Developing platform skills for the workplace: Weaving reflective practice experiments into everyday life

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Generalist skills - organising, innovating, reflecting, negotiating, etc. - make a large contribution to successful professional practice. Learning to experiment with one's practice is a metaskill that strengthens students' capacity to develop these platform skills. Helping students learn to approach their practice in an exploratory, experimental way is therefore good preparation for work integrated learning experiences, and for subsequent professional practice. To explore this possibility in practice, students in a postgraduate environmental class chose some platform skills and experimented with their approach to them in actual situations. Schön's differentiations - exploratory practice, move-testing and/or hypothesis-testing - defined "experiment", and we asked them specifically to heed their evolving 'feel' for their practice and situation, as they experimented, as a felt sense of what is occurring is inherently holistic and open, and has been demonstrated to be helpful in problem solving and creative thinking. Student evaluations and qualitative analysis of their practice research reports demonstrate that most students found this approach illuminating. These reflective practice experiments gave students an experience of consciously taking responsibility for and managing the development of their own practice. This built their capacity to engage reflectively and astutely in the work integrated learning experiences that follow in their program.

Keywords: Professional practice, reflective practice, work-integrated learning, capacity building, reflective practice experiments, felt sense

INTRODUCTION

Generalist skills - organising, innovating, reflecting, negotiating, etc. - make a large contribution to successful professional practice (Robbins, 1994; cf. Gunderson et al., 2007). One way to think about these generalist skills - adopting a metaphor from information technology - is as a platform on which many application skills depend. To take the environmental professions as an example, environmental impact assessment, environmental auditing, policy design, project management, and many other practices depend on skills in organising and negotiation, and each benefits from skills in innovation (most obviously when current practice is unsatisfactory or circumstances are novel - arguably the typical case, given the difficulties we have maintaining ecosystem services and conserving biodiversity).

These platform skills are an obvious place to focus educational effort, particularly when one is (as we are at Macquarie University) teaching students for diverse environmental professions - environmental planning, environmental management and environmental science, etc. - who, in professional life will need to develop a wide variety of specific skills, depending on the professional roles that come their way.

To prepare students for formal work integrated learning experiences (in our case, a consultancy with an actual client), and for future professional life in general, we have experimented with an approach to reflective practice: encouraging students to experiment, reflectively, with their practice in their everyday lives (at university, in households, in workplaces), paying close attention to their evolving 'feel' (Schön 1987 p.24,30), or “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1981, 1997; Walkerden, 2005), for what may be helpful.

Familiar examples from everyday life of a heeding a felt sense or felt knowing are (1) having something one has forgotten ‘on the tip of one’s tongue’ (which ‘rejects’ the suggestion “camera” and ‘confirms’ the suggestion “wallet” if it is one’s wallet that one has forgotten), or (2) editing a text and pausing what is written sits uncomfortably (a correction may come quickly, or one may have to sit with the sense of ‘needing something different’ for some time). Gendlin and colleagues have demonstrated that systematically heeding one’s ‘feel’ for what is at stake in a situation – a kind of ‘listening to oneself’ – enhances problem solving in psychotherapy (Hendricks, 2001). Walkerden (2009) has identified parallel discoveries of this process in a wide variety of practice traditions, including advertising, architecture, education, management, theatre and scientific research.

This paper reports on our efforts to help students become more sensitive to their ‘feel’ for how their practice is going, and to leverage this as they experiment with ways of improving their practice of a variety of professionally relevant platform skills.
METHOD

We asked students to experiment with one or more of six practices that play central roles in environmental decision making: systems analysis, stakeholder analysis, management system analysis and design, negotiation, creative thinking and reflective practice. They were invited to experiment with them in any setting in their lives outside the classroom – another university class, home, workplace, etc. The experiment(s) themselves were to be gentle and safe: the goal was simply to demonstrate, through a project report, that they had sensitively explored ways that they could vary their practice, looking for better approaches.

To scaffold their exploration of their practice we provided two reference points, one nested in the other. The overarching frame was Donald Schön’s (1987) description of reflective practice experiments, which are part of how he unpacks the notion of ‘reflection-in-action’. Schön’s differentiations, with examples we provided students, are:

- exploratory practice, (e.g. noticing you are uneasy and slowing down and checking that out - the ‘unease’ needs to be ‘listened to’)
- move testing, (e.g. noticing that you are inclined to respond critically too often to some others’ ideas and trying on a different hat - in De Bono’s terms), and/or
- hypothesis testing, (e.g. trying out a shift from positional bargaining to interest based negotiation in some low key settings (e.g. when you and a friend want to different things on a Saturday night)).

Nested within this was a requirement that they use their ‘feel’ for their practice to guide them as they experimented. By ‘feel’ we meant, in the first instance, “uneases, discomforts, ... intuitions, hunches, ...; your ‘feel’ for what may occur, for what may be helpful ...”. Schön (1987 p.24,30) mentions the centrality of heeding one’s ‘feel’ for one’s practice to reflection-in-action, and many others advert to it (Walkerden, 2009). Few have explored these micropractices in depth (though cf. Alexander, 1979; Gendlin, 1981, 1997; Johansson and Kroksmark, 2004; Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999). We used Gendlin’s (1981, 1997) and Walkerden’s (2005, 2009) work to explicate what ‘having a feel for one’s practice and heeding it’ means for students.

The practice research project was introduced in the second week of class, and the practice research report, was due in the last week. To scaffold the project, we ran diverse workshop sessions in class, held FAQ sessions, and provided diverse resources online.

The students’ essays were analysed to identify which practices they had experimented with, in what settings, in what ways, and what they had learned. Over the two years of this study 96 students participated in the class, and 53 (55%) volunteered their assignments for analysis. Other data points which throw light on the effectiveness of the teaching were also used: the students’ grades, which are a measure of how skilfully they experimented with their practice; and a formal student evaluation of the class in 2013.

RESULTS

The students’ grades demonstrate that most carried out reflective practice experiments successfully: 95% passed the assignment, and 85% were awarded Credit grades or above. In 2013 in a formal assessment, 78% of students identified the assessment tasks as useful learning exercises.

Analyses of the essays demonstrates significant learning (from the students’ perspectives), in diverse professional skills. What occurred is best conveyed with examples (Table 1). The students’ reflections support four key findings (Table 1).

1. Undertaking reflective practice experiments quite often leads to surprising insights: i.e. they can catalyse significant, valuable learning. [See the observations tagged (1) in Table 1.]

2. The extent to which students find it easy to refer directly, self-consciously, to their felt sense, within reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, varies considerably. [See the observations tagged (2) in some examples, and the lack of articulation of this aspect of reflecting in others.]
3. Heightened sensitivity to one’s own felt sense about a social situation can deepen insight into others’ experience, and improve social skills. In other words, intrapersonal (somatic) sensitivity is at one and the same time interpersonal sensitivity. (3)

4. Reflective practice in general, and heeding felt understanding specifically, can support innovation and creativity. (4)

Together these demonstrate that reflective practice experiments undertaken by the students in their everyday lives can make a substantial contribution to their development of platform skills.

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<tr>
<th>Setting &amp; Research focus</th>
<th>Student Reflections</th>
<th>Observations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Household; using felt understanding, in reflective practice, in stakeholder analysis</td>
<td>“When using felt-knowledge and reflective practice for a stakeholders analysis, it became easier for me to identify positions and separate them from interests. For instance, the first time we all agreed on trying to keep the house tidy something felt like missing. After letting grow that feeling, I realized it was more a position than a true interest. Later I understood our interest by analyzing move testing actions and hypothesis testing with the three of us:”</td>
<td>(2) heeding felt sense self-consciously (1) unexpected insight (3) improving social skills</td>
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<td>Household; using felt understanding, in reflective practice, in negotiation and stakeholder analysis</td>
<td>“It was very easier for me to identify the interests and separate it from the position when I used felt knowing and reflective practice. When I thought about my position of getting the full amount of the rental bond reimbursed, I felt like something was not right. When I gave more thought to this uncomfortable feeling and let it grow. I came to realize that my approach is focused solely on the position not the interest. I started acknowledging the interest of my land lord using stakeholder analysis. The following are some of the interest of my landlord I noticed: […] the most important interest of the landlord was to avoid financial loss when the flat remains vacant for few months. From the reflective practice processes […] I found I could focus on the multiple interests of my landlord rather than positional bargaining. In addition, using stakeholder analysis, I identified some other stakeholders who might be helpful for my negotiation [and in fact were].”</td>
<td>(2) heeding felt sense self-consciously (1) unexpected insight (3) improving social skills</td>
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<td>Non-environmental workplace; using reflective practice, in negotiations</td>
<td>“I was surprised by the effectiveness of reflective practice when applied intentionally. Previously I thought of it as something that was done at an unconscious level. I enjoyed the self-analysis and the improvement in the negotiations was almost immediate in some cases, […] The benefits extended to future negotiations and made the negotiations not only more effective but more pleasant and provided secondary benefits by creating a workplace where professional negotiations are an alternative to negotiating from a position of power or control.”</td>
<td>(1) unexpected insight (3) improving social skills</td>
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<td>Non-environmental workplace; using felt understanding, in reflective practice</td>
<td>“I also acquired another important result by felt knowing practice. […] Another example is, during their dance, I used this method to notice how I should enhance their dance and harmonization. Then I waited to notice if anything comes through my conscious and when it came, I just welcomed it. Using this method, I remembered many dance movements and styles and taught them one by one.</td>
<td>(2) heeding felt sense self-consciously (1) unexpected insight</td>
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From the perspective of Work Integrated Learning, the most important characteristic of this approach is that it develops students’ capacities to take responsibility for their own learning, and specifically their learning of the relatively ‘soft’ skills that underpin effective professional practice in many roles. It introduces students to the possibility of explicitly reframing difficulties they encounter as opportunities to experiment with variations to their practice, and it equips them with a highly general model for doing so: reflective practice experiments (forming and testing hypotheses, trying out moves, and/or exploring without defined expectations) in which their felt sense of their practice, which is inherently holistic in a way that beliefs about what we are doing are not (Gendlin, 1981, 1997; Walkerden, 2005), provides an evolving orientation. As the surprises the students report in the excerpts quoted above demonstrate, this approach to practicing reflectively is capable of producing ‘step changes’ in know-how.

DISCUSSION

In postgraduate environmental programs, many students anticipate that it is the specialist skills that they can learn that are the key to professional success. In some roles they are critical, in many roles they make an important contribution, however strong technical skills are rarely sufficient for professional competence, and in many roles the platform skills are far more important to competence and excellence. Because ecosystems integrate diverse influences, environmental professionals commonly have to interface with other experts and other stakeholders (within and outside their organisations), so social skills, like negotiation, make a central contribution. Because many aspects of environmental practice are inadequate if our benchmark is sustainability, innovation is often appropriate. Platform skills have a pervasive impact on performance in most roles.

The educational process outlined here has echoes of placement programs: it leverages the situations students are already embedded in, and platform skills that matter in these situations and in professional environmental practice. It is not a substitute for WIL of course, but it is a good preparation for it, and for professional practice generally.

The model we are using has significant limitations, and is evolving. Most notably, with the class sizes we are working with (ranging from 40 to 60 students) it is not possible to address individuals’ difficulties with learning how to heed, directly and self-consciously, their felt sense of their practice.
situations, except briefly. Gendlin and colleagues have demonstrated that with more intensive training skills in heeding felt understanding can be taught in ways that are very empowering for personal problem solving (Gendlin, 1996; Hendricks, 2001). We are currently exploring ways to provide more intensive scaffolding in this area.

CONCLUSION

Taking an experimental, reflective approach to practice is a metaskill in which students can be trained. The students’ reflective practice experiments gave them an experience of consciously taking responsibility for and managing the development of their own practice. By experimenting with their use of platform skills in their everyday lives – in their homes, workplaces and other classes – they built their capacity to engage reflectively and astutely in the work-integrated learning experiences that follow in their program, and in future professional life generally. Reflective practice experiments in which students heed their felt sense of ‘what is at stake and what might be helpful’ can foster ‘step changes’ in know-how.

REFERENCES


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