Reflecting on one-to-one teaching - What strategies might shed light on our practice?

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Introduction

Tertiary learning advisors may spend considerable amounts of time teaching individual students in one-to-one consultations, using both face-to-face and online delivery (Carter, 2010; Wilson, Li, Collins & Couchman, 2011, Berry, Collins, Copeman, Harper, Li & Prentice, 2012). Along with other more traditional forms of evaluation, reflection on teaching has been recommended as a method for reviewing and evaluating one-to-one teaching. In December 2012 ATLAANZ adopted a document on Professional Practice (ATLAANZ, 2012) which includes the statement, "learning advisors engage in reflective practice within institutional teams and within the wider community" (p. 3). However there seems to have been little investigation into how this reflection on practice is carried out, and in particular, on whether learning developers/advisors engage in reflection on their individual teaching sessions or if they do reflect, whether they follow any structured formats, such as a rubric, diary, checklist, list of prompts, or other tools.

As Thomson (2012) has noted in her blog on academic writing, "reflection is one of those weasel-ly words that can mean anything and nothing. Most of us acknowledge that we need to do it, but what does it actually mean as a practice?" (para. 1). I believe myself to be a reflective practitioner but when I look at how much time I devote to reflecting on practice and then consider how informal and unsystematic this reflection can be, I can see that I am probably not deriving all potential benefits from this form of review. I have the sense that solutions to some of my one-to-one teaching concerns may be at my fingertips; if I could only find the time, and an appropriate structure, to more consistently review my practice and think my way through to greater clarity about alternative ways of conducting each interaction.

I am therefore interested to investigate to what extent TLAs engage in reflective practice, how colleagues go about reflection if they use it and their beliefs around this practice. This paper assumes that reflective practice is likely to be helpful to the enhancement of teaching practice, difficult though this may be to demonstrate. It also assumes that, like me, other TLAs find it difficult in the course of their working

lives to consistently and thoroughly reflect on their one-to-one teaching practice. The purpose here is to highlight aspects of reflective practice and consider the usefulness of a range of tools for reflection on one-to-one teaching – in particular a checklist and 'wheel of learning advising' which time-poor TLAs could use as prompts to review one-to-one sessions. The paper concludes by outlining a planned research project to be undertaken with participation from members of ATLAANZ.

Insights from literature

Most writers on reflection in teaching seem to start with the work of Schön (1983). He describes reflection as 'thoughtful practice' which, according to a later work (Schön, 1987), can include:

1. reflection-in-action – thinking about the work that happens at the time of actually doing the work;

2. reflection-on-action – thinking shortly after an event is finished, usually reviewing what happened, to think about how we could solve problems that arose, or what we could improve on in future practice;

3. reflection-before-action was added by Eraut (1995) – thinking and review prior to practice, as part of the planning stage, a form of reflection that seems to differ from reflection-on-action only in the timing, as it may be done some time after the initial practice rather than immediately.

This early work focused, in the case of Schön, on the role of reflection in the overall work of professionals, rather than specifically on teaching. However, it has been very influential in the application of reflective practice to education.

Reflection is seen as a method of learning which involves thinking things over with the purpose of making the implicit explicit and questioning our practices, knowledge bases and deeply held beliefs. A reflective cycle involves investigating the past in the present in order to generate alternative ways of practicing for the future (Carroll, 2009). The notion seems to relate to the socio-cultural perspective on education which holds that thoughts, statements and actions cannot be disentangled from the context in which they originally occurred. In this perspective Tennant (as cited in Illeris, 2009) sees our experience as "a text which can be reinterpreted and reassessed" (p. 155). Reflection on experience implies taking a certain amount of responsibility for what happens in our work, and assumes that we can make progress in our practice by thinking deeply about it. Usher (as cited in Illeris, 2009), points out that it assumes a willingness to change. In a strong statement about the ongoing nature of reflection on practice, C. Wright Mills (1959) emphasises the link between personal experience and our working lives:

what this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense, craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work (as cited in Clegg, 2012, p. 196).

Others have looked at the emotional work component of one-to-one teaching and learning (Huyton, 2009; Mitchell, 2008). Following an electronic survey of members of Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education, Huyton (2009) found that almost three-quarters of them could identify times when, after challenging encounters with students, they needed to 'debrief' or 'offload'. Most reported that in such situations they reflected on such encounters individually and drew on their own professional expertise, rather than on support from colleagues. Huyton claims "the contemporary climate of work intensification has had implications for the emotional well-being of higher education practitioners which are, in part, explained by the lack of discursive space available for collective reflection on practice issues" (p. 14). Clearly, feelings and emotions are significant because of the way they arise unbidden and contribute to reactions. During sessions, feelings can intervene and disrupt thought processes; especially in relation to mistakes or perceived mistakes, so they can be clues to key points about practice. Collective reflection may indeed be useful as a way of dealing with emotions in teaching, but not always be practical within the constraints of busy professional lives. Reflective practice or 'self-reflection' as Berry et al., (2012) term it, can allow for intrapersonal debrief and may be useful before or instead of discussion with colleagues.

Some views, beliefs and concerns of advisors about their one-to-one teaching practice have been exposed as writers comment or reflect on their own teaching experiences (Carter, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). In 2010 Carter reported on results from a survey of ATLAANZ members which looked at how TLAs see their work in individual consultations. This article raises a number of challenges and suggests we interrogate our practice in one-to-one consultations, both for personal professional development and to ensure ethical one-to-one teaching. Reflective practice has also been advocated as a useful option to enable individual review of aspects of one-to-one teaching (Wilson, 2008), as a component of a more general teaching evaluation (Berry et al., 2012) and as a basis for professional development (Wilson et al., 2011). A range of reflective methods have been investigated; in these articles we can see benefit gained from individual recording of questioning techniques (Wilson, 2008), use of discourse analysis (Wilson et al., 2011), journals, audio logs and post-teaching discussions (Berry et al., 2012). Chanock (2000) presents a good example of the use of reflection in her one-to-one teaching and points out that insights gained from one-to-one work enable learning advisors to address student needs more widely, as they engage with academic staff in their institutions. Wilson (2008) provides an excellent case study

of personal reflective practice in action. She focused specifically on her questioning strategies within seven one-to-one sessions, and reflected on student responses. She found that this reflective process deepened her understanding of the varied approaches that questions can play a part in a teaching session.

Benefits of reflection

Some benefits of reflective practice lie in its potential for articulating thoughts and helping us externalise them (Carroll, 2009; Usher, as cited in Illeris, 2009), as well as for "allowing the context to teach us" (Langer, 1989, as cited in Carroll, 2009, p. 49). Also, in engaging in reflection we focus on the process of our work (Carroll, 2009) and make it more likely that we will apply new understandings to future practice. Reflective practice is claimed to be an effective form of on-going professional development (Walker, 2011). This is attested to in a number of practical guides for teachers in a range of settings (Brookfield, 1995; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998; Moon, 2004; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). A further guide to reflective practice (Cowan, 2006) provides both analysis and a range of reflective tools, along with many examples drawn from tertiary education. While generally relevant, this literature does not refer to reflection in the context of one-to-one teaching. The articles mentioned above (Wilson, 2008;: Chanock, 2000) clearly support the benefits of reflecting on one-to-one teaching, and Chanock summarises this by saying. "I was able to learn much that could be fed back into teaching other students" (p. 65), while at the same time emphasising the unique nature of the dialogue with each individual student.

The challenges of reflection

While reflective practice is usually discussed in highly positive terms, some issues arise concerning its use. Carroll (2009) concedes that individual internal reflection is beneficial but "can allow for self-deception" (p. 43). The link between reflection and action has also been questioned (Mälkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012). Reflection can simply involve looking back on what happened and noticing, rather than acting to improve teaching. Teachers routinely see time as a barrier to reflective practice, perhaps in part because it may not immediately lead to a perceptible outcome or relevant professional development (Brookfield, 1995; Cowan, 2006). A lack of time is undoubtedly genuine, but Brookfield (1995) also points out that time concerns may include, more subtly, doubts about whether reflective thinking is a legitimate way for teachers to spend time at work. He comments that institutional rhetoric may espouse the value of teachers engaging in critical reflection, but not work to create the conditions of openness and acceptance that would allow this activity to flourish. TLAs are likely to feel some discomfort about engaging in reflective practice, if they sense that others do not see it as a valid component of their accountability as learning advisors.

Dialogic reflective practice

One value of dialogic reflective practice may lie in the opportunity to share ideas that are not fully formed or have perhaps become implicitly coded in some words we routinely use to talk about our practices. As mentioned above, peer dialogue or peer mentoring provides a model for shared discussion of reflective practice (Carroll, 2009); as does narrative therapy as proposed, for TLA use, by Carter (2010). Kato (2012) supports the use of dialogue with a peer in reviewing one-to-one sessions with learners, as well as the use of prompted individual post-session reflection, prior to engagement in dialogue. The individual reflective phase seems essential before moving into a discussion with a colleague. The ground for such a discussion would also need to be carefully prepared, as Kato (2012) and Berry et al. (2012) note, in terms of a carefully articulated learning contract about how the peer discussion on reflection is to be conducted. A contract could include discussion of confidentially, agreement on roles, responsibilities, acknowledgement of status differences, sharing of the floor, nature of feedback given and post-discussion expectations.

Tools for reflection

The following list outlines a number of strategies, tools or prompts which have been suggested for individual (or self-) reflective practice in teaching and learning and which may be useful for TLAs to explore when reflecting on one-to-one teaching. Some tools or strategies with a peer discussion component follow this.

Primarily individual reflection strategies:

- Journal writing – different forms of written narrative, sometimes following a structured framework of questions (Moon, 2004; Cowan, 2006);
- Critical incident review;
- Voice-recording - oral narrative and/or recorded learning log (Moon, 2004);
- Self-observation via video or audio (Walker, 2011);
- Checklists (Cowan, 2006); and
- Blogging (open to peer comment, but initiated as an individual reflection).

Peer-assisted strategies:

- Peer discussion, peer mentoring, possibly as part of community of practice activity which might include forms of reciprocal peer interviewing or dialogue (Kato, 2012; Wenger, 1998);
- Peer observation of one-to-one teaching, followed by peer dialogue (Berry et al., 2012);
- Structured peer discussion as in peer mentoring, peer supervision (Carroll, 2009);
- The wheel of learning advising (Kato, 2012);

- Critical conversation (Brookfield, 1995);
- Action research – projects adopting a cycle of observe, reflect, implement, evaluate usually with the aim of addressing a specific identified issue or problem (Piggot-Irvine, 2009);
- Discussion of metaphors; and
- Concept-mapping.

Dialogue with a peer could follow use of an individual reflection tool, but conversely discussion with a peer about a specific focus for reflection might lead well to a TLA trialling an individual strategy. Awareness of a range of tools might allow for individual choice and encourage trialling of different approaches to see which work best in terms of promoting enhancement of teaching, and which fit well within time constraints and other work commitments.

Personal Observations

My own efforts at reflective practice are both consistent and sporadic. They are consistent in the sense that I regularly do mental review of some of my one-to-one teaching sessions, particularly when a session has not gone well. Writing notes, talking to other TLAs and sporadic attempts at keeping a journal are the main strategies I use. As noted above, many authors endorse journal writing (Moon, 2004, Cowan 2006), but my success with this reflective tool is mixed. Writing is invariably helpful because it externalises the issue and enables me to develop some perspective on the options I may have had in the session. It is probably effective but can be slow and cumbersome; I ramble and it is not always easy to crystallise key points from the texts I produce. Bullet point notes work better for me but it is sometimes hard to recapture the full thought later. I do not always get to the point of identifying key points I want to work on. The reflection on practice I engage in therefore works as a one-off learning activity after a particular session, but I am uncertain whether it prompts long-term changes in my teaching practice. However, on occasion I notice that in a one-to-one consultation I put into practice a thought or strategy that occurred to me in an earlier post-teaching reflection. This has occurred both when working with the same student again and when working with a different student.

Next steps

As a result of considering the role of reflective practice in one-to-one teaching I became curious about the extent to which there could be evidence of a culture of reflective practice within our profession. I also wanted to see if I could develop some ways of prompting and recording reflective thinking which could help to take advantage of short breaks between teaching sessions. In 2012 I therefore applied for and received ethical approval for a research project into reflection (Unitec Research Ethics Committee, 2012, personal communication). The research question for the project is:

What is the role of reflection in the 1:1 teaching practice of tertiary language and learning advisors?

Specifically it aims to explore the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of TLAs on the role of reflection before, during or after their 1:1 teaching?

2. To what extent are TLAs regularly reviewing, evaluating or reflecting on 1:1 teaching?

3. What is the potential for and value of using specific reflection tools and practices as a means of improving their one-to-one work?

My intention is that this will initially focus on asking participants to trial two reflective practice tools – a checklist that I have drafted that allows participants to include their own specific points for observations and reflections; and a wheel of learning advising (adapted with permission from Kato, 2012) which participating TLAs will be encouraged to adapt as they see fit.

In order to explore the above questions with participants, I plan to use a qualitative approach which includes data collection methods, survey questionnaires and focus groups, the latter of which may have to be limited geographically to where I am based. It seemed to me that we learning advisors could benefit from both reflecting on and considering the potential of reflection for what Carter (2010) refers to as this 'closed door' form of teaching. This could contribute to our on-going professional development and strengthen discussion of our work with other academic colleagues. It may also be of value given the current lack of structured and specific training for one-to-one teaching. Indirectly I hope that students may benefit from their advisors both engaging in regular and structured consideration of teaching strategies and sharing insights with colleagues.

I conducted a pilot study for this work in 2012, when two colleagues and I trialled the first iteration of the two tools. I saw this trial as an opportunity to refine the tools and the instructions given for their use. I extended the trial to a wider group of learning centre colleagues and will trial the planned survey questionnaire with this group before inviting members of the wider ATLAANZ community of practice to participate. Following the analysis of survey data, I hope to share some findings in focus group discussions with colleagues. In the focus groups, participants will also have the opportunity to review some further tools for prompting reflection and for recording responses, and comment on their potential usefulness.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some understandings of the term 'reflective practice'. It has also considered reflection on one-to-one consultations as a means of both interrogating practices and reviewing the informational, interpersonal and emotional

dimensions of this work. From a personal perspective, I have noticed that my assumptions about one-to-one teaching and learning are based substantially on my needs as a learner and my reactions to my own learning. This observation alone seems to support both my continued engagement in individual reflective practice on teaching and the value that might be found in discussion with TLA peers. Colleagues will no doubt have a wide range of experiences and views on the topic. Now that ATLAANZ members have agreed to a professional practice document that says we engage in reflective practice, it seems timely to explore its potential to help us enhance and share insights on our one-to-one teaching.

Note: If you are interested in participating in the trial of the two tools – the reflective practice checklist and the modified Wheel of Learning Advising (Kato, 2012), please email me at cmalthus@unitec.ac.nz for a participant information sheet and consent form.

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