

Incorporating Reflective Learning: rationale and initiatives in a programme on information management

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Introduction

While reflective learning has been recognised as an important pedagogical tool, a number of areas need development. These included the necessity for “integration between theory and practice” (QAA, 2006). The need to put theory into practice from a critical and informed perspective is of increasing significance in a rapidly globalised world requiring new skills among citizens. The development of transferable intellectual and study skills within a lifelong learning context is equally important.

Reflective learning is implicit in one of the four main purposes of higher education as seen by the Dearing Committee (1997):

“... to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life.”

The need for incorporating reflective learning has now been well accepted in pedagogical terms. Indeed, it is a course requirement set by the Quality and Assurance Agency:

“There should be integration between theory and practice by a variety of means according to the type of degree and mode of delivery ... The strategy should make available opportunities for participants to reflect on their knowledge, experience and practice ... A dissertation or project can be particularly important in this context...” (QAA, 2002)

Bourner (2003) defines reflective learning as the “process of interrogating experience with searching questions” and provides a useful background to reflective learning, setting it within the context of lifelong learning which is then seen in its dual aspects, planned and unplanned learning. “Much learning across the lifespan is

unplanned, experiential and emergent”, he says, explaining that it is “reflection which turns experience into learning”.

The application of these ideas to teaching and learning has important practical implications. The first one is whether lecturers themselves are reflective, lifelong learners and whether they incorporate such learning in their teaching. As the UK Centre for Legal Education (2005) says, “it is extremely difficult to encourage students to learn reflectively unless the lecturer embodies such an approach”. DASS has taken up this challenge seriously:

... For us to provide appropriate teaching and learning opportunities to the students, we ourselves need to be aware of the issues and also ensure that these are reflected in our curricula. (Ideas and Issues in Social Exclusion).

Secondly, all modules need to be re-assessed critically to ensure they meet the reflective learning requirements. It will not be effective if only a few Modules incorporate reflective learning. Further, it will give an incorrect impression to students as to what learning is all about.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is that reflective and critical learning can take place only if students enjoy lectures and other aspects of the learning process. For their part, students are keen to learn from new ideas and experiences if delivered in a creative way. The challenge is whether such enjoyment and reflective learning can be embedded in all modules.

“Lack of a learning culture”

The information and library sector needs effective leaders who can regenerate the services in order to meet the needs in a rapidly changing world. Libraries, according to Leadbeater (2003), are in “serious trouble”. He maintains that “public service renewal requires strong political leadership... Libraries lack such leadership.” One way of injecting leadership is a wider use of reflective learning.

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) recognises that “lack of a learning culture is the single most important barrier to developing the workforce” (MLA, 2004). MLA, London expands on this:

Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more. (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, London, 2006).

Thus the challenge for information management courses is to ensure that they inculcate reflective learning among students as a lifelong learning process. However, this is not always possible within the formal teaching environment. The limit on time, the need to cover large topic areas and meet complex learning outcomes often leave little time to ensure that effective reflective learning takes place.

Another area that has not been adequately addressed in the information sector is innovation. Mulgan and Albury (2003) define innovation as “the creation and implementation of new processes, products, services and methods of delivery which result in significant improvements in outcomes, efficiency, effectiveness or quality”. Perhaps the best way of teaching “innovation skills” – as with leadership skills - is through reflective learning.

It is to meet the above requirements that Information Management Services (ISM) is developing an alternative approach to embed reflective learning in their work.

Information Services Management: Changes in Modules

A number of changes were made in 2006 to existing modules. One reason was to incorporate reflective learning in the teaching programmes.

The rationale given for the proposed modification was to “meet the changing needs in the workplace as expressed in various policy initiatives at national and international levels”. Modification also reflected “the need to ensure reflective learning among students” and to ensure “workforce development to meet new challenges as an on-going process”. (London Metropolitan University. DASS, 2006).

This new approach included the production of a newsletter, *Ideas and Issues*, for students. It is “an irregular current awareness service which alerts you to new ideas, experiences, reports and developments of relevance to the ... modules. It is meant to supplement the recommended readings and lecture notes for your modules. *Ideas & Issues* aims to give you a wider perspective and increase your awareness about current developments. (*Ideas & Issues*, 2006).

Ideas and Issues highlights the need to keep up with new information during the course of the Module, as well as when students return to work. At the same time, students are expected to reflect on matter included in *Ideas and Action* and to develop this new information in the weekly seminars and in assignments. Crucial part in this is played by the weekly seminars where “each student is expected to contribute to one debate on one issue” (The Module Booklet). This activity is designed to:

“...build up the skills necessary in presenting a persuasive arguments.. Active participation in seminars will enhance your learning and provide a greater depth and perspective to the issues raised in lectures. (*Society, Information and Policy*).

Short course

The “Leadership for innovation, equality and change; a two day ‘Ideas into Action’ Short Course” takes reflective learning a stage further. It includes some initial pre-course reading, a first day dealing with theoretical issue, and a follow-up day where the emphasis is on reflective learning through implementation of ideas and action plans developed on day 1. The draft publicity explains:

The second day will build on the work of the first day. It will use actual workplace situations to develop action plans based on ideas and experiences from the first day. Each participant will develop an “Ideas into Action” plan. These will be discussed to understand issues around leadership, roles and responsibilities.

The Course offers a place to think, a place to be creative, a place to plan... and act...The Course will thus help you to become more aware of alternative ideas. It will provide opportunities for reflective learning from reports and journal articles and your and other people’s experiences.

Thus the approach is to move away from a “traditional” training days which stop at imparting new information. This normally means that the learning process is rather limited as participants are then caught up in daily workplace activities with the new things learnt being pushed to the background by pressures of work. The Short Course uses an active learning and reflection approach – which continues after the formal course – to overcome these shortcomings.

Quality Leaders Project – Youth strand (QLP-Y) I

This is a DASS managed, eternally funded programme of “management development through service development”. The first phase of QLP, lasting six months, focuses on developing skills in participants. The second, implementation phase then lasts for two years. The first phase includes project management and related skills for designing a service development proposal. There is also a module on “combating racism, managing equality”. One of the assignments for this module is to “Designing an ‘equal’ Library Service”. Various aspects of this assessment are discussed at each session and the participants have time and space to reflect on their readings and class discussions.

At the same time, participants keep a diary and logbook of actual experiences at work. These are used as part of the final assessment for the Award in Work-based learning. Whether competencies have been developed in these is then assessed in

¹ Further details about QLP are available at <http://www.seapn.org.uk/qlp.html>.

the final presentation of a Service Development Plan (SDP). Reflective learning is an important way to acquire skills to develop the SDP.

Conclusion

The above is only the beginning of a process of incorporating reflective learning in new and revised modules and projects. An “open” approach to learning from other experiences and ideas is used to ensure that latest theories are being incorporated.

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Biographical note

Shiraz graduated from the University of East Africa and got his library qualifications from the University of Wales. He worked at the University of Nairobi Library from 1968 to 1984. Following the publication of his articles on the liberation movement in Kenya, Shiraz had to move to London where he worked at Hackney and Merton public libraries before taking up the post of Senior Lecturer in Information Management at the London Metropolitan University. Shiraz's main interest is in politics of information and he has published numerous articles and given conference papers on this theme His book, "Never be silent; publishing and imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963" was published in 2006. His forthcoming book, "The politics of information and librarianship" will be published by the Library Juice Press in USA.

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