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How different reflective learning activities introduced into a postgraduate teacher training programme in England promote reflection and increase the capacity to learn

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Abstract

Research in Education

Full Paper

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Student teachers in England are expected to learn from experience in order to become reflective practitioners and to achieve Qualified Teacher Status. This study is a qualitative project studying whether and how different reflective learning activities introduced into a postgraduate teacher training programme promote reflection and increase the capacity to learn. It takes an interpretative approach, generating qualitative data on the reflection of students and the most effective learning methods. The study took place over a one-year period in one teacher training institution. The data arose from Post Graduate Certificate of Education student teacher responses to different reflective learning activities and subsequent interviews followed by an evaluation of the effectiveness of the overall learning strategy. Of the four activities used to promote reflective learning (discussion groups, action learning sets, journals and interviews), the action learning sets had the most impact on the student teachers’ ability to reflect. The implication for initial teacher training programmes is that providers need to recognise the importance of oral reflection within a communal setting.

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Keywords

Student teachers, reflective practitioners, reflective learning activities, action learning sets, discussion groups, journals, Post Graduate Certificate of Education

## The research problem

The preparation of teachers in England over the past 15 years has seen change beyond recognition with a modification in the nomenclature and priority in Initial Teacher Training formerly known as Initial Teacher Education. The alteration in the emphasis from ‘education’ to ‘training’ signifies in my mind a move from the process to the product of education. This alteration in the nomenclature and focus, has created a shift in priorities within teacher preparation towards a competency based system rather than a learning experience

As universities and school-based trainers become more closely affiliated to corporate businesses (Torres, 2012), I have a growing concern for the lack of ‘institutional commitment’ to the learner from a provider (Del Gandio, 2014). The priority of the provider is to ensure an appropriate pedagogical approach to encourage student learning, but as pressures and future enrolment numbers are influenced by achievement grade rather than quality learning through reflection which is time consuming, it is understandable why institutions prioritise other factors.

In order to learn and place the relevance of reflective learning in teacher preparation, West (2010) suggests student teachers need ‘time and space’ away from the demands of the classroom, which is made difficult by the conditions and requirements of the preparation year but also by the constraints of institutional policy and ethos. Parsons and Stephenson (2005) and Donald (2002), felt there is insufficient time to reflect in a one year training programme and highlighted evidence that students were reporting rather than analysing or reflecting. With this in mind this research altered the pedagogical approach of the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) year in one institution, by introducing more opportunities for reflective learning.

## The importance of reflective learning

Bloom (1956) portrays reflection as a complex and ‘higher’ form of learning by citing reflection as a definition for the sixth level ‘evaluation’ of his taxonomy of learning. Dewey (1933) believed that an individual learned from experience through reflection: a thought process that formalises learning. Dewey’s focus was based on a ‘meaning-making’ process, which moves a learner from one experience to the next; he considered this development to be systematic, occurring with the interaction of others and a process that held value and attitude. Dewey saw reflection as more than just ‘thinking’ about a situation, he viewed reflective inquiry as ‘active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge’ showing reflection as a thought process that considers the process and consequences of significant actions that can initiate change. In other words, reflection occurs to establish a connection between something that has been done and the results achieved. Dewey refers to education and learning as being an ‘interaction’ of ‘subsequent experiences’, statements later echoed by Moon (2010) when she says that reflection can be linked to ‘learning from, learning that, learning to do and learning to be’. Reflection enables an individual to solve a problem through self-discovery and may eventually help an individual to create an independent point of view.

Dewey’s (1933) original thoughts show that reflection includes a feeling of perplexity, hesitation and doubt. Dewey associates reflection with asking questions about an experience. Dewey presented a five-stage model, suggestion, problem, hypothesis, reasoning and testing, that provided a framework of how an individual learns from experience. Dewey’s model, although simple in structure, showed that reflection is a complicated and involved form of learning. He proposes reflection is a process where an individual stops, reviews or looks back and then tries again in order to improve a skill or gain additional knowledge and suggests an individual should be open-minded, responsible and wholehearted (Farrell, 2004).

Dewey emphasises that reflecting on an event or situation does not have to follow the given order of his stages sequentially and the process could be circular or spiral but each element is initiated by another (Redmond, 2004). Dewey (1966: 151) provided the following explanation of each of the five stages: [AQ1]

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Suggestion | ‘Stimulus to thinking. We wish to determine significance of some act’ |
| Problem | ‘Anticipate consequences. Situation is incomplete’ |
| Hypothesis | ‘Proposed tentative solution’ |
| Reasoning | ‘Situation carefully scrutinized and implications developed’ |
| Testing | ‘Suggested solution. Idea or theory is tested by acting upon it’ |

Dewey’s original work focuses on reflection as a process, a concept other authors have reconsidered and developed to call critical reflection. Scho¨ n and Argyris’s (1987) double loop theory in particular the ‘governing variable’ I believe helps to explain the reflection process (Figure 1). [AQ2]

When reflection considers ‘other’ factors via the ‘governing variable’ such as: the individual’s views or values of a previous experience, the importance of additional factors such as perception, personal habits, social pressure (Mezirow, 1983, 2000), their ‘emotional state’ (Moon, 2010), how the individual assigns meaning (Moon, 2008) or makes sense (Boud et al., 1985), all of which may result in a change in behaviour (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993). [AQ3]

Although this study owes much to Dewey’s theory of learning from action it also benefits from the work of Moon (2010), who considers reflection as a thought

Figure 1. Double loop theory (Scho¨n and Argyris, 1987).

process in a situation of uncertainty that eventually has an outcome or solution. Moon’s stages are also presented as progressive:

1. Noticing
2. Making sense
3. Making meaning
4. Working with meaning
5. Transformative learning.

Having considered Moon’s theory of reflection, it became obvious that the learning/reflection process has a number of factors that add complexity or provide an additional level by giving consideration to the context of their learning, the relationships with other people, their detachment or emotional involvement with the situation, factors that ‘enhance’ the reflection.

Boud et al. (1985) believe the student teacher may associate with many of the circumstances in the new environment and may progress to integrate this familiarity or old knowledge with a new situation or context. The student experiences many familiar situations when working in a school, simply because they once went to school. In other words, the individual is ‘shaped’ by their existence and how they react to the new situation is a result of the integration of the old knowledge with the new. How the individual views the experience or highlights the importance of additional factors such as perception, value, personal habits, social pressure (Mezirow, 1983, 2000) or reviews their ‘emotional state’ (Moon, 2010) will affect their capacity to reflect.

According to Wulff (2007), this feeling or sense of familiarity comes from a complex set of emotions. The feeling gained from an emotional response is influenced by the value assigned to the situation by the individual. The value is described as the importance, significance and meaning the individual gives to the situation. The feelings generated from the emotional response are likely to influence how the individual responds to any future event or experience. Ehn and Lo¨ fgren (2007) believe an emotion is contained within the thought process and forms part of everyday life but is influenced by the individual’s cultural experience or expectation. The most important point here is the meaning of the emotion that is attached to the situation.

Although numerous authors (Fook, 2010; Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998; Mezirow, 2000; Moon, 2010) identify the importance of the emotion, which helps to build a person’s resilience and understanding of their own feelings. I adopt Fook’s (2010) suggestion that as an individual takes a journey through life the person acknowledges different feelings, values different episodes and hence builds an ‘emotional scaffold’ on which to place any future feelings that might not be the same as those already experienced. Fook (2010) suggests individuals use this emotional scaffold to understand and validate their feelings toward and consequent response to a new context, hence affecting their ability to reflect. Burke and Jackson (2007) state that learning involves an individual constructing an identity, which may be influenced by an emotional process.

Richert (1990), Morrison (1996), Moon (2005) and Parsons and Stephenson (2005) all used reflective journals or diaries with either student nurses or student teachers to successfully encourage learning. Richardson (2000), Lillis (2001) and Burke (2008), however warn if the written reflection is poorly framed, the written work will not be accepted by the students and they will not value the reflective journal or any subsequent learning. Richardson (2000) stressed that writing is a pedagogical tool, which enables an individual to create meaning but only if the use of a reflective journal is implemented with empathy, understanding and reassurance.

Oral discussion or conversation is one activity that, Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) feel is a crucial element of the reflection process and oral discussion provides the opportunity for the student teacher to place the situation temporarily in context at that particular time and provides the opportunity for the speaker to make sense of their own thoughts. McDrury and Alterio (2002) also highlighted the importance of the reflective conversation because they believe it encourages storytelling opportunities. I am interested in and wished to gain a better understanding of the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), deliberately use storytelling as a vehicle for their research, with Clandinin stressing the power of narrative in the use of reflection throughout his studies. There are many different forms of narrative: stories in magazines, books, newspapers and stories people tell about themselves in coffee shops or over lunch (Denzin, 1989). Hunt (2010) suggests individuals need to share and reflect with others, not only on the how or why of practice but on myths and narratives of life experiences. The narrative is a vehicle for reflection because during the story the individual makes choices: what to include, what to leave out, where to place extra description, why highlight a particular point and so on. Oral reflection, because it is usually spontaneous, does not always incorporate narrative, but if narrative were to be used the extent of the use of narrative may range from a description of linked events to a full and coherent story.

In teacher preparation, the definitions of reflection and reflective practice are vague, as Moon (2008) highlights there is a frequent use of the term ‘reflection’ with little expectation of learning, but it is important for young teachers to review past events, make judgements and to be able to alter their behaviour in response, in order to increase their capacity to learn from experience. It is therefore the responsibility of the training provider to ensure student teachers have an opportunity to reflect, encouraging the student to become a professional who reflects and learns from their practice. As Coultas (2008: 143) states:

An effective teacher is someone who sees herself or himself as a learner

Therefore, this research was located within Dewey’s philosophy of learning: reflection is a meaning-making process, reflection is systematic, reflection necessitates interaction with and requires personal attitudes that value, intellectual and personal growth (Rodgers, 2002).

## Initial areas of interest

Donald’s (2002) research of reflection within the higher education context, showed that the one-year PGCE course often failed to prepare a student teacher to adapt quickly to classroom feedback and to reflect and learn from their teaching experience. The PGCE training year is a short period of time where students have to achieve a standard of performance, satisfy the needs of the pupils, school staff and start to learn from experience. Lovell (1982) stated the one-year training period is an intense learning curve where learning can be based on a process of trial and error as opposed to a calculated and considered approach. The time scale and demand of rapid learning places the novice teacher on a short, sharp journey with a defined purpose and direction with the learning being influenced by the priorities of the training institution. In other words, the student may or may not have time to consider and contextualise the learning.

With Donald’s research in mind, I highlighted an area of interest:

. How different learning activities promote reflection and increase the capacity to learn.

I decided there was no obvious or systematic reflection demonstrated by the student teachers, but the training year did involve writing explanatory lesson evaluations focused on lesson content. I knew student teachers completed lesson evaluations because I had seen the evidence in their teaching files, but I also knew these evaluations were based on pragmatic decisions that assisted pedagogical aspects such as pupil learning, behaviour management or pupil participation. My prior experience and observations led me to believe that the lesson evaluations did not show obvious signs of reflection and hence might not add to the teaching skills of the student.

I considered the apparent lack of reflection to be an issue, but realised as Sparkes and Smith (2014) stress that a researcher’s problem may not be viewed as such by others. My assumption that reflection did not occur systematically influenced the methodological and instrumental considerations and eventual data collection and interpretation (Cohen et al., 2009).

## Method

The PGCE course originally had no activities to encourage student reflection other than the completion of a lesson evaluation form, which concentrated on a ‘tick box’ system of pupil/teacher learning. I followed the advice of Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) in creating a variety of methods through which to reflect. I introduced an overarching strategy to promote student reflection, using a variety of methods such as discussion groups, action learning sets, a reflective journal and an individual interview.

The research population for the study consisted of a group of students who were studying a one-year PGCE at one training institution. All participants were 22 or 23 years of age. The students were divided into small groups or, as Brockbank and McGill (2004) describe, as an ‘organization initiated set’ based on gender and location of school experience, for the oral events. The transcripts from the audio tapes of the activities formed the data and were added to the photocopies of the student journals.

The discussion groups were included as an activity to provide the opportunity for oral but communal reflection. The justification for using discussion groups in this research was not to discover just ‘what’ the trainees were thinking but with questioning from others in the group to establish how and perhaps why they came to that opinion (Morgan, 1993). The concept behind a discussion group was to create a situation where participants who had shared a similar experience could listen and respond to comments made by others in a relaxed, atmosphere and allow ‘emic’ or natural information to be gained. The participant could opt to verbalise an experience or listen to the accounts of others.

I had discovered from previous studies that the discussion group had assisted some trainees in their spoken and communal reflection but had not allowed each student the same opportunity to speak. So action learning sets were introduced to give each participant the chance to talk about their practice to an audience: an opportunity to articulate their learning. The action learning sets were included as an activity within the learning strategy to provide the opportunity for oral reflection without interruption but within a communal setting. Each participant spoke to a small group for five minutes whilst the other participants formed a silent audience. This structured approach varied from the apparently random conversation of the discussion groups and gave the individual an opportunity to talk with no interruption. If required questions were posed at the end of the 5-minute talk.

The discussion groups and action learning sets were oral activities that took place throughout the year. Participants were also issued with a journal to encourage written reflection. My objective through the use of reflective writing in the journal was to aid learning (Rolfe et al., 2001), but the use of the journal over a year-long period may not have represented learning to the students (Moon, 2005) simply because they were unfamiliar with the notion of ‘reflective practice’ or linking theory to practice (Morrison, 1996). The students were initially not given any assistance about ‘how’ to write the journal because I felt I had to allow them to develop their own style of writing. I did not want to provide rules and regulations surrounding the journal (Rolfe et al., 2001) but wanted this written reflection to occur naturally rather than with strict guidelines.

At the end of the training year and after the data had been analysed, interviews took place. I wished to clarify and extend some of the conclusions being drawn from the data and the selection of questions was based on the student’s ability to reflect.

I acknowledged that I knew more about the participant than perhaps they imagined. However, the use of semi-structured questions quickly allowed the ‘power relationship’ to shift from myself to the participant as the participant’s answers had potential to lead the interview in a direction of their choice.

The overall aim of the reflective learning strategy was to give the student a spatial context or a ‘voice’, allowing them to give an account of and demonstrate learning from previous experience. The range of activities within the strategy gave a variety of reflective situations that could suit each individual (oral, written, communal and individual).

Once collected, I was able to organise the data sets in a variety of ways to assist with my analysis. This provided an inquiry into each activity of the overall strategy but also provided a cross-sectional investigation (time within the training year) of each participant. In other words I held longitudinal data for all participants throughout a 1-year period and cross-sectional data from the discussion groups, the action learning sets, the reflective journals and interviews.

. data sets from the discussion groups

. data sets from the action learning sets

. data from the reflective journals

. data from the interviews

. data for each participant across the reflective learning strategy as a vignette.

## Data analysis

I acknowledged my position as a practitioner–researcher and took a reflexive stance with regard to teaching, education and teacher preparation. I knew my data analysis would be influenced by my expectations, both implicit and explicit (Swann, 2005) and by what I expected to see. I accepted my subjectivity and the impact this would have on any interpretation of the data (Sparkes and Smith, 2014) and how judgemental my analysis could be.

Dewey’s stages of learning (suggestion, problem solving, hypothesis, reasoning and testing: Dewey, 1933; Skilbeck, 1970) had been selected as a framework to indicate that the participant was learning from experience. I started to look for phrases that indicated learning, such as ‘I have learnt to become more inspirational’ (M2 Journal) demonstrated M2 was reconsidering and learning from a prior experience. Dewey’s framework provided a clear indication of whether reflection had taken place or not.

## When the reflection occurred

I undertook a process of investigation that counted the number of times reflection occurred during each activity and indicated which type of reflective learning activity produced the most reflection. As a practitioner, my aim was to find the most appropriate reflective activity for the PGCE students.

## Results

I divided the reflective learning strategy into two areas: the oral activities, which included the discussion groups, action learning sets, interviews and the written activity, which was the journal.

## Oral reflective activity

My initial analysis showed that the discussion groups produced descriptive accounts concerning whole-school issues, but very little reflection. For example a male participant makes reference to situations in either a descriptive or factual way as shown:

I’ve got a lot of children with a disability. Luckily I had a session the week before on Autism because there you get a massive folder on 5 children but I did teach one of these in Yr 7. (M5 – Discussion Group – September)

The action learning sets, on the other hand, encouraged the participants to voice a prolonged, full and coherent narrative of their own personal experience, which often demonstrated reflection, as shown in brackets. A female participant demonstrated how she was using previous experience to enhance her understanding and learning, when she says:

I write instructions on a board and the whole lesson is them going and exploring and then they come back at the end and seeing what they’ve done. They don’t respond very well to the authoritarian teaching (me always being on their case) [a previous problem – revisited – the way the people respond]. When I’ve tried that it has always backfired on me and I’ve had a couple of confrontations with the guys [referring back without citing the exact issue but I presume it is teaching style]. So in my last few lessons I’ve found some sort of balance with them. I don’t know if they know me more or I just seem to have more?[possible hypothesis] I don’t have to be so autonomous. [statement which suggests testing]

My target for development was the tone of my voice and to show emotion through disappointment or my voice rather than shouting automatically [reasoning]. I started going quiet and this seems to work for this type of class [testing with a conclusion of what works]. I’ll never lose my temper with this class. If I have to send someone out it’s [because] I’m really disappointed with you, rather than you’ve misbehaved and I’m angry [reasoning]. That seems to work. [testing] (F1 – Action Learning Set – April)

The interviews produced shorter more focussed comments but demonstrated more emotion than the other oral activities:

My own stubbornness said ‘‘no’’ I will get this and it took practice but I wasn’t going to give up. It wasn’t nice but I got there, yeah, it was hard at first [to receive feedback] especially if it is something negative but it is useful and wouldn’t not want to have it, because I wanted to improve. (F2 – Interview – June)

## Written reflective activity

The written data found in the journals were disjointed and usually linked to facts, which could be used in an assignment rather than a reflection of personal thoughts or views on experience. The written data contained concise statements, which immediately referred to the point being made, such as:

Two pupils demonstrated each dance. Preparation for actual assessment. Each pupil asked to comment on Dance, only strengths. Something different from every pupil. (M2 – Journal – 25 November)

However, the comments held an emotional context as shown in the following extracts:

This made me realise that extra help is available and teachers really want to help you achieve. (F3 – Journal)

The teacher had faith in our abilities. (F2 – Journal)

A teacher pulled me to one side and offered me their condolence and offered me a shoulder to cry on and gave total support. This incident made me realise that 1) I was not alone and support was there if I needed it. 2) That teachers are human and care about our wellbeing as well as our education. (F1 – Journal)

My tutor always gave me encouragement .... Hugely inspiring... Always wanted to try and please him ... Inspired me to be a teacher. (M1 – Journal)

...Mr B... has been an inspiration to me throughout my time during PE. (M3 – Journal)

## Discussion Oral reflective activity

The data from all oral activities demonstrated some level of reflection and the use of narrative. In the discussion groups, all but one of the participants selected a common or generic theme to discuss. This may have been an attempt to satisfy the perceived interest of the cohort by considering a topic that was relevant to the whole group.

The action learning sets were more personal and generated topics relating to the individual and their personal experience with the interview data not demonstrating the narrative but highlighting the importance of relationships.

As the action learning sets transcripts demonstrated all participants showed signs of reflection. I conclude that the action learning sets are a more effective learning activity for demonstrating reflection than discussion groups and should be more widely used in teacher preparation to encourage reflection on an experience. Primarily because, the participants used the opportunity of the action learning sets to tell a prolonged, full and coherent narrative of their experience, which enabled the discovery of not only ‘what’ the trainees were thinking but also ‘how and why’ they had come to that decision. This supports the work of Morgan (1993), who highlighted the importance of giving students the time and space to consider how and why an action had been taken. This was not the case in the discussion groups, where the narrative was often interrupted by others and became disjointed with less consideration of detail.

The story told was detailed and in chronological order. The students appeared to use the action learning sets to talk about an experience with the other group members. The participants used language and terminology that was familiar to the audience. There was little or no need to explain a term or phrase, the student just continued the story, almost expecting the peer group to follow the episode that was being explained. There was an expectation that everyone would fully understand, it was as if the participant took on the role of ‘storyteller’.

In summary, the oral learning activities, especially the action learning sets promoted the use of narrative, which consequentially resulted in the most reflection.

## Written reflective activity

The journals were primarily descriptive lesson evaluations or general comments about the lesson. Most of the students used their journal to review a lesson. The written descriptions within the journal were factual. This is a key finding and does contradict the research of both Walker (1985) and Fook (2010), who used reflective journals to enhance learning. In this research the majority of the participants did not use the journal to reflect and formalise their learning but the extracts did provide examples of previous experiences such as former teacher–pupil relationships and an indication of any emotional value towards teaching. This supports Mezirow (1983), who stated that adults always return to their childhood in order to ‘ground’ a new experience within a familiar framework.

The journal completion was limited, suggesting the students did not value the written activity. I would like to suggest the participants may have associated ‘written’ work with an academic assignment or a piece of work that may be judged, or viewed the journal as another form of evaluation. Alternatively, the students may not have had sufficient time to complete the journal and this activity may have been more effective if it was given more priority. The journals completed by the PGCE students in this study, lacked purpose.

## Conclusions

The investigation found that considering the activities used, the action learning sets were the most effective learning activity in producing data that demonstrated reflection.

The participants in this project showed very little written reflection but all did show some signs of reflection, with most using a full and coherent oral narrative. Journal writing did not encourage reflection for the student teachers at this university but the students’ oral use of a detailed story was more evident than literature suggests.

These participants chose to relive their experiences by using a full and coherent narrative. The story that was told primarily in the oral activities was detailed but not abstract or conceptual. The participants adopted a pragmatic approach to tell the story. The story helped the student to capture moments and experiences and some participants turned these moments into thoughtful, learning opportunities by reflecting through Dewey’s stages. Hunt (2010), Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Elbaz (1990) all value narrative in learning, but the majority of the literature on reflection focuses on the product rather than the process. McDrury and Alterio (2002) are exceptions to the rule, highlighting the importance of storytelling for reflection. I can therefore conclude narrative, especially in the oral form, during action learning sets, is an effective way to encourage the start of the reflection process.

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