Using a Collaborative Reflective Process to Enhance Professional Development in Higher Education

Authors: Linda Ann Mostert, Eunice Champion, Hermien Johannes, Thoko Batyi, Florence Southway-Ajulu, and Anne-Mart Olsen.

Nelson Mandela University

Format: flipped paper (in draft)

This reflective paper offers an account of designing a new Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Practice at Nelson Mandela University from 2016 to 2017, and it has been written by the collaborating curriculum designers.

The professional dialogue group model of collaborative reflective practice, in combination with Gibbs' reflective cycle, was used to explore their experiences. Professional dialogue groups have been recommended for considering complex issues from diverse and, perhaps competing, perspectives (Cooper and Boyd, 1998).

In this qualitative research project, each participant wrote a personal account of the experience of working together in curriculum design, using the steps in Gibbs' Reflective cycle. Thereafter, individual reflections were discussed in a professional dialogue group. There was room for varying views as the group strove to reach consensus, recognizing that everyone had her own point of view. In this, it was accepted that everyone's perspective was equally important.

Much of what was learned through participating in the collaborative reflective process may be defined as emotional intelligence.

As power is negotiated in diverse, multidisciplinary teams, it raises the question as to whether curriculum design can and should be an entirely rational, scientific process. In this paper, we seek and welcome the opinions of our peers who have worked collaboratively to design similar professional development courses.

Keywords

Curriculum design, collaborative reflective practice, postgraduate diploma in higher education, emotional intelligence, professional dialogue group.

Introduction

This research was undertaken by a steering committee of six women developing a new Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Practice at Nelson Mandela University, from 2016 to 2017. All of the participant researchers were, at the time of writing, employed full time at the university and were, or had been, involved in both teaching on academic professional development programmes and in varying kinds of curriculum work.

The process of developing the new diploma was somewhat complicated by the departure of the team leader in the middle of 2017, along with the simultaneous rebranding of the university as its name changed from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University to Nelson Mandela University.

In spite of challenging circumstances, the participant researchers committed to studying their own practice and the research was undertaken for the sake of enhancing the professional development of the participant researchers. Of particular interest at the outset of this study was the diversity of the group – all female but differing with regard to language, age, ethnic group, experience in curriculum design, and so on – as possible modules for the postgraduate diploma were hotly debated; but through ongoing collaboration the group arrived at consensus more often than not.

To enhance their professional development, the group consented to engage in in a combination of individual and collaborative reflective practice.

Literature Review

Many teachers of adult learners have argued that reflective practice (on one's own or in groups) enhances professional development (Boud 2001, Thompson and Thompson 2008). Professional dialogue groups are a form of collaborative reflective practice and they are purported to help professionals: "examine their assumptions", increase their ability "to hold multiple perspectives" and "speak in an authentic voice" (Cooper and Boyd 1998:56). But, while collaborative reflective practice may be beneficial, some proponents such as Boud (2001) and Hargreaves (2000) have noted that adults may be embarrassed to share their thoughts with others. For this reason, the participant researchers engaged in the Gibbs cycle of reflection in privacy and then shared what they wished to share in a professional dialogue group.

Research Question

Carrying out the research was relevant because, according to Gast, Skilkamp, and van der Veen (2017: 762), "There is a great need for … in depth qualitative studies on the topic of effects of team-based professional development interventions in higher education."

While a large scale study was not feasible under the circumstances, the participant researchers had a convenient opportunity to study the "effects of team based professional development". The effect focused upon, in this case, was the learning of the participants.

Our research question was: What will the participants learn from a collaborative reflective process in the context of collaborative curriculum design? It should be noted that engaging in curriculum development itself could be seen as a "professional learning strategy for educators" (Bouckaert and Kools 2017:12). Unsurprisingly, then, the participant researchers, in their responses, conflated what they learned through participating in curriculum design with what they had learned through reflecting collaboratively on the process.

Research Design

After obtaining ethics clearance from the university's Research Ethics Committee (Human), the researchers engaged in reflective practice and a professional dialogue group, considering their individual perceptions of co-designing the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice.

First, each participant wrote about her experience of participating in the curriculum design process through following the Gibbs cycle of reflection. The Gibbs model of reflective practice, involves writing responses to the questions shown in the diagram below:

Figure One: Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing*: *A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford University.

The participant researchers then met to discuss their individual reflections in a professional dialogue group, sharing what they felt comfortable to share. After the discussion, the participant researchers completed a questionnaire in order to record what they had learned or gained from the process of reflection. This questionnaire was based on some of the listed benefits of reflective practice in Thompson and Thompson (2008) and York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere and Montie (2006).

While the opinions of the participant researchers in the professional dialogue group were necessarily known to one another, the questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Data Analysis

Two of the participant researchers independently coded the responses to the open ended questions in the distributed questionnaire, and then discussed their coding to reach agreement. The coding was in vivo and a grounded approach was used. The codes were then distributed to the rest of the group for checking.

Findings

The responses to the closed questions were summed up as follows:

Through engaging in collaborative reflective practice on the curriculum design process:	YES Total Out Of 6	NO Total Out of 6
I have received guidance for my new role in curriculum development	3	2 1 not applicable*
I have added to my learning of how to participate in designing a curriculum	6	
I have noticed the gap between my espoused theories and my theories in use	3	3
I have bridged the gap between my espoused theories and my theories in use	2	2
I have a better ability to accommodate multiple	5	0

perspectives		
I am able to resolve conflict more effectively	2	3 1 not applicable
I have a better understanding of the effect I have on those around me in work situations	6	
I have learned to manage my emotions more effectively in work situations	5	1 not applicable
I have become more culturally sensitive	5	1
I have a better understanding of my role as a curriculum designer	4	1 1 not applicable
I feel more empowered as a professional	5	1
I have stronger relationships with the members of the participating team	5	1

Figure Two: Responses to the closed questions in the questionnaire.

*One participant elected to add a 'not applicable' column to her table in the questionnaire.

Themes

With iterative coding still in progress, three themes have emerged so far: personal learning, helpful theories and leadership styles.

Personal Learning

Participants gained various kinds of knowledge or know-how, which they may or may not be apply in their professional development work with academics. Some of this knowledge could be classified as an inclination to modify the professional development strategies they would use with lecturers. One respondent wrote:

As academic developers, this should help us when we support academic staff – provide prodding/leading questions and reading to enhance development.

Some of the reported learning could be classified as gains in emotional intelligence. There are different models of emotional intelligence, but emotional intelligence may be defined as the "ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others" (Mayer, Salovey and

Caruso 2000:396-397). For example, one participant noted that she learned to have more empathy for the academics that she supports. She wrote:

The whole process let me have an idea and a feel of what the academics I support are going through when designing a curriculum.

While one aspect of emotional intelligence involves relating to others, the concept includes the ability to express one's emotions appropriately. One respondent claimed that what she learned was:

It is better to be open about how you feel as long as you do it in a polite way, instead of stuffing your emotions.

Some learning could be perhaps described as a gain in critical thinking, as one respondent wrote:

We haven't acknowledged the politics constraining curriculum design enough e.g. capitalism – being driven by industry.

Helpful Theories

In response to the prompt, "If there are any theories that you feel have clarified your understanding of your experiences in collaborative curriculum design, please say what they are and explain what aspects of these theories have been important in helping you to understand the process", the participants mentioned the following:

- Taylor and Marienau – I want to be right, right now
- Theory X and Y by McGregor
- Emotional intelligence
- Barnett's ways of being and knowledge encounter in curriculum development
- Geraldine O'Neill's article
- Constructive alignment

It may be inferred that the participant researchers gained a deeper knowledge of the theories or readings listed as they engaged in the collaborative process.

Leadership Styles

It must be noted that several different people were perceived as leaders of the programme at various times and, conveniently for the sake of confidentiality, these individuals were not identified in the data. That aside, it became clear that at least some of the participants became more conscious of what leadership styles they prefer. One wrote:

I thank the leader of this programme for not giving us a choice but to capacitate us by making us involved.

Another participant wrote:

I feel like the person with true yay and nay leverage needs to drive the process and be open about what they want. I prefer more guidance with such a heavy responsibility – not a laissez faire management style.

Another participant became aware of her own leadership style through the process of collaboration and felt inclined to change it:

I hope that in future I would be more aware of the complexity of curr design and dev and avail myself in a more supportive rather than authoritative role, esp. w.r.t. the knowledge encounters of others. So probably a more sensitive approach, and being less invested in my own voice, as the voice that matters.

The comment above also seems to indicate a gain in emotional intelligence.

Discussion and conclusion

Unless one believes the gains in emotional intelligence and self-knowledge that result from collaboration are irrelevant, we need a broader definition of teacher learning than that of Guskey (2000: 121) who defines teacher learning as "new knowledge and skills gained with regard to design and implementation of curriculum innovations and/or teaching practice". It could be argued that practitioners in higher education also have to learn how best to relate to one another.

References

Bouckaert, M. and Kools, Q. 2017. Teacher educators as curriculum developers: exploration of a professional role. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02619768.2017.1393517

Boud, D. 2001. Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 9-17.

Cooper, C. and Boyd, J. 1998. Creating sustained professional growth through collaborative reflection. In *Professional Development for Cooperative Learning: Issues and Approaches,* C.M. Brody and N.Davidson (Eds), Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Gast, I., Schildkamp, K., and van der Veen, J.T. 2017. Team-based professional development interventions in higher education: a systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 87:4, 737-767.

Gibbs, G. 1988. *Learning by Doing*: *A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford University.

Guskey, T.R. 2000. *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Hargreaves, H.D. 2000. The knowledge creating school. In *Leading professional Development in Education*, B. Moon, J. Butcher, and E. Bird (Eds), London: Routledge Farmer.

Mayer, J.D., Salovey, P., and Caruso, D. 2000. Models of emotional intelligence. In *Handbook of Intelligence*, R. J. Sternberg (Ed), New York: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, S. & Thompson, N. 2008. *The Critically Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

York-Barr, J., Sommers, W.A., Ghere, G.S. & Montie, J. 2006. *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: An Action Guide for Educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.