Reflection: Alignment of practice as a strategy for building capacity for learning

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Reflective practice can play a key role in the collaborative education curriculum as it supports learners with developing a capacity to build cognitive bridges between the theory of the classroom and their professional or community experience. The argument presented is that a whole of institution and aligned approach to reflective practice may build capacity for learning and foster a deep approach to learning. The holistic approach adopted by the PACE (Professional and Community Engagement) initiative at Macquarie University provides the case material of a program that is core to a university’s vision, and through which the embedding of reflective mechanism(s) is a requirement. A holistic approach to the practice of reflection is achieved through the alignment of policy, infrastructure and practice. Good practice examples of resources and strategies that can each contribute to building capacity at an individual, program and institutional level are outlined. Evaluative data and outcomes will be considered as a means for demonstrating the potential for success with institution-wide reflective practice – an approach that may offer synergistic and positive outcomes well beyond the Macquarie experience.

Keywords: Reflective practice, capacity-building, curriculum design, whole of institution approach

INTRODUCTION

Nationally and internationally, there exists a widespread practice of incorporating reflection for learning across the collaborative education curriculum, a practice that traverses a diverse range of disciplines (Coulson, Harvey, Winchester-Seeto & Mackaway, 2010). In this context, reflection has three key roles: “in academic learning, in skills development and for lifelong learning” (Harvey et al., 2010, p. 143). Reflective practice can also play a key role in supporting learners in developing a capacity to build cognitive bridges between the theory of the classroom and their professional or community experience (see, for example, Argyris & Schön, 1974; Dalgarno, Kennedy & Merritt, 2014; Reason & Kimball, 2012; Schön, 1987). In this paper, we argue that an aligned, whole of institution approach to reflective practice is an important way in which capacity for learning can be built, and fosters a deep approach to learning. We analyse the holistic approach adopted by Macquarie University and its PACE (Professional and Community Engagement) initiative as a case study of a program that is core to a university’s vision, and in which the embedding of reflective mechanism(s) is a requirement. We then suggest avenues for further development of this approach and research directions.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

How holistic an organisation’s approach to an issue is, may be ascertained by asking three questions:

1. What is the organisation’s expressed intent – what is its policy?
2. What enablers has it put in place to support action to follow through on this intent – what is its infrastructure?
3. Are its actions an embodiment of, and consistent with, this intent – what is its practice?

For an educational institution, a holistic approach to an area of educational practice, such as reflection, necessarily involves considering how the institution as a whole should be organised to support that practice. In the following sections, we examine each of the above questions in relation to the Macquarie University example. We then present evaluative data to demonstrate the potential for success of institution-wide reflective practice – an approach that may offer synergistic and positive outcomes well beyond the Macquarie experience.
POLICY

Reflective practice and transformative learning are important features of Macquarie University. The University acknowledges the ways in which meaningful reflection can maximise learning (individually, collectively, and institutionally), as well as institutional planning for the future (Correia & Bleicher, 2008). Macquarie University's Vice-Chancellor, Professor S. Bruce Dowton has identified the “need for a period of reflection and discernment about our future” (Office of the Vice-Chancellor, Macquarie University, 2013, emphasis added), in order to ensure that the University's strategic plans align with the expanding narrative of the institution and the needs of its stakeholders.

This emphasis on reflective practice cascades through the University's pedagogical approaches, especially in the University-wide Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative. From 2016, all Macquarie undergraduate students will complete a PACE unit as a required part of their degree. Noteworthy is that all PACE units are required to include “mechanisms through which students can reflect, document, evaluate and/or critically analyse what they have learned over the course of the PACE activity ... The reflective task must be incorporated into an assessment task and/or a required learning & teaching activity in the unit” (Macquarie University, PACE, 2011, p.1). This policy framework justifies an investment in infrastructure to support its implementation and encourages the alignment of practice across the institution.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The University's ongoing commitment to building the capacity for an effective and holistic approach to reflection is demonstrated through the significant investment in infrastructure and resource development in PACE and to learning and teaching. The development and implementation of adaptive organisational structures and systems to support operational collaboration, innovation and shared learning are key to this approach. Dedicated PACE staff, comprising Academic Directors embedded in each of the four faculties and an Academic Developer in the central PACE office are strategic and core to this structure. This fosters coordination and collegiality, supporting innovative and collaborative curriculum and unit development that meets PACE criteria while at the same time responding to the needs of academics teaching PACE units, their students and partners. The alignment of the infrastructure with policy has enabled a teaching and research focus on reflective practice to flourish.

Institutional engagement with reflective practice can also been seen by its embedding in the university's teaching preparation programs such as FILT (Foundations in Learning & Teaching) and FLaMe (Flexible Learning at Macquarie). FILT in particular aims to develop the reflective capacity of academics so they, in turn, can support student engagement with reflective practice. Inherent in the program is practicing reflection through a peer review process (Harvey & Solomonides, 2013).

In addition, Macquarie University's Reflection for Learning Circle was established in 2012. The group is made up of a collaborative team from three of Macquarie University's four faculties who came together because of a common commitment to reflective practice for learning. The team meets on a monthly basis in order to explore creative and innovative ways of practising reflection for learning. At the beginning of each meeting, the group participates in a different reflective activity. This is followed by a group discussion around the effectiveness of the activity, and how to implement and/or adapt the activity in a variety of contexts. These monthly gatherings provide scaffolded support for developing reflective capacity at both the individual and the group level, which is crucial to embedding reflective practice into the wider university community.

The Circle has played a pivotal role in the evolution and implementation of reflective practice at Macquarie. It has overseen the development of reflective practice resources for PACE, applying for and being awarded internal grants to (i) evaluate the practice of reflection in these professional and community engagement units, and (ii) develop resources and training for staff in these and other units. The Circle has experimented with diverse forms of reflective practice, including art (Harvey et al., 2012) and felt understanding (Gendlin, 1997; Walkerden, 2009) centred approaches. They have piloted and adapted them in their own teaching, and developed a suite of reflective practice resources and run collaborative and interdisciplinary reflective workshops for colleagues

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1 The experiential components of these units, known as PACE activities, include but are not limited to, service-learning and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) (Baker et al., 2013). For a typology of PACE activities see: http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_assessment/pace/resources/effective_curriculum/
across Macquarie. The central role of the Circle in engaging the wider campus in reflective practice demonstrates the importance of having people who can champion reflective practices amongst their colleagues, as well as being active at the level of policy (cf. Hassed, 2004).

PRACTICE

Building organisational capacity for reflective practice has been facilitated through reflective practice being a core pedagogical approach in the curriculum design of PACE units. Investment in resources has allowed the development of a range of curriculum resources (including online modules for staff and students, custom-made videos, and a suite of reflective exercises). These resources are utilised by a small but growing Community of Practice, comprising professional and academic staff from across the university. Building individual and group capacity for reflective practice has been facilitated through an authentic orientation to practice founded on integrity, trust and respect.

As one example, Faculty PACE Units, which are open to students of any discipline, have provided a unique forum for the implementation of reflective practices, as they must be taught in such a way that fosters learning for a diverse cohort of students with equally varied PACE activities. In the PACE units of the Faculties of Science and Arts (FOSC300 and FOAR300) this has included engaging students in iLearn2 posts throughout the session as a means of providing a reflective scaffolding to which students can refer at the end of the session in order to synthesise their learning. Additional in-class and at-home exercises are designed to encourage students to reflect in creative ways which are meaningful and useful to their experience and learning approach. Evidence of the effects of this approach can be found in the students’ reflections themselves:

We often don’t want to think about our own mistakes, or actions that we could have performed better/differently, because it often means we have done something wrong, or incorrectly. … what I find inspiring about [reflection is that] individuals must challenge within themselves to critically analyse their behaviours and actions, to think about what they could have done differently. … it creates that basis of forming a learning curve based on our past actions that help make our future actions, in many cases … result[ing] in better outcomes (Undergraduate student, Science)

This evidence is representative of recurring themes found in student reflections (through iLearn, assessment tasks, and practical exercises) across five offerings of FOAR300 and FOSC300 (N=38, 2013).

In addition, we have begun a pilot program with Higher Degree Research (HDR) students to build their capacity in and support their reflective practice. We introduce them to three re-framings of their relationship to their research practice:

1. Approaching practice experimentally: as action to be considered reflectively, and played with deliberately in a search for more helpful forms of practice (Schön, 1987; Walkerden, 2009).
2. Shifting attention to microprocesses, and looking for opportunities to develop helpful, reusable micropractices from them (Walkerden, 2005).
3. Exploring a gestalt shift from making the ‘explicit content’ of one’s research practice pivotal (e.g. research outputs) to making one’s ‘evolving feel’ for what may be helpful pivotal. This invites holistic, open, creative sensitivity to possibilities in one’s research practice (cf. Gendlin, 1997; Walkerden, 2005).

The majority of candidates (seven of the eight) in the initial HDR program pilot found the program very helpful, and five of them found significant applications beyond their research practice as well as within it. The eighth found the sessions very interesting, but did not apply the work significantly in his own research.

The broad-ranging impact of the program is evident in the following feedback:

[I]t’s given me a bit of confidence in developing a research methodology. Doing a creative practice PhD., I feel there’s not a whole lot of guidance about what to do when or how to start, […] I haven’t yet come across a lot of guidance on how you mix the creative work with the more theoretical work. So in that sense I feel like I’ve got some tools to start developing a methodology (PhD student, Creative Arts)

and

2 iLearn (ilearn.mq.edu.au) is Macquarie’s learning management system, which enables learning, teaching, communication and collaboration online (Macquarie University, 2014).
...like when I'm reading my work, and I have something that doesn't feel right. For example, [I had] a paragraph sitting out on the side, and I couldn't work out where it fits in: you've given me a number of different strategies that I can use to help work through that. One of which was the clustering [a non-linear writing technique]. That was one. The other one was to sit back – the not running away – you remember how I told you I [would] get up and walk away [from my desk]. I have stopped doing that completely. [...] It is amazing. I've been doing that all through my law degree. I wasn't even conscious that I was doing it during my law degree (PhD student, Law).

These student reflections also suggest the value of reflective practice approaches to students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has presented a case study of the institution-wide approach to reflective practice at Macquarie University. Whilst it is clear that the holistic approach has a positive impact, at both an institutional and personal level, particularly in terms of student learning, the Reflection for Learning Circle is now aiming to ensure wider faculty representation, as well as better gender balance (as the current core group is 85% female). Such ongoing challenges and resistance are acknowledged and managed, but their discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. We also aim to expand the integration of reflective practice beyond the University, and begin collaborations with our partner organisations. Evaluative and evidence gathering research into the relationship between student learning outcomes and reflective practices remains an ongoing focus.

REFERENCES

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