

Is reflection a useful tool for teaching and learning about health and wellbeing ?

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Various benefits have been linked with reflective practice in teaching and learning contexts such self-development, self-awareness (Watson, 2008), critical thinking (Moon, 2005), awareness of thinking processes - and support in decision making and empowerment (Sen,2010). Academic research has focused on the role of reflective writing in higher education courses such as business (Anderson and Thorpe,2007; Currie and Knights, 2003) or professional courses such as teaching or nursing (Bulman et al, 2013;. Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012). This study explores reflection as a tool for teaching and learning.

The research objectives of this project were the following:

- To what extent reflective writing is a useful tool for teaching and learning about health and well-being
- What were the challenges and facilitators of reflective practice in this teaching and learning?
- To what extent and how reflection can inform teaching and learning practices?

Methodology

Participants in this study were students in a course of health and wellbeing taking place in a Centre for Lifelong Learning within the University of Warwick. Nine adults with various disciplinary, professional backgrounds and different nationality and age groups took part.

The teaching was based on interdisciplinary material, relevant to Behaviour, Health and Wellbeing. This incorporated perspectives from medical sociology, health psychology, behavioural therapy and coaching. The teaching material aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice and reflection is considered as a tool to accomplish this objective (Schon, 1983). Since course enrolment, students were prompted to use reflection as a tool to not only explore and understand the teaching material but also to apply existing theories and research evidence in their every-day life. Thus, this project is based mainly on the data from students' written assignments. Students were asked to choose a topic of

their interest and apply the reflection exercise. They used portfolio of reflective writing activities, diaries and session reflections. The analysis is comprised of two levels: a) students analysed the material of the module based on their experiences and the theoretical knowledge they acquired, to capture the impact of their individual learning experience of this module and b) the tutors analysed the impact of the module both on individuals and on the group.

Examples from the assignments will be provided to illustrate the findings presented below.

Preliminary Findings

Benefits for the students/ or reflection as facilitator for learning

Reflective writing facilitated students' ability to link the teaching material to their past experience and identify effective ways to proactively modify their learning and understanding on concepts relevant to health and wellbeing.

Due to the nature of the certificate, which was tailored to their everyday life, the reflection allowed them to focus on different topics that they were of interest to them and acquire a deeper understanding of topics raising their awareness about their personal health and wellbeing. This often led to taking responsibility and planning future steps about how to address health and wellbeing challenges.

Students mentioned that each one of them benefited in a different but in a very 'unique' way which was tailored to specific interests and needs.

Academic practice: challenges and conditions for reflection

In terms of academic practice of the tutors, this project allowed them to explore reflection as a teaching and learning tool and identify not only challenges but also conditions under which reflection worked best.

In terms of challenges, there was resistance and hesitation about reflection in the course for the various reasons. Firstly, student group was not familiar with reflection as a learning tool since they had not undertaken reflection exercises in their previous education experience. Secondly, due to the rather personal and sensitive

nature of the issues discussed, students reported that expressing their thoughts and emotions –regarding health and wellbeing attitudes in their lives – was a challenging task. Lastly, a few students – with strong academic background – perceived reflection as non-scientific and were not confident in blending their personal experience with academic literature. The different cultural backgrounds were reported to be an important factor, influencing the way people perceived and incorporated reflection in their everyday life.

On the basis of the data analysis, the following conditions identified as crucial in reaping the benefits of reflective writing.

1) The size and the composition of the group was of paramount importance. It was a small group and students were able to build rapport with each other rather quickly. It was surprising that especially after the first term, students were describing to the class personal situations and thoughts about their lifestyle and health situation. Great interest in health and well-being were catalysts in their learning experience driving their continuous active participation in the class and their contribution of personal life examples.

2) Due to the nature of the course, all students were able to relate to health and wellbeing topics and share their own experiences about diet, smoking, alcohol, psychological and physical illnesses which created a relaxing atmosphere where everyone could participate and engage.

3) Both tutors were coming from a different cultural background had experience on the topics mentioned and practices relevant to reflection, which enabled them to demonstrate reflection by reflecting on their own experiences and cultural context in relation to health and wellbeing. Continuous support was provided by the tutors in a range of issues: from content of the course, to the use of reflection. At the same time, the tutors also used provocative material and encouraged challenging research material and studies in order to foster critical reflection on the issues presented in the course.

Implications

Reflective writing has been found to be very useful in a health and well-being course, enabling both a deeper understanding of the factors that affect health and wellbeing and an opportunity for students to make informed decisions regarding improvement of their personal wellbeing. Conditions such as tailoring the material to students' background, needs and understanding, small group size, nature of module that encourages contribution of experience, and continuous support from tutors on learning and beyond can help in engaging students with reflection and make them benefit from it.

References

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