

Mutual reflections on a professional dialogue in academic development: Framing the inquiry, the personal - professional nexus and educational tensions

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Abstract: *This paper presents the respective but cooperative analyses of a lecturer and an academic development practitioner of a reflective journal dialogue over the twelve weeks of teaching a postgraduate course. The paper explores the issues in framing the inquiry, the personal-professional nexus, and the tensions in distinguishing concepts and processes in teaching and the research on teaching. These include the educational dilemmas for both the lecturer and the academic development practitioner in the areas of assessment, judgement, evidence, accountability, responsibility, authority and professionalism.*

Keywords: *reflective journal, teaching development, academic development*

Introduction

In this paper we reflect on our work together, X, in his role as lecturer and Y in her role as academic staff developer. X and Y hardly knew each other when X approached Y. We have both emigrated from South Africa, where we were active in academic development. Whilst Y has continued her work in academic development in New Zealand, X had left the field and gone 'mainstream', lecturing in management. There was therefore a lot of resonance between our respective experiences. X's sense is that this shared professional experience contributed to the ease with which we 'settled into' our project.

The process we followed was that X, who taught a post-graduate course in strategy, each week e-mailed Y, a professional development practitioner, on his thoughts and feelings with respect to the forthcoming or previous seminar. Each week Y emailed a response to that week's e-mail from X, who then took it into account – or not – for the next week's e-mail. It was agreed that there would be no set boundaries on what could be considered.

We agreed to reflect on each of the following themes in terms of the process and dialogue itself. The themes are 'Framing the inquiry', 'The personal-professional nexus', and 'The teaching issues'. The reflections are based on two reflective conversations after the 12-week course and the reflective journaling, and an analysis of our dialogue.

The theoretical context for reflective practice emanates mainly from Schon (1983) who places 'professional artistry' at the centre of his thinking. His work has been criticised for underrating the political bases of reflective practice (Avis, 1994), and the emphasis on competence leads to a neglect of the emotional and personal factors, a dimension we hope to illustrate. We have both struggled to find our voices -- an important phase in developing a journal (or log, or diary, cf Holly, 1989). The use of 'reflective self-awareness of practice' (Candy, 1996) in higher education is especially appropriate for academic development and is widely used (Ross and Pitman, 1995; Andresen, 1995; Beaty, 1995). Schratz (1993) and Clegg (1997) have provided evidence of the benefits of reflective practice in higher education. However the empowering effects on participants (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993) are mitigated by institutional and personal factors. Clegg (1997:487) reports how argument over language (specifically the label 'mentor') indicated deeper tensions of discourse reflecting institutional power. The question arose of which was to be the dominant discourse, the 'peer staff development model based on the mutual trust of the reflective practitioner' or the 'accredited course model with its procedures of assessment and quality control'. The issue is not resolved even by attempting a rapprochement between the technical-rational model of professionalism and the professional artistry model (Fish, 1991:24). We, like Clegg (1997:496), are conscious of the fact that reflective practice does not provide a mechanism for assessing the relation between an educational process and outcome measures of increased effectiveness (Korthagen and Kottkamp, 1993).

Framing the inquiry: the lecturer's reflections [X]

I wanted to keep the journal to investigate my professional practice as a lecturer. I also wanted to fulfil the requirements for a HERDSA Fellowship and was keenly aware of having to produce a quota of publications. Such a rather discomfiting admission exposes an important element of our practice; the problem of how, in confronting external assessment, one translates purpose, motivation, sensibility, values and other complex phenomena into visible, tangible and assessable practice. How can I prove what I know, especially when my perception of success or failure of a process may contradict the perception of others who are co-creators of the process?

So, how did we – how could we – frame our inquiry? I felt clearly I was being upfront with Y, about why I wanted to do it. I felt that she had to have her own reasons for engaging, that I could not ensure that it would be worth her while, that I was not responsible, but also that it was not actually my business. My claim on her had to be limited to simply her taking part by responding to and exchanging emails. What she chose to say or respond to, how, and especially why, were not for me to question.

I ended our first exchange by expressing the desire to get into place 'a more coherent and directed framework of analysis', but also recorded that 'I do not want to lose this sense of an ambling exploratory journal'. It remained a dilemma.

Framing the inquiry: the academic developer's reflections [Y]

My purpose in engaging in a dialogue with X was to provide, as an academic staff developer, a means for him to reflect on his teaching, with the aim of enhancing teaching and ultimately students' learning. In my view why we engaged in the conversation frames the inquiry. X wished to explore his theories and practice of teaching. I accepted the weekly commitment to respond as it was within my brief as an academic staff developer. I saw the undertaking as an opportunity to extend my repertoire of consultancy strategies and to contribute to the scholarship of teaching research. I was enthusiastic to engage and explore what for me was a new process, being a critical friend and colleague over a sustained period. So how did I feel about what I was doing? Initially I was not sure whether we had a shared understanding of what we were trying to achieve. This may have been due to the way I had worked before, working

with a specific focus and outcome in mind. I was going to be the critical friend and colleague to allow X to become more aware of the theories and practice of his teaching. So why was I so self-conscious? I felt I needed to keep my responses professional and focused on the brief. I wanted to focus my responses on his reflections of his theories and practice of teaching. I kept feeling that he did not, although he said he did. His reflections were punctuated with several issues, personal and institutional that impacted upon his preparation and teaching. I found this frustrating. I felt he was missing the wood for the trees. I wanted him to calm down, be less worked up, less stressed, more accommodating, etc.

Establishing the purpose, we soon realised, was part of the larger task of theoretically framing the inquiry. Reporting on it is another stage of framing. 'Framing' emerged as an important metaphor, and looking back on our journal, we can understand a lot of what we said to each other as an effort to frame our individual and mutual understandings.

Personal-professional nexus: the lecturer's reflections [X]

I wondered –perhaps more than Y – whether and in what way the issue of race and gender would manifest. I am a South African white male, Y a South African Indian female. As a white male with most of my experience in 'coloured' or 'black' institutions, I was very conscious of race and gender, but quickly felt that this might be more of an issue for me than for Y. In the final analysis both past professional experience and (past?) personal identity seemed to have less impact than I expected.

So although we fairly quickly agreed to engage, and settled on the practical dynamics of that engagement, we quickly entered into the murky area of power, influence, and trust. This murkiness could not be kept external to the practical dynamics. In fact, it quickly became apparent to me that the distinction between what were and were not practical dynamics was rather fine, and often quite opaque. I open the journal by asking 'God, why is this so hard?' Y in response inserts a sympathetic reply about having to bare our innermost feelings. Y ends her first response to me with 'have I been too invasive, self-indulgent? How has the feedback differed from your expectations?' Much later in the journal Y asks 'I wonder what my role is here? Your conscience or mine? What role do you want me to play?' This illustrates how our professional and personal concerns intersect.

Although there was little conflict, at one point I described how tensions at home were affecting my work. Y identified with my partner, on the basis of gender, the experience of immigration and leaving home. She suggested that she might be able to help me 'understand her [my partner] better in some ways'. I recall feeling a sharp sense that Y's comment was intrusive and irrelevant and at the same time thinking I was being unnecessarily defensive. In fact, I was not clear about what I wanted or felt about a person who was rapidly morphing between professional acquaintance, supportive critical colleague, and friend. Writing the paper made me conscious of the contradiction between being keen to consider the impact of my personal circumstances on my teaching, yet resisting Y considering them. It seems that the framing of our work, and distinctions between our personal and professional identities became more blurred as we continued. It was even more so when we specifically turned to the issues of assessment, judgement, evidence, accountability, responsibility, authority and professionalism.

Personal-professional nexus: the academic developer's reflections [Y]

Upon reflection we both shared the same self-consciousness, wanting to tread carefully and not wanting to get personal. Early exchanges solicit feedback about the relationship, e.g. 'Have I been too invasive, self-indulgent?' or 'What would X think?'. As the relationship progressed and trust was established the exchanges became more open and less guarded and depth of reflection increased. This came about after personal exchanges about institutional and emotional support, which are, strictly speaking, issues outside

the teaching agenda. It is important to acknowledge that there are risks and personal vulnerability in entering such a relationship, and that there will be tensions until a certain level of mutual trust is attained.

This conversation has revealed that other forms of teaching consultancy, e.g. lecture observation of small group instructional diagnoses, can be clinical analyses that function at only the professional levels. In a sustained dialogue the relationship evolves and there is a deeper engagement resulting in a shift from professional to personal. Upon reflection we have maintained a professional relationship, but our relationship has shifted after the dialogue to a completely new level. We now have a mutual understanding of each other on several levels, personally and professionally, are less self-conscious of each other, and have agreed to share and engage in the scholarship of teaching endeavours. We are now placing more value on mutual gains as opposed to personal gains, e.g. joint authorship of papers and the pursuit of investigating areas of mutual interest in the scholarship of teaching. The development in our personal-professional relationship is similar to the teacher-student relationship which can also remain at the professional level or evolve to being both personal and professional.

The teaching issues: the lecturer's perspective [X]

I feel there was little conflict and much synergy in this professional dialogue. This is not the case in teaching, something that many entries made clear. There are many conflicts of interest in teaching. One conflict very pertinent to the current discussion is my interest in and desire to explore my practice and the students' interest in and legitimate claim to clarity and security (Rowland, 1993).

In my first entry I wrote that I was enjoying myself but that my confidence and experience was 'laced with anxiety about doing the right thing and worrying about whether they [students] will like me or not'. I go on to say:

I think we generally underestimate our professional needs. Our needs to be acknowledged, respected and even liked. Perhaps the last one is more personal, not so general, related to personality. But still I think it is quite important in teaching. Teaching is essentially a relational activity... People who have no need of relating probably don't bother becoming teachers. I wonder if the vocational aspect of teaching is underrated, even at tertiary level.

I am less clear now on what 'professional needs' as opposed to personal needs are. If teaching is a relational activity – that is to say an essential feature of it is a relationship, and it involves the co-creation of meaning, then can either party alone be held accountable for the quality of the process or its outcome? To play on words, no single voice can offer a reasonably comprehensive account of a relationship.

If the vocational (and I mean here the sense of calling, rather than of trade training) nature of teaching is underestimated, it is legitimate to ask whom is calling and who should answer to whom. Is our distrust of the 'the vocation' tied up with a 'faith' in objectivity reality? Are there ways in which 'professional distance' requires a 'de-vocationalisation' of our chosen work?

Like other experienced university lecturers, I have to work hard at keeping clear what I mean by 'education', 'teaching' and 'learning'. I described a particular technique I used as 'Partly just practical, but also to break the tendency of students to address me only at the front. I wanted them to talk to the class... I think there is much more learning to be done, besides what is explicit course content'. Y responded by wondering 'how many teachers are aware of this aspect in their teaching? How many of us see teaching as a personal learning experience? At another point I reported using a game that involved 'huge judgements of character in allocating roles. On what authority? I am not unhappy or insecure

about it. But it is a huge issue how much teaching involves intimate personal judgement of others'. Y replied, 'Yes, our power with regard to the teaching experience, but we have little power over students' learning! Guess this is where a lot of our insecurities lie'.

We return to those entities to which I feel I am answerable. Each party has different expectations and seeks different kinds of evidence. The issue emerges from comparing my situation to that of the students, and my attitude towards the students. At one point I reflect on how I do not ensure that students have all the resources they need, and I go on to observe that my employer puts me in the same position. However, whilst 'my employer' is easily identified, there are a range of other entities to which I feel I am answerable; peers, academic community, my own expectations, formal requirements, the more specific entities of editors, reviewers, and students.

The capacity and willingness to discriminate and to make judgments as a professional is a responsibility that should not be confused with the power make decisions. Such power can of course be abused, and it can also at times be more limited than is realised.

The teaching issues: the academic developer's perspective [Y]

Over the weeks several issues related to teaching were highlighted. These issues were reflected upon as frustrations, tensions or dilemmas which contributed to X's theories and practices of teaching. The teaching issues X reflected on varied from his teaching philosophy and perceptions of postgraduate programme goals to accountability, institutional support, course learning outcomes, course design, assessment to student motivation and engagement. He ponders the purpose of postgraduate study and what makes it different from undergraduate, and how we can establish that a student is now 'ready' to undertake postgraduate study. What is the place of assessment in postgraduate study, acknowledging that by this stage the student has a 'proven aptitude' to pass? The issues may not have all been resolved, but reflecting and articulating them makes him aware that they impact on his teaching theories and practice, and the students' learning.

Teachers are held accountable for students' learning. How students learn or whether or not they actually learn, is sometimes not considered in terms of the factors that impact on teaching and learning. Teacher frustrations and stress levels may be impacted upon by the extent and quality of institutional support that is provided emotionally, physically or financially. Reflective journaling, although resource-intensive, does provide for much-needed emotional and psychological support to assist in personal/professional development and support.

It needs to be acknowledged that student learning cannot be guaranteed regardless of the 'correct' theories and practice in place. There will always be tensions because of the unpredictability of the learning experience. There may be a mismatch of student motivation and teacher expectations, the inability of students to transfer knowledge and skills to the task at hand, or student anxiety and their lack of engagement. The value that the system places on teaching in relation to research is an important consideration added to workload pressures and other administration demands. These issues do not include issues and constraints that impact on teachers' lives outside of teaching, e.g. personal circumstances like relationships, family, study, finances and other life challenges.

Conclusion

There is a rich tradition in educational research on keeping journals and engaging critical friends. Our contribution to this tradition illustrates the links between framing an inquiry, the professional-personal nexus and daily practical teaching issues. Our journal reveals that there are so many factors at play, some

within the control of the teacher and students, but many beyond. We hope our investigation contributes to the resistance to 'reflective practice being deployed as a conceptual framework for preparing lecturers with the skills and knowledge needed to perform their (teaching) duties as 'competent' technicians rather than critical professionals' (Macfarlane 2004:19). We shall continue our efforts to effectively link assessment, judgement, evidence, accountability, responsibility, authority and professionalism to one another in our educational practice and to resist what Day (1993) has called the culture of 'busyness', referring to the what and how of educational delivery rather than substance and meaning.

Assessing whether or not our inquiry was appropriately framed and adequately conducted is a continuing process, of which this paper is a part. But we doubt if we will ever be able to be conclusive, and this is illustrated in the journal. In one of the last entries, Y wrote that she sensed a huge sigh of relief on X's part, which surprised him, since his memory is that he enjoyed this course, despite his whinging about working conditions.

The value of this experience seems to be directly related to the degree to which it was a personal, even intimate, record. Boundaries are problematic. The prevalent conception of research as inquiry made public begs the question of appropriately making public the intimacies in a journal. This issue is part of exploring professional identity. X, for example, constantly raises the question of professional identity, and yet does not seem to have an impersonal professional identity. Is there a trade-off between professional identity and substantive identity?

We cited the initial exchanges in the journal referring to the difficulty of baring ourselves to ourselves and to each other. This research methodology requires trust to be established between the researchers. Trust – or the lack thereof - is a phenomenon that permeates the entire educational enterprise. Y's querying, 'Have I been too invasive, self-indulgent?' is similar to many such queries posed by X in his reflections on his teaching.

We have learned that the process of keeping a journal can alter the initial framing of purpose. This is potentially a curse and a blessing. How one strikes the balance between being flexible and focussed will depend to some extent on one's fundamental theoretical assumptions about research. It is as well to be prepared for this and foreground the issue. That said, any cooperative journal runs the risk of competing theoretical frameworks. What strikes us now is, does this matter? Our experience seems to indicate that a high degree of congruence between the 'journalists' is not necessary for productive outcomes. Towards the end of the journal X writes:

I also realised I am glad I trusted Y to start this project. I know now I just would not have had the discipline, strength or whatever to keep it up myself. I guess I knew that. It is interesting. I have implicated her for my own benefit - I hope it is to her advantage as well, but my main motivation was self-interest.

Y's reply was pretty straightforward: 'About Y...she is a smart cookie, no doubt. She knows that this is about you! But she too wants something out of this.'

The development of the relationship from being professional to being aware of the emotional and personal issues impacting on X may not have occurred had the exchanges been short term. The other qualifying factor is the mutual willingness and risk involved in opening up to the other with the personal and emotional issues. There are huge risks here as to how the other might respond or how you may be perceived. However, having taken the risks, the rewards are greater in that we both have changed and gained enormously. We are more willing to advocate the use of reflective journaling to engage teachers in the scholarship of teaching.

Our inquiry and reflective dialogue resulted in an evolution of the conversation and relationship. There was risk and vulnerability in taking this route, but we were both prepared for it. What emerged from the twelve week engagement was a richer, more informed experience than if we used intermittent consultation meetings and/or other forms of obtaining feedback on the teaching experience. The sustained weekly reflective journal highlighted many teaching issues that impact on the student learning experience. There are issues related directly to the actual teaching (delivery, assessment, feedback) and others extraneous to the teaching (institutional support, personal challenges and work pressures). We conclude that reflective journaling provides teachers and academic developers with a useful strategy to reflect both personally and professionally, thereby enhancing the experience of teaching and learning for students, teachers and academic developers.

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