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Teaching 'Networking with Others': A Reflective Account

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ABSTRACT

Reflective practice is about seeing yourself and your life differently. It is a method of self-appraisal that, when used in academia, has the potential to provide insights that are not always immediately apparent to the practitioner. The author of this paper shares a piece of structured reflection based on Gibbs's (1988) framework. This personal narrative relates to a teaching session entitled, 'Networking with Others' that was delivered to UK and International postgraduate health care students. It is this activity that forms the basis of this reflective work. A number of educational issues are considered as the reflection unfolds, many relating to methods and modes of delivery. The final part of this paper reports on an action plan developed to improve the session. This includes the adoption of more collaborative working in order to support the student's professional as well as academic needs. It is anticipated that this new workshop style session will improve the learning experience, and provide students with a firm base from which to grow their networking skills for the future. In addition, the plan may offer suggestions for anyone running similar sessions throughout the UK and the world.

Keywords: reflection; teaching methods; academic practice; postgraduate students; networking

Introduction

Reviewing aspects of one's own life, especially in relation to working practices, was developed in the latter part of the 20th century. It is a tool used by academics as a means of observing, as well as writing about one's own actions in order to gain deeper insights. The idea that reflection is an important component of academic practice is central in this paper. In order to assist with the process of reflection a number of frameworks exist. They generally follow a structured format allowing the user to work systematically through their own thought processes. One such model, Gibbs (1988), is particularly well suited to teachers and is therefore quite commonly seen within higher education. Having accepted that there are benefits to reflective practice, this paper takes the reader through a personal journey underpinned by this evaluative method. A teaching session on networking with others, designed for postgraduate students, is considered as a case study for this reflective piece. When this session was originally taught it followed a traditional teaching format. However, after undertaking the reflective work, alternative teaching methods and modes of delivery were considered. One of these, collaborative teaching, would form the basis for a new workshop style session. This has the potential to offer students a more creative and dynamic learning experience. The paper concludes by offering a detailed action plan on teaching networking that may be useful for academics from various interdisciplinary backgrounds.

Reflection

There are a variety of ways that teachers can review their own working practices. They can compare their teaching against core professional competencies (e.g. see Higher Education Academy, 2011; Succar, Grigg, Beaver, & Lee, 2016), or be evaluated by colleagues (e.g. see Golparian, Chan, & Cassidy 2015). Alternatively, or indeed alongside these choices, is the reflective practice approach which is perhaps less quantifiable than the other two examples. Reflection is a journey of self-discovery; it is about learning from experiences. It can offer insights into one's own behaviour, encourage deeper and more critical thinking, and perhaps change perspectives that potentially improve a person's professional practice (Mahlanze, Sibiyi, & Govender, 2015). It can be undertaken with no guidance tools or prompts, perhaps in an autobiographical manner (e.g. see Stout, 2016) or it can follow a more proscribed path. Philosophical thinkers such as Hegel (1964), Habermas (1987) and Schön (1987) all discuss the potential of reflection for increasing understanding of the self. It is a mode of thinking that has been embraced by many professionals, and is also present in the learning and teaching environment within higher education. Two of the key contributors in the development of a systematic pathway for reflection, particularly associated with learning, are Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988). Both provide cyclical frameworks that allow the reflector to explore and analyse a situation, although Gibbs' model is a bit more detailed (Paterson & Chapman, 2013). Gibbs' (1988) work ends with an action plan which is particularly useful for goal setting and work related appraisals. It is this latter element that made it the model of choice for this particular piece of work. This paper will lead the reader through some of Gibbs' (1988) reflective framework headings in order to share a piece of transformative learning that took place, particularly around teaching approaches and modes of delivery. In order to offer authentic insights a first person biographical form of narrative is adopted at certain points during the reflective sections.



1 A reflective experience regarding a postgraduate teaching session on networking with others

Starting with Gibb's (1988) first heading, this section highlights the case study under review. I was involved in arranging a drop-in session within our university faculty for health and social science doctoral students who wanted insights into networking in order to develop and improve their research. In relation to the topic the need for postgraduate students to have an understanding of the importance of networking is recognised by the academic community. The English Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017) defines networking (outside the computer world) as a means to, "interact with others, to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts". Networking can also be seen to have a supporting role, or one that is mutually beneficial for both parties involved. Taking a more social constructivist approach, networking can mean different things to different people depending on a range of issues, such as, for example, their occupation. Indeed networking is seen as an important skill for anyone who is interested in building their career, especially if this involves moving towards or working in a job within research or academia. International networking is also key and its importance has been highlighted by authors such as Thompson (2006) who consider the role of the 'invisible college' (informal networks of academics) in Southeast Asia and the US. In the UK the 'Joint Statement of the Research Councils' Skills Training Requirements for Research Students' proposed that universities consider networking to be important. They note that a university should support a student to be able to, "develop and maintain co-operative networks and working relationships with supervisors, colleagues and peers, within the institution and the wider research community". More recently there has also been an emphasis for researchers to consider engaging with people from the wider community as part of this network. See, for example, the UK National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement concerning public engagement and universities (2017) (<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/explore-it/what-does-engaged-university-look>). Given this, many universities both in the UK and internationally have invested in training for postgraduate students that include networking skills.

The teaching session on networking was delivered using a traditional teaching format that involved a PowerPoint lecture followed by a large group discussion. Indeed, Singla, Saini, and Kaur, (2016) note that traditional teaching is seen as a model in which the lecturer holds the power within a session as they take on the role of instructor. The lecturer also takes the lead on any talks and debates. This was indeed the case in relation to this session, as the content contained a selection of information that I considered the students might find useful, and the class discussion was mostly controlled by my understandings of networking.

2 The reflective feelings and reactions to the postgraduate teaching session

Whilst the student feedback on the session was satisfactory, I had a feeling that more could be done. As Springborg (2010, p. 248) says, it was "sensing sense-making". Sense-making, he says, is, "generally understood as something that is received through the senses, rather than produced by collecting and analyzing data using our conceptual mind." Springborg (2010, p. 248). This was very much in line with my experience. I felt as if something needed to change, as if more could be done. The thought processes that drove this thinking were, for me, part of a 'reflective reaction' which is associated with the idea of reflection 'in' and 'on' action, an idea proposed by Schön (1987) in the latter part of the twentieth century. So I considered how I could make some improvements to the approaches used in this teaching.

3 The reflective evaluation on the postgraduate teaching session in relation to the teaching approaches and the modes of delivery

It is recognised that within relativist thinking, "truths... vary across cultures, historical periods and or even individuals and every effort to adjudicate them is bound to be futile" (Baghrmian 2004, p. 92). As reflective practice can be seen through this lens a number of philosophical perspectives were drawn on for this work. In doing so it liberated thinking and provided a platform for broader, more diverse insights.

So to return to the evaluation of the session, one avenue was to provide the students with a deeper learning experience, a concept considered by Entwistle (2000). He sees this mode of learning as a way for students to create new meanings from the material provided, by drawing on their own knowledge of the world and merging this with the course content. In addition, I felt the teaching needed to be more 'fit for purpose'. Perhaps it slotted more easily into an activity based learning method as proposed by Schwartz and Fischer (2006, p. 7). They state, "Current pedagogy mostly leaves students to struggle with textbooks and lectures in order to figure out how to build their own understanding." These authors continue with a note that, "...students' experiences and activities can easily be overlooked in the design of lectures".

I recognised, however, that building the student perspective into a new session requires careful thought and a clearly managed strategy. Whilst the teaching still needed to meet the intended learning outcomes, a different design could enhance student interest and motivation. Indeed the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education notes that there should be, "dynamic approaches to teaching and learning though creativity, innovation and continuous development..." (Higher Education Academy 2011, p. 2).

Yet, it is also known that radically altering a session can be difficult. Mitterle, Bloch and Würmann, (2015) highlight this, noting that rearranging a teaching session not only involves reconceptualising the teaching, but also time is needed for the preparation. Despite these challenges I was keen to follow a new path, and so decided to start by reviewing the session in light of what had gone before.



4 The reflective analysis of the teaching approaches and modes of delivery used in the postgraduate teaching session

In the original delivery I had not really taken into account the knowledge and skills that some of the students might already have on networking. This was a gap. Bennetts (2003) proposes that if an academic considers this it can help students gain an understanding of themselves, and their learning needs. I therefore needed to find out what the students already knew (a consideration for the action plan), and what was already available to them on the course. It is this latter element that will be discussed below.

First, in the classic model doctoral students generally work closely with their supervisors who guide them through their individual research journey. This was the case in this instance where supervisory sessions were run either on a one-to-one basis, or consisted of meetings with two supervisors and one student. This approach makes it difficult to establish what insights the students gain. Indeed, learning about networking and making contacts through the route of the supervisor can, for students, be very dependent on a range of factors. These might include the breadth of the supervisor's own personal list of contacts, their wish to introduce the student to these colleagues, and differences between the student's professional body and that of the supervisor. Krukowska's (2015) biographical-type paper discusses some of these challenges. He considers how PhD students struggle with not having the necessary contacts. In one example he shares a story about how gaining participants for his research study was made harder by the fact that he had 'no connections'.

Second is the availability of training for postgraduate students. I had been asked to provide the original session at the request of some students. At the time the university did offer some postgraduate training packages through its centralised Graduate School. These were generally based on the excellent online resources found at Vitae (2017) (<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development>) that supports emerging researchers. However, the topic of networking with others was not included as a separate entity, but rather hinted at in sessions on conference attendance, preparing for presentations and writing for publication.

5 The reflective conclusions on the teaching approaches and modes of delivery used in the postgraduate teaching session

It was becoming clear that this teaching session could be enhanced. The students needed to be more engaged and placed at the center of this learning. It is argued that if students believe their studies have real practical value in the outside world then this, "encourages students to become more actively involved" (Hu & Kuh (2002, p. 570). The session therefore required some adaptation which would increase the creative content. This, in turn, would appeal to a broader set of student learning styles such as concrete, experiential and/or inquiry-based learners (Nilson 2003). It could also be a session that drew on the expertise of a community of local and global professionals, rather than a single academic. Learning in what can be termed as a transient social community (Fuller, 2007). It would seek to, "respect individual learners and diverse learning communities and acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates recognising the implications for professional practice" (Higher Education Academy, 2011, p. 3). Having identified that more could be done, a strategy was needed.

6 The action plan for different teaching approaches and modes of delivery for use in a future postgraduate teaching session

A teaching plan was created that drew on different approaches and modes of delivery. This was divided into four different sections.

Information gathering

It is probably worth making links with colleagues, internally and in other establishments in order to gain an insight into what they offer in terms of assisting students in building their networking knowledge and skills. This information can be used alongside the results of a pre-session survey, which provides the teacher with an understanding of what the students feel they need. It is part of what Kaminski, Foley and Kaiser (2013) refer to as an audience analysis, offering the lecturer a picture of the students' underlying knowledge, as well as their current learning needs. The timings of when to post the questionnaire would need to be decided upon. However, once this ground work has been done the preparation for the session can begin.

Organisation

Delivery approaches, such as the provision of an online session, could be considered for this session. However, whilst Lu and Lemonde (2013) state that online teaching can be useful for students who are high achievers, but they also warn that students who struggle are better with a face-to-face approach. It can also be argued that given the nature of this topic personal contact is important. Therefore, in order to provide a more stimulating environment for the students a workshop, running for a period of about 6 hours with breaks, could be offered. The session might start with a brief welcome, before the students form smaller, break-out groups for more detailed facilitated discussions. This latter element, as Hassanién (2006, p. 21) has highlighted, provides the students with "social interaction opportunities" and an environment that lets them "use the expertise of one another". The students might then be invited to visit different stands staffed by other teaching staff and professionals. It has been argued that postgraduate students benefit from the insights of external practitioners, especially those from industry and the entrepreneurial world (Williams, Smith, Yasin, & Pitchford, 2013). Whilst this seemed like a good plan, it is worth remembering that this session has its challenges for the organiser.

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Baroutian and Kensington-Miller (2016, p. 23) note that to organise workshops the lead academic needs to “build an initial network of participants...”. It was during this point in the reflection that it occurred to me that this element would force me to use and further develop my own networking skills. In a sense the workshop would provide learning not only for the students, but also for me as the academic.

Content

It is known that communication skills are central to working with others. Given the number of social interactions required within academia or business, insights into performance skills might be useful. Taylor (2016, p. 6) writes, “The term is used in theatre, in anthropology and the visual arts in business, sports, politics and science. Across these fields, it signals a wide range of social behaviours. Sometimes ‘art’, sometimes political ‘actions’, sometimes business management, sometimes military prowess, performance aims to create effects, and affect.” Listening skills, the use of voice and gestures are also part of this idea of performance (Murphy, Lyon-Maris, Scallan, & Muir, 2016) and very relevant for personal interactions. Alongside this the art of networking through starting and guiding conversations (e.g. see Streeter, 2014) could be included. The session could, perhaps, also include an opportunity for students to practice these types of skills. These could be scheduled in during a break, when students would be encouraged to circulate around the room and talk to different people for two or three minutes, giving it a feel of a real-life networking event

Students need sound writing abilities when making contacts, not only for publishing papers, but in a very different format for marketing themselves and their ideas through social media and the internet. Some of this, particularly in relation to scholarly writing, should be met by internal university mechanism. However, having a stall set up by the university media team, along with journal representatives who may offer more detailed insights, could be a useful addition. The involvement of staff with detailed knowledge about making connections and maintaining those links through sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter or YouTube, as well as more academic sites such as ResearchGate would also be beneficial. However, as part of this there should also be input from those who recognise the challenges of using these tools. There needs to be advice on how much self-disclosure should occur, what levels of privacy are required, considerations around legal and ethical implications and insights into the time needed to maintain social media sites (Argon, AlDoubi, Kaminski, Anderson, & Isaacs, 2014; Donelan, 2016).

One text concerned with success in networking states, “Get equipped. Standard-issue networking equipment includes a business card, thank-you cards, a resume, a date book, a professional email signature, work samples, and clean, appropriate business-casual attire” (WetFeet (Firm) 2008, p. 2). Marketing skills and having an insight into your own unique selling point matter in networking, as does the importance of creating a consistent profile. Even understanding minor points, such as the importance of etiquette related to the use of business cards in settings like Japan or China could be considered. Therefore, having a stand where business cards can be ordered might be useful. Successful networking involves planning, goal setting and the careful allocation of time, so students could be introduced to various project management tools. Discussions around issues such as global travel, in this case provided by colleagues working in the university tourism department, might also be worthy of inclusion.

One of the benefits of this type of workshop is that students can decide on their own individual learning needs, an idea proposed by Knowles (1975), but which still resonates today. Capturing which aspects were important to them can inform future teaching. Students could, for instance, be asked to write one aspect of their learning on post-it notes. These could then be displayed in an open area in the workshop and discussed towards the close of the event.

Evaluation

Evaluations relating to any teaching are important for all those involved. They can feed into further improvements and provide a better quality of service for the students. In the case of this session a standard university-based questionnaire, sometimes called programmatic evaluations (Saunders, 2011), could be distributed to the students at the end with the intention of obtaining immediate feedback. A more challenging approach is to measure the success of this type of workshop in the longer term, and establish whether it did indeed contribute to the students’ future networking skills whilst undertaking the PhD and beyond. This is more in line with Hubball and Pearson’s (2011) perspective on academic feedback, who note that follow-up evaluations in the longer term might ask students what they can remember about their learning (in this instance on networking), and how has this contributed to their life and career development. With the right ethical considerations this latter method could even be transformed into a piece of educational research linked, for example, to a date related cohort. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that long-term forms of evaluation may get a lower response rate, and this may particularly be the case if run as an online option (e.g. see Paquette, Corbett, & Casses, 2015).

Conclusion

Reflective models, such as Gibbs (1988), provide a framework which can be useful in evaluating and reviewing one’s own teaching. They offer a means of unravelling the complexities that lie in planning, preparing, delivering and evaluating an educational session. For me, working through a reflective model felt like a journey of discovery, with new thoughts and ideas emerging during the different stages. One clear theme that arose from this review was the approaches and methods of delivery within the teaching session under scrutiny. However, as the reflection progressed a clear pathway opened up, particularly when academic educational theoretical perspectives were also considered. Gradually an action plan for a revised session was created. This was based on partnership working



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which appeared to offer students more opportunities for interaction and professional insights. As such it had the potential to offer a more interesting and exciting learning experience.

Reflection is a powerful tool. There is no final destination. The process serves as a reminder that regular reviews and updates are necessary, and to be a teacher is to live in a constant transient state. There is always a need to shift, alter and adapt one's own ideas and perceptions in light of this voyage of self-discovery. I therefore continue to navigate my way through the challenging and rewarding art of teaching, and whilst doing so journey with my students towards improving my own understanding of networking with others.

Biographies

Angela Turner-Wilson is a senior lecturer at Bournemouth University, Dorset, UK. She has an interest in postgraduate education. Her areas of expertise lie in public health, particularly around justice and sustainability. She has supervised a number of PhD students and leads the MSc Public Health research modules. <https://staffprofiles.bournemouth.ac.uk/display/wilsona>

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