Reflective teaching in the creative arts

Abstract

This paper explores the conceptualisation of reflective teaching on creative educational development programmes and the extent to which enabling a reflective disposition may be influenced by the forms, interpretations and underpinning values of reflective practices in the creative arts. The author reflects on her own role as a senior educational developer working in a creative arts university, identifying a mismatch between educational developer discourse or "edu-speak" and the more socially-situated, culturally-imbued dialogue on reflection that might more typically personify creative arts teaching practice. This gap in knowledge is now the subject of the author's own educational doctorate, entitled, 'How do creative arts lecturers in higher education talk about reflecting on their teaching?' in which arts lecturers in higher education will be encouraged to talk about reflecting on their teaching using their own discursive repertoires. The aim of the research proposed is to better understand the contingently formed understandings and engagement with reflective teaching processes by creative arts lecturers.

Introduction

The value of reflecting on teaching is at the heart of both the formal and informal educational development activities that I am responsible for and is encouraged in my own institution as a means of improving teaching quality and the student experience. The outputs from these reflective activities have also assumed a particular importance recently in terms of their contribution to institutional teaching metrics. For these reasons, my university, along with other universities has expanded its teacher development scheme, offering both taught and experiential routes to professional recognition. This has meant that enabling the reflective disposition amongst creative arts lecturers has been my main preoccupation for the last few years, teaching reflection on both the Postgraduate Certificate in Creative Arts Education and the HEA fellow CPD scheme for experienced lecturers.

As an educational developer, I respond to the central aim of reflective teaching, which according to Ashwin et al, 2015, is to systematically re-evaluate our teaching experiences in order to change our future teaching practices' (Ashwin et al, 2015, p. 43). Ever mindful that the work of educators takes place in dynamic, unpredictable and often ambiguous teaching settings, I employ a range of reflective theories and techniques, to encourage lecturers to reflect on their teaching. These theories and techniques include, for example, Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle and Brookfield's (1995) four lenses for critical reflection. Whilst these approaches to reflection are welcomed by creative arts lecturers seeking to evidence reflective outputs for the purposes of qualification or Advance HE professional recognition, I sense there is some unease in the way these systematic approaches for reflection might connect with more generative creative arts teaching contexts. This is borne out from my own conversations with lecturers in which they appear to invest in reflection through a different set of values and beliefs.

It is through my dialogic encounters with creative arts lecturers that I have begun to observe a disconnect from what I see as the reflective discourse used to improve the everyday teaching practice, and a form of reflection enacted for the purposes of professional registration or teacher qualification. Whilst my orientation as an educational developer is to encourage the use of more emancipatory forms of reflection for collegial self-improvement, the individual lecturers I work might feel inclined to adopt a more restrictive view of reflection, which has little impact on teaching practice. One could conclude that this behaviour is a strategic response to meet the requirements of teaching targets, but it could also be a consequence of feeling disengaged from the more systematic reflective teaching models promoted in educational development training.

Reflective teaching models

Educational developers foster reflective teaching practices through formal and informal teacher development activities. Regular, purposive reflective practice is a key characteristic for excellent teachers in higher education (Bell & Mladenovic, 2015). This is borne out through the educational development literature, where there are numerous characterizations of reflection in teaching, describing the various psychological, philosophical and educational lenses scholars have used to define its value within programmes of academic development. Within these frames, reflective teaching might be viewed as an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge, on the grounds that support that knowledge, and the further conclusions to which that knowledge lead (Dewey, 1933); a means of generating professional knowledge through reflection in and on action (Schon, 1983; Schon, 1987), or a deliberate pause to focus on an aspect of our teaching practice, to allow for higher level thinking processes (York-Barr et al, 2006).

Whichever schema or framework is adopted for educational development, the overall purpose of reflecting on teaching seems to be to enact a process of thinking about teaching in order to improve teaching practice. Yet, in times of super-complexity, where teaching staff have competing research and education work demands, there may not be the time for the degree of mental processing espoused by reflective frameworks taught on educational development programmes. Eraut (2004), for example, suggests that in the 'swamplands of practice', decisions and judgements are often made on an instant basis, requiring more intuitive, 'hot action' rather than deliberation in cool spaces after the event (Eraut, 2004, p. 252). Educational developers may be working with academic communities where reflective conversations have disappeared from everyday practice and where learning is socially constructed and socially experienced. The inference from such critiques, is that promoting a conventional, disembodied conceptualization of reflective practice which does not acknowledge the influence of epistemological structures and generative professional practice, may be counter-intuitive.

More recently, educational developer studies have begun to explore the varying levels and types of reflection in teaching settings (Ashwin et al, 2015; Boud, 2006; James, 2007; Kreber, 2009) revealing that the work of educators takes place in dynamic, unpredictable, often ambiguous contexts. As Ashwin (2015, p. 55) surmises, there may be a number of contextual barriers to reflective teaching, including dominant notions of reflection, which can discourage critically reflective engagement with teaching and leave lecturers teaching practices unchallenged. Indeed, some researchers have expressed increasing concern over the effectiveness of reflection in teacher settings (McCardle & Coutts, 2012, p. 201) arguing that the process of reflection is poorly understood (James, 2007; Kreber, 2009) and has become difficult to nurture and sustain (Boud & Walker, 1998). Whilst these views may cast doubt on the use of reflective practice in teaching settings, they also shine a light on new possibilities if academic developers are prepared to think about how the different disciplinary contexts in which teaching is situated, impact on reflective teaching practices.

Reflective practice in the creative arts

At first glance, creative arts practice would seem conducive to reflective teaching. These are disciplines after all, where reflective practice is 'at the heart of creative education' (Orr et al, 2010, p. 3) and where educating students to become 'reflective practitioners' (Schon, 1983) is viewed as essential to individual students' development and at the core of the creative arts curriculum (Orr et al, 2010). This is important for my own research as it infers a pragmatic receptivity to reflective practice. But, as Orr and others (2010) also observe, reflective practice may have assumed an orthodoxy which is not embodied in practice. Creative arts lecturers may still be wrestling with the concept of what reflection is and how it is should be manifested (Shreeve, 2009; James, 2007).

Studies of reflection in the arts, reveal teaching cultures that are characterized by mutuality and multiple perspectives where 'reflective practice conversations might include questioning and formulating multiple solutions to daily challenges that arise in arts practice' (Burnard, 2006:10). As Kreber (2009) suggests, these are disciplinary practitioners used to working with unclear boundaries, relatively unspecified theories and who might deal with loosely defined problems. An educational developer might read from this that arts disciplines may provoke a more divergent attitude to problem solving, which defy the neat solutions to solving problems in practice suggested by models of reflective teaching. Burnard (2006), for example, points out that the catalysts of reflection in arts education might encourage more creative forms of thinking: critical incidents and disruptions can stimulate action, change of direction, identification of a problem, a solution or a revelation; reflective task design might generate tools for reflection to generate and shape the nature of the thinking they are designed to support.

It is also worth considering the apparent distinctiveness of art and design pedagogy with its situated, contingent and generative processes, indicative of creative practice (Eisner, 2002; Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Eisner (2002) observes that, these arts-related understandings provide unique forms of knowledge which 'materialize in reflective processes that require accumulated observation captured across a wide range of symbiotic forms, expressive languages and actions (Eisner, 2002). This is also echoed in Orr and Shreeve's (2017) recent analysis of the distinct teaching practices of art and design lecturers in which they refer to a 'sticky curriculum' which is active, generative, contingent and dynamic and where the kinds of knowledges employed in creative practice are multiple and complex (Orr & Shreeve, 2017, p. 73). These findings on creative arts teaching practices suggest that research is needed to explore the disciplinary influences and traditions that are woven into creative arts reflective teaching practice, and what opportunities there may be for educational developers to use different forms of reflection in teaching to enable more teacher-led professional development.

Conclusion

My emergent findings from the educational literature on reflective teaching and reflective practice in the creative arts, reveal a gap in understanding of how creative arts lecturers reflect on their teaching. There would appear to be some value in educational developers gaining a better understanding of how creative arts talk about teaching, to foster a reflective disposition that is more attuned to creative arts pedagogies, and more appreciative of the multiple discourses present within these disciplines. This is the subject of my current educational research project, 'How do creative arts lecturers in higher education talk about reflection in their teaching'. My research will involve interviewing creative arts faculty in the UK, to explore how they talk about reflection in their teaching using their own words, phrases, metaphors, incidents, experiences and events.

I conclude that creative arts lecturers are reflective practitioners who may be seeking more imaginative, sociable and non-threatening modes of reflection (Burnard et al 2006, p.190) where reflective practice conversations are situated, contingent and generative processes, indicative of creative practice. Rather than coerce creative arts lecturers into adopting reflective practices that are decontextualized from their disciplinary cultures, there would appear to be some clear benefits to educational developers connecting with creative arts lecturers to ignite individual and collective motivation around reflective teaching. In other words, if educational developers can frame reflective teaching using the language of disciplinary reflective practices, it may be possible to locate more authentic reflective teaching tools to motivate individual thinking beyond professional registration or teacher qualification.

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