Guest editors' introduction to special theme issue: Reflective practices

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Rationale

This special theme issue of Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development is entitled *Reflective Practices: Promoting Professional Learning in Contemporary Workplaces*. Current rhetoric constructs such workplaces as learning organisations and communities of practice facilitating situated learning (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1993) where the effective attainment of outcomes depends on employees at all levels renewing their professional learning and contributing to ongoing efficiencies. Potential barriers to the promotion of this view of professional learning include employees who might take a different view of their roles and/or organisations failing to accept and build on that learning.

Reflective practice (Schön, 1987) is a key pre-requisite if such professional learning is to energise contemporary workplaces and to enhance individual and institutional development. This issue of the journal canvasses a range of evidence-based strategies deployed by the contributing authors to engage in reflective practices of various kinds in their respective workplaces, with a view to evaluating their effectiveness and their impact on professional learning. What emerges from that engagement is a recognition of the situated character of reflection and of the complexity – even the confusion – of influences on its likely efficacy in initiating and sustaining productive change and lifelong learning.

The impetus for the theme issue came from the work of participants in a workshop that the guest editors conducted about researching and publishing in lifelong learning at the 3rd international lifelong learning conference hosted by the Central Queensland University Library at Rydges Capricorn International Resort in June 2004 (with the participants representing universities and training organisations in Queensland, South Australia and New Zealand). Out of that workshop and subsequent discussions grew a commitment by the participating authors and the guest editors to bring together a broad range of articles exploring the intersection among reflective practice, professional learning and the character and influence of contemporary workplaces. That commitment was enlarged and deepened by other authors who did not participate in the workshop, but whose work has enabled them to make a significant contribution to the discussion.

The rationale for this focus on reflective practices is threefold. Firstly, there is a growing specialised literature, to which this theme issue seeks to contribute, on contemporary workplaces and the ways in which they facilitate and/or inhibit professional learning. Much of this literature emphasises the innovative and positive opportunities afforded by new technologies and work practices and influenced by broader socioeconomic changes, such as change management, collaboration, mobile work and teleworking (Becker, Quinn, & Tennessen, 1995; Becker, Rappaport, Quinn, & Sims, 1992; Becker & Tennessen, 1995; Becker, Tennessen, & Dahl, 1996). By contrast, other studies have highlighted workplaces as sites of overt and covert discrimination and marginalisation for particular groups of people. For example, the gendered composition of such workplaces has been demonstrated to be both significant and often marginalising for women (Acker, 1991; Moore, 2003; Probert, 2002). Similarly, despite progress on a number of fronts, workplace racism persists, particularly in disguised or unrecognised forms (Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, n.d.). These kinds of characteristics and developments form the broader context against which individual experiences of workplaces as facilitating and/or hindering professional learning need to be understood.

Secondly, there is a growing recognition that professional learning is not an 'optional extra', but rather a crucial element in harnessing energies and maximising outcomes in contemporary workplaces (International Labour Office, 2002; see also Campaign for Learning, n.d.). Yet such energies and outcomes depend for their attainment as much on individuals as on institutions. It is therefore vital to record and listen to the wide array of individual perspectives represented in this theme issue.

Thirdly, there is value in contemporary analysis in contesting the notion of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987). While there is an intuitive identification with a process of reflecting on one's work in order to enhance it, there are at least two potential challenges to the utility and viability of such a concept. One such challenge is the postmodernist critique of the idea(l) of a unified self; the other challenge is the fractured and fragmented character of many contemporary workplaces that function as sociocultural sites which are framed by the nexus of culture, language, social relationships, and power and in which autonomous agency is downplayed and even extinct. This theme issue therefore presents an opportunity for authors and readers alike to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of reflective practices as a concept and a process in the early 21st century.

Overview

In the first article, Stephanie White from the Christchurch College of Education in New Zealand deploys her own reflective practices and experiential knowledge as a liaison lecturer to explore 10 final-year student-teachers' experiences of situated learning – linking the contextualised teaching of knowledge and skills with their prospective use in real life situations – during fieldwork experience in primary school classrooms. The author analyses qualitative data gleaned from a range of sources in terms of five key themes: learning situated in authentic settings; engagement between novice and expert; the opportunity to employ strategies that assist learning; the opportunity to shift learning between contexts and situations; and the opportunity to engage in communities of learning and practice. White argues that there is a strong link between the student-teachers' capacity and opportunity for situated learning on the one hand and the effectiveness of their reflective practices on the other, and that there are specific strategies (such as

through action research) in which both student-teachers and supervising teachers can engage that are likely to enhance that link.

Nicolette Lee from the Swinburne University of Technology in Australia uses the second article to propose a variation on Laurillard's well-known 2002 Conversational Framework in order to incorporate experiential learning in a design studio setting, the focus of the author's teaching. Lee draws on her own experiential knowledge to argue against the privileging of abstract knowledge at the cost of experiential learning. Reflective practice emerges in the context of this particular type of workplace as being both a valuable tool for thinking and action and composed of multiple sources of information and forms of knowledge construction.

The third article, by Kerri-Lee Harris and Richard James of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne in Australia, highlights the enduringly significant and sometimes controversial policies and practices associated with university student assessment. The authors explain the careful thought and their own experiential knowledge that underpinned the development and implementation of the first-named author's *Guide for Reviewing Assessment* (Harris, 2005), which was based on seven generic principles of good practice: matching assessment, learning exercises and objectives; variety and complexity in assessment; the timing of assessment; informing students; equity and fairness; feedback to students; and feedback to staff. Harris and James ponder the factors that facilitate and inhibit the broader adoption of this set of reflective practices in a particular university workplace.

In the fourth article, Judy Nagle from Deakin University in Australia also investigates the issue of assessment as it frames the intricate interplay between student plagiarism and customising learning to individual student cohorts in a postgraduate course aimed mainly at international students. The author associates changes to student assessment to concerns about cheating as well as to a situated move to a more teacher-centred approach to course pedagogy. What was striking in this study was that reflection was located in the specific context of the course's development and was in turn the catalyst for pedagogical and assessment changes that made sense in that context but that Nagle acknowledges might be seen differently by other academics.

Mark A. Tyler from the University of Southern Queensland in Australia applies the concept of criticality in the fifth article as a lens for interrogating the efficacy of his praxis as a Technical and Further Education teacher over 13 years. He asserts that a personal philosophy of action is able to be enlisted as a source of support and encouragement in the context of an oppressive work environment. On the basis of that capacity, Tyler stakes a strong claim for the utility of criticality in ongoing research into the vocational education and training workplace.

The sixth article, by Savia A. Coutinho and Brad J. Sagarin from North Illinois University in the United States of America, takes us into the realm of workplace learning as it pertains to consumers and their susceptibility to different kinds of advertising. The authors report a study with 59 undergraduate psychology students in three groups to assess their responses to a set of stimulus advertisements that demonstrated both legitimate and illegitimate scarcity tactics. Coutinho and Sagarin conclude that the development of inductive reasoning is vital for training consumers in rule induction and thereby for enhancing their resistance to unscrupulous persuasion – itself a useful element of contemporary reflective practices.

In the seventh article, P. A. Danaher from the University of Southern Queensland and Beverley Moriarty and Geoff Danaher from Central Queensland University in Australia examine dialogism, cooperative community and performance space as three separate but complementary approaches to integrating theory, method and writing – three crucial tasks in their workplaces. These approaches and tasks are part of a broader and ongoing teamwork in researching the educational opportunities and experiences of Australian occupational Travellers. The authors contend that reflection on practice underpins all three approaches and that it also helps to frame and sustain their own professional learning.

Despite the diversity of evidence-based strategies, reflective practices and contemporary workplaces canvassed in these articles, there are some important common elements that speak to the continuing relevance of professional learning in all its forms. One element is the recognition and valuing of multiple sources and types of knowledge, including the experiential. A second element is an understanding of change as both a constant factor and the opportunity – when approached with goodwill and insight – for beneficial improvement. A third element is the situated character of the reflective practices and the professional learning; it makes a fundamental and profound difference when, where, why and by whom they are enacted and engaged. If these and other lessons are learned and embraced, workplaces of all kinds are likely to be happier and more meaningful and productive sites of teaching and learning in the broadest sense.

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