

Barriers to reflective practice

The changing nature of higher education

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ABSTRACT Reflective practice is seen as the way forward for both students and academics alike and there is much research that shows that reflective practice leads to better learning. This article, whilst acknowledging that reflective practice is something to which we should strive, recognizes that there are many other considerations that will have to be dealt with by the sector before its use will be universally accepted. The main consideration, probably more than anything else, is the de-motivated staff within the higher education environment. It is suggested that this de-motivation occurs because of lack of resources, lack of recognition, overwork and lack of appreciation of the additional burdens put on academics, and invariably the institutions themselves, by widening participation and lifelong learning initiatives. Therefore, it is suggested that universal reflective practice may come in the long-term but only once the deeper-seated problems within the sector are resolved.

KEYWORDS: *barriers, curriculum and pedagogy, motivation of academic staff, reflective practice, resources, widening access*

Introduction

The recent article in *Active Learning in Higher Education* by Kuit et al. (2001) states that ‘the group found that all that was required for reflective practice to occur was one thing, time’. Whilst they recognized that this was indeed a rare and precious commodity, it is surely a fallacy to state that this is all that is required. There are many reasons that reflective practice does not, and will not, take place within the working lives of current academics, especially those in the post-1992 higher education establishments. The changing nature of higher education is, I believe, the cause. This article highlights some of the issues involved and challenges the idea in the introduction of the article by Kuit et al. (p. 128) that ‘many of the former polytechnics have an environment in which teaching has been more valued than research’. Perhaps a truism once, but not now.

The higher education environment is changing and this is particularly so in the post-1992 higher education institution. There are many issues

involving management, pedagogy, curriculum, human development, quality and culture that have to be considered. As the success of higher education institutions is now documented in league tables and is seen in relation to various criteria (i.e. student numbers, completion rates, proportion of students attaining a 'good' degree, the research assessment exercise, the teaching quality assessment, extra income generated, net financial surplus, cost per student and employment rates for graduates) there is great pressure on the post-1992 higher education institutions to move towards pre-1992 universities' practices (Shaw, 1999/2000). It is in this ever-changing environment that academics find themselves and it is this increased accountability which makes reflective practice something beyond the vision of many. This article is written mainly from a Scottish post-1992 university perspective but the issues discussed here have a wider significance and affect us all in higher education.

Widening access and lifelong learning

The belief in lifelong learning, accreditation for prior learning and simplifying access to higher education is fundamental, and this is currently a high agenda item for the government, industry and commerce alike. Ranson (1998) suggested that the purpose of higher education is the development of people, society and the economy, and it certainly appears that higher education is developing with these three themes in mind. Although in 1963 the Robbins report increased the number of universities in the UK, it is recognized that this initiative did little to encourage working class school leavers or to eradicate the low expectation levels amongst the lower socio-economic groups (Crawford, 1999/2000). Sir Keith Joseph's Green Paper, *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (1985) and the report of the Scottish Tertiary Education Advisory Council (STEAC, 1985), which tackled falling demand for places in higher education and economic and national need, eventually led to entry requirements being lowered to encourage more participation. Simultaneously, it was recognized that 'fitness for entry lay in more than formal paper certification' (Crawford, 1999/2000: 66). Upheld by Dearing (1997), the government continues to encourage universities to admit people irrespective of formal qualifications. Consequently, universities now have students with wide varieties of educational backgrounds and qualifications.

Many post-1992 universities are in this category and must take much into consideration in their strategic planning because, having accepted students on to programmes, they must take account of their diversity and ensure that curriculum, student support, teaching practices and assessment methods are relevant. It has to be recognized that the students' diversity

relates not only to academic achievement, but also to ability, disability, age, maturity, experience, commitment, motivation, study mode, class, sex, race, religion and the like. Merely allowing them access is not enough. All students should essentially experience the same processes on programmes and exit, at some point, with a qualification. One problem lies in the fact that, irrespective of their actual ability, the level at which wider access students can initially be taught is sometimes different to those more academically qualified. In addition, one cannot assume that they have the necessary prerequisites as regards syllabus knowledge from their compulsory education or the preparedness for the assessment methods which they will encounter (Roger, 1994). It follows that if the higher education ethos is to provide education for all, the education provided must be suitable for all. This suggests greater resource commitment.

The economics

In 1998–99 the number of young, full-time, undergraduate entrants to Scottish universities varied from institution to institution, with Paisley, Abertay and Glasgow Caledonian taking on 41, 39 and 34 percent of their intake in that category from social classes iii, iv and v, whilst Edinburgh and St. Andrews took on only 13 and 15 percent respectively. In the same year from low priority neighbourhoods, the same three universities took on 34, 28 and 26 percent, whilst again St. Andrews and Edinburgh took only 8 and 9 percent respectively. Of mature, full-time, undergraduate entrants Paisley, Napier and Abertay took on 42, 35 and 34 percent respectively of their overall intake of undergraduate entrants, whilst once again the lowest was taken by St. Andrews, 6 percent and Edinburgh, 11 percent. The highest number of 1106 was taken on by Glasgow Caledonian (Scottish Higher Education Funding Council [SHEFC], 2000). The new universities are therefore attempting to satisfy government requirements on access but this is not without its penalties. The pre-1992 universities St. Andrews, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Strathclyde, Dundee, Heriot-Watt and Stirling, regard themselves as research universities (Shaw, 1999/2000). The post-1992 universities are emulating them, partially due to their status but also partially due to funding and quality issues. The post-1992 universities have to compete for funds on a similar basis as their more experienced counterparts. What they were good at, namely teaching, vocational degrees and applied research, now appears undervalued. It is not the undervaluing itself that is the main problem, but the effect that such competition is having on the total curriculum offered.

It is important that a high majority of students entering university qualify and are able to take their place in society thereafter, as without high

success rates the whole system would prove to be uneconomic. This 'wastage' element is now documented in much research arising from the poor retention levels within the sector (Hall, 2001; Yorke, 1999). There are, however, a multitude of reasons why a student might not gain their qualification; personal financial circumstances, social problems, medical conditions, changing circumstances and inadequate decision making will all contribute. Having recognized this, one must also recognize that poor support before or during the time at university could also be part of the equation. The amount of time, effort and energy that is being expended by these new universities in dealing with the diversity of students is enormous. Whilst reflective practice might be the ideal it is hardly the priority.

Universities have to work also in communities and have local insight to take into account, in addition to national and international interests. Kelly (1997) suggests that not taking this into account can result in an alien curriculum, which lacks relevance to the students' lives and to their experience outside the school, and ultimately causes them to reject the education offered. The politicization of education also dictates that it should be done for the good of the economy and to reflect political ideals rather than for its own sake. We must also reflect on the fact that insisting that many more people engage in higher education is done at the expense of other areas, such as lower level vocational subjects and that impacts on those trained in the trades (Connelly, 1999/2000).

The curriculum

Kelly (1997) states that curriculum relates to the total experience of the student, whereas Bernstein (1977/1978) states that curriculum is essentially knowledge which is valid. It has further been stated that curriculum content should contain philosophical, professional, psychological, practical and student criteria (Newble and Cannon, 1991). Grace (1978) suggested, in a study on inner city schooling, that there is uncertainty and disagreement over what are appropriate curricula, pedagogy and modes of evaluation, and this is equally relevant to higher education. Although once the medium for liberal education, there now appears to be conflict in purpose (Ball and Eggins, 1989; Barnett, 1994; Beard and Hartley, 1984). This conflict is all too evident in the post-1992 universities. Barnett (1994: 7) suggests that higher education is a 'contested concept' but states that 'crucially it indicates that additional processes are taking place, bringing about . . . a special level of personal development' (p. 6). This is all at a cost, a cost that falls heavily on the lecturers.

The curricula and programmes being developed have to be concerned with the content or knowledge base of the programme for which they are

designed, whether considered liberal, academic or vocational and must also include those aspects of the hidden, actual and received curriculum suggested by Kelly (1997). The curricula adopted, however, must also include those skills required by employers and one cannot ignore the ideological influences of particular groups such as current political parties or big business. Whilst academic considerations appear as a force of quality issues in higher education, there appears to be conflict arising between this and the increasing need for preparation for employment (Shaw, 1999/2000). 'Knowledge is now seen as a commodity . . . with a market value . . . and learners are human capital which it is in the countries' interest to invest (Bryce and Humes, 2000: 1011). However, these are not, and should not be, mutually exclusive. Universities themselves decide on the structure of their own programmes, the regulations and practices applicable thereto, the curricula and teaching and learning approaches (Shaw, 1999/2000), but in essence the post-1992 universities are left with little choice.

Whilst there is demand for the traditional ability to analyse, think critically and work independently, employers also want transferable skills such as communication, teamworking, numeracy, information technology and problem solving. Universities are responding and although some students will be capable of assimilating all skills, whilst still learning the knowledge base of the topic, it will have to be achieved by careful curriculum planning, support mechanisms, teaching methodologies and assessment strategies on the part of the institution. Again the requirement for resources here must be stressed and the main burden falls on the individual module leaders and teaching assistants.

Post-1992 universities, however, have an added burden that the pre-1992 universities do not have. They appear to be changing their practice to that of a more academic style, at the expense of the vocational. The post-1992 universities are in fact caught between the high academic methods of the older universities and the competency-based education of the further education environment. The curriculum content in these universities could now be more suited to the academic student than the vocational student, yet in many cases the student attending these institutions is more suited to the vocational type of course. These new universities must offer a curriculum, including student support, suitable to the type of student that attends their establishments otherwise this will be detrimental to all. This is a real issue that these newer universities have to deal with. The way widening access itself has been interpreted is perhaps the real problem but, despite that, the teaching and learning provided to the students once within the institution must be relevant. There is overwhelming evidence of the value of access entry but limited evidence that higher education was changing to accommodate the needs of an increasingly different student population (Connelly,

1999/2000; Munn et al., 1994, 2000). Whilst the doors have been opened at one end to all, the curriculum is being altered at the other end to that, which suits only a minority (Ranson, 1998).

Recognizing that widening access has permitted a mix of educational ability and reasons for attending, one must surely recognize that the curriculum provided must share this diversity. Such diversity existed when there were clear definitions between the old and the new universities because they had obvious differences in curriculum content and rationale (Dearing, 1997), but this is no longer the case. Cowan (1998: 28) has said that real change can come about 'when an educational programme and its methods are appraised and redesigned in accordance with the abilities which represent the current needs of society, rather than the timeworn and outdated priorities of educationists in higher education . . . we should focus on abilities as heavily as on content mastery – to develop these abilities through reflective self-assessment and reflective awareness of process'. Speaking specifically of a college in the USA, it is an example of how one institution recognized the value of innovative teaching and curriculum, particularly in the reflective sense, and would not simply accept the status quo. It would appear also that institutions which manage to change their curricula to take note of economic or social needs are valued by society and students alike (Cowan, 1998). This is, however, a difficult task in the current uncertain and demotivating environment.

Quality assurance

The quality assurance procedures instigated throughout the sector are insisting on benchmarking of programmes and all universities having to establish the quality of their programmes and teaching strategy against these standards. This is causing post-1992 universities to alter their curricula to enable them to meet the laid down academic standards. In addition, because a large amount of university funding comes from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), with most funding going to the experienced research universities, it will take a long time before the post-1992 universities can compete as equals. In addition to all of the problems with the widening access itself, student diversity and the rigours of a much more academic curriculum (often designed for purposes other than the education of the student) experienced teaching staff are now under pressure to become active researchers, despite the detrimental effect that this might have on the quality of their teaching or indeed their morale. It is believed that part of the problem is the value and credence put on vocational qualifications as opposed to academic: they have less credibility (Ranson, 1998). Recognition of the value of both types of programmes is necessary in a society of

complexity and diverse requirements (Ash et al., 1993; Dearing, 1997). The quality assurance debate, particularly in Scotland, has now turned to one of quality enhancement. There is a feeling in some quarters that the wheel is yet again being reinvented.

Pedagogy

Pedagogy adopted within the context of the curriculum is also part of the debate. Bernstein (1977/1978) suggested that pedagogy is about valid transmission of knowledge and evaluation is about valid realization of this knowledge by the recipient. High academic curricula and vocational curricula necessitate different styles of pedagogy, as do the different types of learners, who not only learn in different ways, but also at different rates (Soden, 2000). Universities who accept a wide range of students thereby face a more difficult task than those universities who already have a solid base upon which to build teaching and assessment strategies. Communications between people may go seriously wrong when lines get crossed, for example, one person speaking as an adult is responded to as a child. In addition, teaching styles may have an influence on the educational opportunities of different types of students within a class. Whilst this latter idea relates to formal compulsory education it is nonetheless relevant to higher education.

It is widely recognized that people learn at different rates and are on different levels at similar ages. The works of cognitivists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner are examples of much of the research that has gone into this area (Wood, 1988). Vygotsky's development theory is particularly important here as each student will require this 'scaffolded' assistance from whatever level they begin. This means that the lecturer cannot treat all students the same as they will each require assistance to that next level individually. There is much research into teaching and learning styles; self-directed learning, independent learning, problem-based learning and reflective learning, which leaves many avenues open to the lecturer. Cowan (1998: 30), however, feels that teachers in higher education are 'regrettably ignorant about the choice and use of pedagogical methods which are suitable for an education that relies more and more on higher level cognition and interpersonal abilities'. Interest in such training has to be reignited; giving time may not be the only answer.

Resources

Assessment methodologies will be critical to the success and/or failure of the students. Mature students may be more open to flexible styles of

assessment, whereas the younger student may still need the security of high formal instruction and end-of-term exams. Yet the module leader is often limited in assessment methodology, not because methodologies are unavailable or lecturers do not want to use them, but because of resource implications or compliance with institutional norms. It is considered desirable that a deep approach to learning is adopted by students. Factors that encourage students to adopt such an approach are the student's own purpose in studying, their previous experiences of education and beliefs about learning, together with the teaching and assessment encountered on the course. It is also recognized that if students feel overburdened with work, if assessment requirements are inappropriate, and if authoritarian relationships between tutors and learners prevail, students tend to adopt ineffective surface approaches to studying (Entwistle, 2000). However, there also has to be an appreciation by the lecturer of students who do adopt deep learning techniques because, if not recognized, students can and will revert to surface techniques only. There needs to be more resources allocated to course design, and innovative teaching and assessment (Ash et al., 1993). Reflective learning, for instance, requires much more time and resources than, say, a mass instruction lecture and a closed book exam, but the learning outcome is likely to be more successful in the former (Cowan, 1998).

The role of the lecturer

All of the aforementioned have a (direct or indirect) influence on the role of the lecturer. Widening access means that the lecturer has a diverse range of starting points. Knowledge of one's audience is important but this in itself means additional work for the lecturer in assessing the students before they arrive for induction. Knowledge of background, prior learning, reasons for being there, ages, social backgrounds, family or work or other commitments and qualifications will all be important for the lecturer to know. The official curriculum itself will not be under the influence of the individual lecturer, but the hidden, received and actual one may be. Each individual student is looking for a total experience and will expect, whether realistic or not, to be provided with it. Their first point of contact is with the lecturer (assistant) teaching the module. Relatively straightforward for lecturers teaching specific subjects to small numbers of students, it becomes much more difficult for those teaching large classes. Theoretically, however, the lecturer can adopt differing teaching methods, and offer all students pedagogy that suits them. The use of andragogical techniques for some and pedagogical techniques for others (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 1992). In addition, assessment methodologies could be tailored to each student to

allow them to display their knowledge and skills to their best advantage. There are, however, restrictions to such an idyllic situation.

The effort required to be able to do the above would be heavy on the lecturer. For large classes, allowing students to pick and choose methods of teaching and assessment would be laborious and difficult to manage. Equality in assessment and time allocation would be difficult. Mass teaching classes may have to be abandoned for smaller, more intimate classes, welcomed probably by many teachers and students but practically impossible. Attempting to get an established timetable altered or different sized classrooms can be a nightmare. The production of a multitude of teaching materials and assessments would make this very time-consuming. In addition, there are university, departmental and faculty regulations to be complied with, therefore, whatever pedagogical methods were adopted would have to be quality assured for rigour and equity. The lecturer also has cultural problems to contend with. Change is often a problem and persons who are not of a like mind as far as progressivism is concerned would find many options unacceptable. Their influence on the decisions on pedagogy, assessment and curriculum will stifle many innovative ideas. Grace (1978: 10) said that 'senior teachers saw their role as defenders of the traditional disciplines and excellence against the attacks of an educational progressivism, which utilised relevance as a central notion for change . . . the traditional curriculum enshrined "the best that has been thought of and known"'. This once again rings true of higher education.

The highest honours and largest funds are given for research and scholarship to those institutions that also operate the most highly selective admissions policies (Roger, 1994) and despite the teaching quality assessments, little appreciation is given to good teaching. This has an adverse effect and has led to teachers feeling demoralized and undervalued. This may change between research assessment exercises but without some credence given to teaching practices, and a recognition that research and teaching are complementary and should be equally valued (Smith and Brown, 1995), individual lecturers will face an uphill struggle in an attempt to alter curriculum practice or pedagogy, if in fact they bother at all.

Included within the teaching methodologies will have to be incorporated the transferable and other skills required by the students and employers. Modules specifically designed to deal with transferable skills are being abandoned and indeed those modules that attempted integrated studies are also diminishing due to the push for a more academically rigorous syllabus. These skills now have to be incorporated into individual modules and this is being achieved by assessment methodologies. However, it all leads to additional work for module leaders, who have to rewrite modules and ensure incorporation of vocationally relevant content, academic skills,

transferable skills, pedagogic methods appropriate for the mixed ability students and correct terminology to meet QAA standards, and that their own personal research and scholarship is high enough to actually allow them to teach the module in the first place.

The duty of the university and of lecturers

It is incumbent on lecturers, irrespective of how much teaching they do, to develop their own abilities and to learn how to become more effective teachers and indeed managers. Roger (1999/2000) also states that the diversity of students' abilities might in fact offer the lecturer an opportunity to widen their teaching base. An idealistic situation would appear to be on offer; however, in reality the lecturer in the post-1992 university is being pulled in many directions. They have to become more effective teachers with all that this entails as regards curriculum and pedagogy from an academic and vocational standpoint. They have to become active researchers to prove they are of some worth to the organization. They have to become student support counsellors and managers of their own modules, and they have to design programmes suited to the widest possible range of students. All of this with a smile on their faces but, in many cases, with little resources supplied or recognition in return.

Widening access has huge implications for the curricula offered, the type of teaching adopted, the management of the facilities and staff development. Shaw (1999/2000) stated that all universities share a common mission to provide students with high-quality education and experience across the range of subject disciplines and to develop and sustain research excellence whether pure or applied. However, this need not be as clones of each other. Designed to suit the programme, the teaching within each area also has to be designed to suit the variety of the students, whilst still allowing the lecturer and institution some autonomy in teaching and assessment methodology. In addition, the transfer of students from further education courses has to be examined since, despite the competency-based degree programmes of the newer universities (Soden, 1999/2000), students entering university from further education still face an uphill struggle in adapting to the less structured attendance mode, teaching and learning strategy and styles of assessment. This article, of course, argues that this is changing.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to bring together many issues within the higher education sector today, particularly related to the post-1992 higher

education institution. It can be seen that time is not the only thing that is required before reflective learning can and will take place but it does play a significant part in the debate. It is suggested, however, that the following are also required:

- commitment to staff by policy-makers and management alike;
- recognition that staff cannot be all things to all people;
- recognition that teaching is as valuable to the institution as research;
- revisiting of management styles;
- commitment by staff to their own development;
- provision of appropriate resources;
- understanding of reflective teaching.

Dearing (1997) stated that higher education depends upon professional, committed members of staff who are appropriately trained, respected and rewarded and a diverse range of autonomous, well-managed institutions with commitment to excellence in the achievement of their distinctive missions. Committed staff will assist in the improvement of progression rates. Resources should be given to them to develop and adopt appropriate curricula and teaching and assessment methodologies (Roger, 1999/2000), which would include the use of information technology techniques. The curriculum provided to students by the institutions must be flexible and open to compromise. Teaching and assessment must encourage and allow all students to demonstrate that they have achieved the objectives of their course of study, and be rigorous enough to stand up to internal and external scrutiny.

Many teachers within the higher education environment do not have the time for new initiatives because they are fully committed trying to do everything else that they have been allocated. Many staff members are demotivated with the situation. Being given time will not solve the problems. It will take more than that. There needs to be more certainty and less pressure. We are in a period of rapid change and these are confusing times. The lecturers need to stop being pulled apart. Reflective teaching appears to be the new(est) 'in' word, although in reality it is not so new. It is being introduced spasmodically across institutions and is being promulgated by interested academics. Time will certainly be a factor in its success or otherwise, but it cannot be sold in this way to already stretched academics. We need to try solving some of the basic problems within the sector first. Through time perhaps there will be a realization of the inadequacy of the education sector and the unreasonable burden being put on the staff. Through time perhaps the value of reflective practice will catch on. Through time perhaps policy-makers and managers will begin the

reflection on some of the issues raised above. Maybe then we will learn by example and we can reflect on why it took us so long to get there.

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