Managing academic change through reflexive practice: A quest for new views

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Abstract: In the current academic environment we need to become truly reflexive practitioners in order to contribute to the ever-changing landscape in which we find ourselves. This paper describes a tri-view model for reflexive practice. This model represents an integration of the intra-view (our own personal quest), the inter-view (the process of questioning each other) and the trans-view (the paradigms of the collectives to which we belong). The integration of these three view points allows us to actively seek, or ‘quest’ for, new perspectives and new understanding which are fundamental to the process of change.

Keywords: reflection, reflexive practice, viewpoints, intra-view, inter-view, trans-view, academic development, quest, managing change

Introduction

The academic environment presents an ever-changing landscape, and academics of all disciplines are confronted with a multitude of perspectives on what constitutes learning, knowledge, pedagogy and research. As student cohorts and institutional structures change, so too do the roles academics are required to assume. Even within a disciplinary specialty, it is no longer possible to take a single world view, because of the diversity of world views held by both its practitioners and its students. Irrespective of our specialty, as academics the world over we are faced with the challenge of improving our performance and our contribution to our students and our institutions. Regardless of whether our personal academic landscape is changing subtly or tectonically, we find that we must seek new understanding, new interpretations and new ways of knowing what we thought we knew.

Adapting to change begins with expanding and deepening our own understanding of self. One very useful tool for developing self-awareness is reflexive practice which is an ongoing process of examining and refining how we operate in our professional work (see below, and Dewey (1933) and Schön (1987, 1991), for example). However, many common reflective techniques tend to be introspective, seeing the world only from the viewpoint of the individual engaged in the reflection. Although this is an essential component of reflexive practice, this personal viewpoint or intra-view is inadequate when it comes to building our understanding of who we are as academics. We need to be able to see and understand the different worlds in which we are immersed – the academic “multiverse” – from additional viewpoints.

Reflexive practice, on the other hand, is reflective inquiry that involves making connection between our personal lives and professional careers. Reflexivity has been defined as, “the self-conscious co-ordination...
of the observed with existing cognitive structures of meaning (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997, p. 237). It is important to distinguish between reflexivity as a position, and reflectivity as a general process. At the heart of this differentiation is the thinking that a position of reflexivity, or of an ability to locate ourselves in the picture, is complemented by a process of reflectivity. Reflectivity, developed from the ideas of Argyris and Schön (1974), is the process in which we are able to reflect upon the ways our own assumptions and actions influence a situation, and thus change our practice as a direct result of this reflective process. In this way of thinking, reflectivity becomes a type of research method, one which allows us to research our own practice (or that of others) in order to change or improve it. Frederick Steier (1995, p. 3) writes, ‘if we begin to examine how we as researchers are reflexively part of those systems we study, we can also develop an awareness of how reflexivity becomes a useful way for us to understand what others are doing’. He claims that reflexivity is a way that ‘we contextually recognise the various mutual relationships in which our knowing activities are embedded’ (1995, p.163).

While it may seem that there is a multitude of different and changing viewpoints that we must adopt or acknowledge, those that are not intra-views fall into two fundamental types – the inter-view, which is the outcome of the viewpoints shared between ourselves and another, or a few, individuals, and the trans-view, which provides the context for our individual intra-views, and represents the viewpoints, norms and beliefs of the communities to which we belong – academic, cultural, discipline-specific, national, political, religious, and social (see Figure 1).

These three viewpoints, the intra-, inter- and trans-views, and the dynamic interactions between them, have led me to a model for holistic reflexive practice, which allows us to see ourselves in the context of our interactions with other individuals, embedded within the multiple contexts in which we live. Further, the quest-questioning-questions model presented in this paper is founded on the notion of actively seeking, or questing for, the new understandings and perspectives that are fundamental to any process of adapting to change.

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**Figure 1. The three viewpoints of reflexive practice**
Much of the impetus for this model has come from my experience as a teacher in higher education, a researcher and as a consultant to a major World Bank project aim at bringing about change in the Thai higher education system (Prpic and Kanjanapanyakom, 2004). In each of these contexts the model has provided a means of understanding and reconciling the elements that have blocked or facilitated change.

Before articulating the model itself, and before attempting to understand how it operates and what it implies, it is useful to appreciate the three different viewpoints that it encompasses, and to understand that each is based on some form of dialogue or narrative.

The intra-view

The intra-view is about the inner landscape where we find connection to self. We interact with our intra-view whenever we attempt to find deeper understanding of self, or struggle to understand a new concept or make meaning from an experience. In the intra-view we speak in the first person, “I think …”, “I believe …”, “I feel …”, “my experience is …”. It is our intra-view that helps us to explore the boundaries of self and of our academic disciplines, and to find new ways of seeing ourselves and the world around us. The intra-view also holds the beliefs, metaphors and models by which we understand our world and operate in it. Thus it is through this inner landscape that we traverse when we embark on our personal quest for understanding, meaning and being.

The intra-view arises from the collected opinions, understandings, beliefs and prejudices that we hold as individuals, and, as such, goes a long way towards determining our self-identity. As described by Giddens (1991), self-identity is not just a set of traits or observable characteristics. Self-identity is our own reflexive understanding of our individual biography, and has continuity in that it cannot easily be completely changed at will.

A stable self-identity is based on an account of our life, actions and influences which makes sense to us personally, and which we can explain to other people without much difficulty. It ‘explains’ the past, and is oriented towards an anticipated future. Thus, our self-identity involves the capacity to keep our personal biographical narrative going. Yet, because we maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, we must continually integrate the events which occur there, and sort them into our ongoing biographies. Giddens (1991) describes this process as “self-reflexive”, involving reflection in action, and reminding us that “self” is not a passive entity. Thus developing our intra-view requires engaging in an active dialogue with ourselves, involving contemplation, meditation and self-reflection.

One of the most widely used techniques for reflection is journal writing (Bell and Gillett, 1996; Ballantyne and Packer, 1995; Kember et al, 1999). However, Richardson and Maltby (1995) argue strongly that, whilst journal writing facilitates the skills required for reflection, the skills of critical inquiry and problem solving are frequently not demonstrated.

Thus while many common reflective techniques help us see the world from our own viewpoint, they leave us poorly equipped to appreciate the views of others and of the communities to which we belong. In other words, internal dialogue is important but by itself it may not lead to new understanding, particularly of phenomena and events in the real world. It is therefore important to expand our reflexion to encompass the breadth provided by the inter-view and the trans-view.

The inter-view

The inter-view deepens our personal quest through the process of dialogue and questioning. It is the outcome of a process in which we share our quest with another person or small group of people, to co-
create actively some new understanding. Very much in the sense conveyed by Bohm (1996), the inter-
view allows us to find a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This is fertile 
ground for the development of new understanding, and indeed the inter-view process allows us to test 
our ideas, deepen our warm-up and achieve clarity.

In contrast to the typical interview, which is constrained around a predetermined set of questions 
designed by the interviewer, the aim of the inter-view is to share our own intra-view and to come to 
understand the other’s intra-view. Considerable trust is required on both sides, and the questioning 
process needs to be conducted in a spirit of curiosity. Indeed, “trust is perhaps the essential condition 
needed to foster reflective practice in any environment” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 45).

Brockbank and McGill (1998) succinctly describe the dialogue involved in the inter-view as one that 
engages us at the edge of our knowledge, our sense of self and the world as we experience it. By providing 
a mirror in which we can find new reflections, the inter-view allows our assumptions about knowledge, 
ourselves and our world to be challenged.

In an academic context, the inter-view is a very Socratic process of questioning and reflective answers. In 
my experience, learning reflectively in this way is particularly effective at promoting new understanding 
when the emergent ideas are related to existing senses of knowledge, self and the world. Yet it is critical to 
distinguish between the inter-view and a discussion. All too often, a discussion becomes merely a forum 
for the concurrent exhibition of different points of view by individuals who have no real commitment to 
changing their own worldview. By contrast, the inter-view is most effective when we trust the process and 
are willing to be vulnerable and open to new ideas – only then will we become aware of opportunities for 
change and self-development. Indeed, as Gebser (1985) puts it, we have an “ethical imperative of presenting 
an expository dialogue instead of a postulatory monologue and thereby convey the probably objective 
correctness of the basic idea rather than merely a subjective opinion of its correctness” (p. xxviii).

In seeking to find a new inter-view, the interviewee needs to be willing to share openly and, in the sense 
of the quest, to be actively seeking new understanding. The interviewer needs to take the role of naïve 
inquirer, to remain curious and to ask open questions about the interviewee’s beliefs, feelings, thoughts 
and responses to experience that lie behind the issue at hand. This questioning, and the dialogue 
associated with it, allows both parties to clarify their ideas, deepen their understanding and strengthen 
(or soften) their commitment to positions, thereby arriving at a new inter-view. Thus the process of 
questioning is central to the establishment of the inter-view.

The inter-view is an opportunity for true intimacy, which is about exploring and discovering the unknown 
between two individuals. In particular, there are no prejudices, pre-conceived ideas or pre-formed images 
or judgements in such intimacy. It is not surprising therefore that the context and environment of the 
interview in influential in enabling reflection to take place.

Kvale (1996) in his book on interviews as a qualitative research methodology proposes six criteria for 
quality in interviews:

1. The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee;
2. The shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the interviewee’s answers, the better;
3. The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of 
   the answers;
4. The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview;
5. The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the interviewee’s answers in the 
course of the interview; and,
6. The interview is “self-communicating” – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations (p. 145).

Although originally proposed in the context of qualitative research methodology, these criteria apply equally to the inter-view process described here.

The inter-view can take many forms – narrative (Russell and Carey, 2005; Barry and Elmes, 1997), mind-mapping (Buzan, 1991), peer mentoring (Fullerton, 1996; Hutchings, 1996), clinical supervision (Smyth, 1991), drama (Prendergast, 2003), sharing personal journals (Leitch and Day, 2001), engaging a critical friend (Stenhouse, 1975), stories, poetry, and collage (Newton, 2004). The question we need to ask ourselves is how many forms of inter-view are evident in our academic practice today?

The trans-view

The trans-view is the collected and accepted body of norms, beliefs, values, practices and prejudices of all the individuals who make up a community. The trans-view contextualises the intra-view and the inter-view by providing and prioritising questions about what is important to the collective. The trans-view also holds the essence of cultural differences, and can be seen for example in my experience in Thailand (Prpic and Kanjanapanyakom, 2004), where it was not only critical for me to understand the contexts which impacted on the Thai educational system, but also for the Thais themselves to be able to appreciate the norms and beliefs which colour their practice.

In the broader academic setting we are part of many communities or networks of communities – discipline based, learning, organisational, social, cultural and international, to name just a few – each of which has its own sets of questions. So, for example, in an organisational context, the trans-view poses questions of structure such as “Will we have formal Schools or loosely organized learning communities spread across several campuses?” and “Will our new building have common areas for discussion?”.

In a community based on an academic discipline the trans-view illuminates the research questions engaging that particular community. We can also see the trans-view throughout other aspects of academic life, for example, in the development of

- Policies: “What is the university’s policy on inclusivity?” “Do we need a policy on marketing?” “How will we support attendance at Conferences?” “How will we deal with internationalisation?”
- Procedures: “What procedures do we have in place for reviewing academic progress?” “How will we promote staff?”
- Practices: “How do we implement problem-based learning?” “How do we provide our students with practical experience?”
- Processes: “How do we evaluate learning outcomes?” “How do we develop new curricula?”

These questions enliven our communities, which need new questions to keep developing. There are now so many new questions as we embrace other international and multicultural viewpoints, and it is these new questions that fuel the changes that confront us all – questions that arise as the trans-view evolves.

The model in motion

Times of change inevitably demand an increased level of consciousness if we are to adapt successfully, so we need to develop greater awareness of ourselves and how we are shaped by the communities we belong to. Yet we do not simply need to be reactive: greater awareness enables us to have a greater impact on these same communities and to influence the magnitude and impact of change. The quest—questioning—
questions model described here provides a tool for understanding the processes involved in the dynamics of change (see Figure 2).

Together these three view points conform to Mezirow’s (1981) hierarchy of reflection:

1. Reflectivity: an awareness of specific perceptions, meanings or behaviour;
2. Affective reflectivity: an awareness of feelings about what is being perceived, thought or acted on;
3. Discriminant reflectivity: assessing the efficacy of perceptions, thoughts and behaviour;
4. Judgemental reflectivity: an awareness of value judgments made on perceptions, thought and behaviour;
5. Conceptual reflectivity: assessing the adequacy of the concepts used for judgement;
6. Psychic reflectivity: recognition the habit of making precipitant judgements on limited information; and,
7. Theoretical reflectivity: an awareness that one set of perspectives, e.g. taken for granted practice or culture, may explain personal experience less satisfactorily than another perspective (pp. 12-13).

Mezirow refers to the first four levels of reflectivity as ‘consciousness’ and the last three as ‘critical consciousness’. It is these latter levels of reflectivity which he claims is when perspective transformation, that is, learning occurs. In the sense of the model presented here, Mezirow’s transformation occurs as a result of the dynamic interaction and integration of all three view-points.
It is important to understand that there is a dynamic and vibrant relationship between each of the view points described above and that no one view alone allows us to see opportunities for change, or moves us towards the action required. This impetus for change only comes from the interaction between all three views, and it is the combination of all three views that constitutes truly reflexive practice.

If the dynamics between the three views become frozen we can get stuck in the shadow landscape of each view. A frozen intra-view leads to disconnected navel gazing and isolation; a frozen inter-view becomes an interrogation; and a frozen trans-view imposes a tyrannical and didactic structure on the community and ourselves as individuals within it.

The inter-view plays a key role in the dynamics of this model, because it is through the inter-view process of mutual questioning that we can arrive at a deeper understanding of our personal intra-views. We can also develop new understanding of the impacts that the trans-views of the various communities – academic or otherwise – to which we belong have on our intra-views. It is this understanding that facilitates change.

How does this model lead to improved learning outcomes for students and to change in institutions? As Brookfield suggests,

Critical reflection is a matter of stance and dance. Our stance toward our practice is one of inquiry. We see it as being in constant formation and always needing further investigation. Our dance is the dance of experimentation and risk (Brookfield 1995, p.42).

The model helps us understand how we can go about the process of inquiry and what factors influence the way we think about teaching. Our practice as a whole becomes the object of systematic inquiry. We become more aware of issues of power and control in both our classrooms and our institutions. By gaining new perspectives on our practice we begin to name and confront the dilemmas and contradictions that challenge us on a daily basis - dilemmas and contradictions that arise from either our own intra-view or from the educational paradigms (trans-views) of our institution/culture/discipline. Further, through the inter-view process we gain insight into the beliefs, thinking and experiences of our students, ourselves and our colleagues.

Although it is increasingly apparent that critical reflection and reflective learning are practices that every academic is expected not just to know about, but to be actively involved in, typical academic schedules rarely allow the time or space that is required. More importantly reflection as described here needs to be valued and resources allocated to allow reflective work to take place.

If we can embrace the intra-view, the inter-view and the trans-view as an integrated whole we can become truly self-reflexive practitioners – become articulate social beings, able to exercise attributes such as initiative, creativity, independent judgment, oral communication skills, analysis, critique and synthesis. These are the very attributes that most Universities articulate as being desirable in graduates. Yet although we academics are expected to understand and undertake reflective practice, guidance in developing the necessary skills is rarely forthcoming, and, until we are able to “live” reflexive practice, we will be unable to help and guide our students along the same path.

References


Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Brent Davey, Dr. Marie-Louise Annerblom and Ms. Margaret O’Connell for their commitment and willingness to engage in inter-view so that I could expand my own personal quest for understanding.

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