

Can Pedagogic Practice Enhance Post Graduate Business Students' Abilities To Self-Direct
One Teacher's Reflections (0164)

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This study examines a teacher's reflections of their pedagogic practice intended to aid students' engagement in self-directed learning (SDL). Findings are taken from action research undertaken with a cohort of mixed nationality, postgraduate students in a British post 1992 university.

Indicative Context

In recent times, the significance of the learner and their contribution to the learning process has shifted; what the learner does has become more important for the learning process than what the teacher contributes (Prosser and Trigwell, 1998; Biggs, 1999; Trigwell and Shale, 2004). Our understanding of SDL has also evolved. Brookfield (1985; 1986) claimed the full form of SDL is when both external activities (task control) and internal reflective dimensions are brought together (Candy, 1991). More recent models including Garrison's (1997) three dimensional comprehensive model of *self-management, self-monitoring and motivation* reflect current understanding, incorporating these internal cognitive concepts.

The learner, according to Garrison, takes responsibility and control to monitor and manage learning activities, known as *self-management*. This is comparable to Pilling-Cormick's SDLP model (1996, in Pilling-Cormick and Garrison, 2007) where individuals determine their priorities and choose from available resources. Pilling-Cormick's model divides self-management further into three aspects; a) the control factor, b) the contextual influences on the interaction between the teacher and student – involving both motivational and management processes and c) being the interaction between the student and the teacher. The interaction between teacher and student is a key consideration for pedagogic practice in determining how best to engage students (QAA, 2013).

Student engagement however, is not the sole responsibility of the teacher (Kuh, 2009).

Methods that aid self-direction and self-regulation, like SDL, can motivate learners through achievement of goals (Ames, 1992). As Garrison (1997) identified, cognitive dimensions to self-direction were key in understanding learner's engagement in self-directed learning, both in self-monitoring and in establishing their own motivations for study.

Self-monitoring (Garrison, 1997), focusses on reasoning processes – the learner is significant in understanding the task, in assessing the strategies available, and in being aware of and having an ability to think critically about what they are learning. Therefore, SDL requires a learner to be self-reflective and self-appraising (Garrison and Archer, 2000). Clearly, learning as an ongoing process requires sustained effort and to achieve this, the learner needs to have positive perceptions of their ability to maintain their *motivation*, or volition in reaching their learning goals (Corno, 1993).

Accepting that self-directed learning can offer learners opportunities for engagement and key employability skills (Ames, 1992; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Ellinger, 2004), then it is significant to explore how the teachers can foster SDL through their pedagogic practice.

Results from previous action research (Dawson, 2015) identified several acts of teaching practice that could aid SDL in postgraduate business students. These were;

- 1) In setting expectations, this should be done as much as possible in small groups or individually to build rapport (relatedness) between tutor and student.
- 2) Where possible, a peer network in small groups should be facilitated to develop a sense of belonging and to enable feedback and support amongst learners themselves.
- 3) In using VLE resources, tutors should create synchronous online activities where face to face intervention does not permit, and provide additional resources to direct and support all learners in their knowledge and understanding.

- 4) The use of reflective logs by all enabled self- management and self-monitoring skills.
- 5) Experiential, problem-based learning and reflective discussion in class time assists self-monitoring and drives motivation by volition, by providing relevance to the workplace and the opportunity to connect theory to practice (Knowles, 1975, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Ames, 1992).

Therefore, in conducting a further study, it was important to test these outcomes with a larger cohort to further define the extent to which specific teaching practice can aid SDL.

Methodology

Action research was undertaken in spring 2015 with a class of 33 mixed nationality post-graduate business students to scale up and re-test these findings. As part of the data capture, the tutor kept a weekly reflective diary of their observation and thoughts. Ethnographic content analysis (Holsti, 1969; Altheide, 1996) was undertaken to analyse this data, to ascertain whether the previously identified acts of teaching practice aided SDL from the teacher's perspective and to explore any other underlying themes.

Research question;

To what extent can specific acts of teaching practice aid the development of SDL in PG business students?

Preliminary Findings

The primary focus of the teacher remained external task control – management of the class and associated activities (Candy, 1991) in line with earlier findings. Face to face communication of tasks and resource availability was hampered by multiple student absence across early sessions, so e-messaging was utilised in its place; however a lack of synchronicity prevented the tutor from gauging student response, in line previous findings.

Most reflection centred on cognitive aspects of SDL, being Garrison's (1997) *self-management* component and the students' *self-motivation* to engage in SDL. The teacher

experienced mixed emotions in attempting to engage the students in SDL activity. Whilst demonstrating enthusiasm for the methods and activities selected – an encouraging behaviour observed by previous learners (Dawson, 2015), students' disinclination to undertake self-study activity, led to feelings of frustration and concerns over the risks associated with student-centred learning (Baeten *et al*, 2010). The tutor posited whether by further reminding students, they would be over-stepping the line from facilitating to controlling the class (Rogers, 1969), which the tutor saw as an undesirable outcome, potentially damaging any rapport built, consistent with earlier findings, despite expectations being set at the outset. After all, in self-directed learning, the responsibility for learning sits with the learners themselves and this requires a significant shift in how the teacher approaches pedagogy (Wilkerson and Hundert, 1991 in Boud and Felletti, 1991).

Resistance to peer group working in relation to coursework, brought to question the primary purpose of the taught programme – it was considered whether passing the module was the most significant goal for individuals, more than the learning itself (Leung *et al*, 2008). It is acknowledged that drivers of student motivation can be influenced by their cultural differences (Stickland, 1996; Altbach and Knight, 2007), which in turn can bring about significant differences in response to self-directed learning, adding further complexities to evaluating pedagogic practice (Gwee, 2008; Frambach *et al*, 2012) This in turn led the tutor to question their role as teacher – to what extent should the teacher be flexible to meet the needs of students in this way- given, it may be argued, that students are customers (Finney and Finney, 2010).

Additionally, the tutor questioned their own needs in fulfilling their role as facilitator of SDL – speculating that the desire for face to face interaction with learners, through reflective discussion in class and at tutorials, may be to fulfil their own expectations of SDL, rather than being of primary benefit to the learning experience. (Doring *et al*, 1995: Moore, 2008)

Upon completion of the module and associated assessment, the incongruence in role purpose between ‘tutor as expert’ and ‘tutor as facilitator’ was evident. In judging the students ‘success’, it was pondered that if acting as a true facilitator, should the tutor decide whether learning has been successful? This demands an exploration into whether SDL can truly be achieved in formalised learning environments, when it is critical for students’ to determine their own objectives and outcomes and to monitor their performance against these.

Implications

In establishing common factors that enhance SDL skills, teachers can develop their pedagogic practice to improve student abilities to self-direct. In understanding how teaching practice can enhance SDL, educators can help develop key skills to aid students in their preparations for the world of work. It must be recognised however, that the teacher’s own understanding of and motivations for SDL must also be explored to examine their influence in the management of the learning experience. The teachers role should also be supported, to encourage the teachers own volition (Corno, 1993) in developing new ways of working (Doring *et al*, 1995), and the need for differentiation in SDL practices, especially in the light of the exponential growth of international students in UK HE Institutions (UNESCO,2015) and across faculties with less experience in their use. In summary, the use of alternative forms of pedagogic practice, brings into question much broader principles and educational philosophies.

Further Research

Perceptions of this student cohort will be analysed to identify further themes to build our understanding of pedagogic practices that aid self-directed learning. This could include a comparison with teacher reflections, and also with the students own reflections of the learning experience post completion.

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