc.

According to Prasad (2000, p.97) “the purpose of individual counselling is to facilitate wise choice of the sort on which the person's later development depends”. Counselling is a teaching-learning process for the client. It is a relationship between a professionally trained competent counselor and the individual who wants to learn about himself. Various goals for counselling have been established over the years.

In both formal and non-formal system of education, Reflective practice involves thinking about and learning from your own practice and from the practices of others, so as to gain new perspectives on the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in your educational situation, improve judgment and increase the probability of taking informed action when situations are complex unique and uncertain. In distance education, students and tutors are linked through multi-media sessions, Radio and Television programs, correspondence material, tutorial meetings and group workshops.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of the study was descriptive. Survey method was adopted to collect data from the respondents. The sample of the study was 40 prospective teachers doing masters of Arts in Education enrolled in semester autumn 2009 at Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad.

Allama Iqbal Open University A questionnaire of 12 items was developed keeping the related literature in view.

The questionnaire was modified and refined with experts' opinion that established content and face validity of the instrument. Only 35 questionnaires were properly answered, among the rest, some had missing items and some were incorrectly filled in. The questionnaire was designed on five point rating scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed personally and the responses came from 35 students out of 40 that was 85.5 percent of the total delivered questionnaires.

Sr. No	Statements	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	%	Mean Score
1.	Counseling is necessary for a student to address his problems in learning.	19 54.4%	13 37%	3 0.09%	0 0.0%	--	91.4	4.5
2.	Students should consult their seniors about difficult issues in learning.	19 54.2%	10 27%	1 .01%	5 14%	--	81.2	4.2
3.	Students can overcome their problems in learning through counseling by the teachers.	18 52%	14 40%	0	3 0.09%	--	92	4.5
4.	Past experiences help in resolving students problems.	12 34%	22 63%	1 0.02%	--	--	97	4.3
5.	Awareness of a student through counseling about the nature and impact of his performance is very important	18 52%	13 37%	2 0.057%	2 0.057%	--	89	2.0
6.	Fellow students' feedback and observation help in resolving students' learning problems.	14 40%	19 54.2%	8 23%	9 26%	7 20%	94.2	3.4
7.	Counseling enables the students enhance their learning in future.	20 57%	14 40%	--	1 .02%	--	97	3.4
8.	It is necessary for students to frequently interact with teachers for counseling and guidance.	8 23%	12 34%	7 20%	7 20%	1 .01%	57	3.5
9.	Counseling helps in promoting personal contact with teachers.	5 14%	16 46%	6 17%	6 17%	2 8%	60	3.5
10.	Reflective Practice helps teachers keep an eye on students learning activities in the classroom.	13 37%	19 54%	1 3%	2 8%	--	91	4.2

11.	Reflective practice helps Students reflect their values and assumptions for bringing a change.	14 40%	12 34%	3 9%	4 11%	2 8%	74	3.9
12	Reflective practice helps students criticize themselves for improvement in learning.	14 40%	19 54%	1 3%	1 3%	--	94	4.3

DISCUSSION

Data analysis shows that the respondents took high interest in manifesting their attitude and perceptions towards counseling and the reflective practice. Almost all the students think that counseling and reflective practice help them in their learning at postgraduate level. Data indicate that 91.4% respondents were agreed that reflective practice was necessary for a student to cope with various psycho-academic problems.

The students come with different backgrounds and need counseling for proper adjustment. 82.8% respondents were agreed that the students need to consult their seniors about difficult issues in learning.

97% responses show that reflective practice in the classroom helps students overcome their learning problems. Past experiences that manifest the reflection of reflective practice help in resolving students' learning problems as respondents were favorable to this practice.

89% responses indicate that students think it very important to get awareness through counseling about the nature and of their performance. As supported by the data counseling helps enhance students learning in future and it is necessary for students to interact with teacher for counseling and guidance.

94.2% respondents perceived that fellow students feedback and observation is helpful in resolving students' problems in learning. Data on reflective practice show that the respondents find it helpful in improving learning and bringing positive behavioral change. The teacher would better watch the students' activities in the classroom through reflective practice.

74% respondents were agreed that reflective practice helps the students in reflecting their values and assumptions for bringing a change and 94% responses accede that reflective practice is helpful in improving their learning by criticizing themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

From data analysis and discussion following conclusions are drawn:

- Majority of students agreed that students need counseling and consulting their seniors to resolve their problems in learning
- Majority of students conformed that past experiences help them learning problems.
- Most of students agreed that awareness of the students through counseling about the nature and impact of his performance is very important.

- Majority of students agreed that fellow students' feedback and observation help them in resolving their difficulties in learning.
- Almost all the students were of the view that reflective practice enables a student to enhance his/her learning in future.
- Majority of students concurred that reflective practice helps teacher keep an eye on students' learning activities in the classroom.
- Most of the students acceded that reflective practice helps students reflect their values and assumptions for bringing positive change.
- Majority of students agreed reflective practice helps students criticize themselves for improvement in learning.

Following recommendations are given for further studies:

- Content material on reflective practice and Counseling may be incorporated in the syllabus to enhance efficiency of open and distance learning.
- Teachers and students may be provided training on reflective practice counseling for better teaching and learning process.
- Reflective Practice may be promoted through teaching-learning methods and content activities, and by incorporating innovation in curriculum.

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