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Configuring life histories

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Configuring Life Histories

A PBPL-CETL Funded Research Project
On Student Reflection

Escalate Conference, Stirling Management Centre, 30th
April 2008



Configuring Life Histories

This presentation:

- Personal introduction
- Some background on reflection
- Project methodology
- Emerging themes
- Possible implications
- Discussion of issues around 'reflection'



Configuring Life Histories

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- “At the heart of learning lies reflection, a much used but rarely defined term in the worlds of educationalists.” (C. Day, 1999)
- “Although reflection is widely considered to be a type of learning from experience central to professional learning and the development of practice, its metacognitive, contemplative and emotional processes in continuing professional development remain underresearched.” (R. Leitch and C. Day, 2001)



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- ‘Andragogy’ differentiated from pedagogy?
- Adults engage in meta-cognitive, reflective activity (and children don’t?)
- Has led to criticism of ‘transmission model’ of learning with adults as the ‘empty vessels’ (Shuell, 1992, Ramsden, 1992, Nicol, 1997)



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- Favouring constructivist views of learning – students forging links between what they already know and what learning can add.
- “Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it , mull it over and evaluate it” (Boud et al, 1985, p. 18).
- Reflection “can be done well or badly, successfully or unsuccessfully” (Boud et al, 1985, p. 19).



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- **Aims and objectives of the project**
- The aim of the project is carry out a short investigation to help better understand what tools/skills/ideas students need to help them learn to reflect.
- The overall aims of the project and of this proposal are to explore:
- The difficulties students (particularly from widening participation audiences) have in engaging with reflection in general and the range of reflective activity included on courses in particular.
- To gauge what features and what contexts of reflexive activity are best suited to encourage the use of reflection and which may inhibit reflection.
- To establish how students have used reflection and the impact this has had on their lives.
- To report and record this information in ways which can be accessed by students in order to enhance engagement and valuation of reflection.
- To make available to academics and course teams information that can assist with the integration of reflective learning.



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Methodology

- The original intention was that 6 experienced ALs would be recruited to carry out 6 interviews each from among 'their' students.
- In fact, 5 ALs were recruited. One had to withdraw to go into hospital. Another was unable to locate any willing students. All the remaining interviewers were women.
- Two of the 3 remaining ALs interviewed 6 students each; the other – 9 students. A total of 21 interviews.
- Ages ranged between 28 and 49. Range of ethnicity mainly White British but included Black African and Afro-Caribbean.
- There were 10 men and 11 women.
- Students on a range of course (Openings, social work and business) and at a range of levels (Levels 1-3).



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Methodology

- The original intention was that the ALs would attend a briefing day. In fact individual briefings done by phone
- The interviews used semi-structured schedule to guide the interviewers.



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Methodology

Interview schedule

- What aspects of reflective activity the students find difficult.
- The wider context of these difficulties.
- Students will be asked to share the resources they found most useful in developing a more reflective, critical approach.(Aspects of the course they studied or resources from their own social or work context)
- How students actually used reflection and the effects that this has had on their lives.



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Methodology

- Interviews recorded and transcribed.
- Transcriptions the basis on which themes are identified.
- The analysis of the transcripts by the two researchers.



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Valuable framework (Wellington and Austin, 1996)

Five orientations to reflective practice

1. Technical – reflection as an instrument to direct or control practice – facilitates conformity to a pre-determined, external standard.
2. Deliberative – reflection to inform practice – facilitates choice among competing views (of teaching in W&A).
3. Dialectical – uses reflection to transform practice – by capturing and reconstructing experience it facilitates political and personal liberation.

(The above are from Van Manen (1977) – seen as hierarchical, each one more encompassing than the one below).



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Valuable framework (Wellington and Austin, 1996)

W&A add:

1. Immediate orientation – emphasis on pleasant survival – ready acceptance of status quo – focus on immediate demands of the group or task in hand. Simple reporting of event based on best memory.
2. Transpersonal orientation – focus on universal personal liberation – resisting imposed constraints – inner directed, focus on self-development, relationship of internal to external – leads to contemplating relationship between personal growth and vocation.



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Using Weft QDA software – some themes:

- Educational goals
- Recollection of when first asked to reflect on a course
- Did they see the point?
- Were they expecting it?
- Has their view of reflection changed? (Do they use it more now? Do they talk to other people about it?)



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Goals:

- **Interview P1**

To improve my job prospects

- **Interview P4**

My aim was just to do a degree in engineering and see where that takes me because I want to develop myself as well in the UK because my qualifications are from Nigeria so I thought that if I could do one or two courses in the UK and also a degree then I could get a better job or also be in a better situation, but now that has changed, I think I want to do system thinking up to the Masters level and even above that now



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Recollection of when first asked to reflect on a course

- **Interview P2**

it probably came through the through the books, probably about a month into the reading I would have thought.

- **Interview P4**

it was just really about my life, in the first course I took with the Open University

- **Interview P4**

there were asked to reflect on our past you know from the secondary age, what you don't do now, to reflect on written essays and friends so yeah that was the first official one

- **Interview P5**

Can you remember when you were first asked to reflect on something during your recent studies?

Student No I can't actually



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Did they see the point?

- **Interview L1**

Student: Definitely, yes.

Tutor: Yes, why do you say that?

Student: Because I have said all along that I do not want to come into study and walk out with just XYZ amount of marks from which ever courses I am doing I want to go into study and I want to learn things, not just about the subject that I am studying at the time but how I present the work and how I put the work across and um have a think about what I am doing and I want to see, I don't just want to get a mark back whether it be a pass or a fail but hopefully a pass I don't just want to get a mark back which doesn't reflect what areas of the subject that I am good at or what areas that I am not good at.

- **Interview L4**

I thought it was good because it gave you a wee chance to sit down and think how your studying was going and if you could change anything.

- **Interview L4**

like I said it gave me a chance to look at the way I was studying whereas if I hadn't the question there I probably would have just gone on as I was and maybe not thought about it so much



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Were they expecting it?

- **Interview L1**

No not at all, I was very surprised ... Because, um when I have studied before at standard colleges and universities I have never had to do a reflection part really.

- **Interview L2**

I had an idea because of um previous NVQ's which were a little bit similar to this kind of course where I had a rough idea that I was going to have to.

- **Interview L4**

I was surprised really.

- **Interview P1**

No it wasn't something I had encountered a lot of.



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Has their view of reflection changed?

- **Interview L2**

Previously, I thought it was just talking about myself and talking about what I had done, and why I did it, um, what I learnt during the course is that it really means analysing how I am thinking, why I am thinking that way, what is influenced my thinking some kind of stepping out, kind of um, observing myself from a distance, then if you like

- **Interview L6**

Well for me it means having to think about something and then hopefully put it in to practice to improve something's that I am already doing.

- **Interview P1**

Well, reflection before is a bit like, when you throw a stone into a pond, you have the action and the affect that you want, the stone goes in and it sinks, but the reflection is about all the ripples and the rising of the water level and that is the reflection before and when you actually do it um, then you reflect upon the other person who throws the rock in from the opposite direction you know



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Some overarching ideas

- Different reflective journeys going on – before during and after formal learning.
- Reflection has different layers or aspects – are these, perhaps, reflected in the student journey?
- Are expectations for reflection on practice different from those in relation to study?



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A possible research question?

How does the experience of being on a taught course affect student perceptions of reflection?



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“... educators need to acknowledge the validity of the full range of orientations. They need to recognise their own predominant mode, and they need to respect the preferred modes of others. When practitioners become aware of their own preferences and prejudices across modes, they can begin to reflect upon a wider range of questions and develop a wider range of responses” (Wellington and Austin, 1996, 314).



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Finish – an example of a ‘reflective journey’?

Tutor: Right, OK, that makes sense, so when you signed up for your first courses where you expecting to be asked to reflect on your own development or your skills and so on

Student: I had no idea what to expect really

Tutor: No, OK, so fair enough, so what did you understand by the word reflection before you started studying, it might be too long ago for you to remember now its just changed meaning

Student: I think sort of the habit of looking back, looking back over things

Tutor: OK, and now you have encountered it in some of your courses has your understanding of reflection changed in any way

Student: Yes, because I was very naively thinking it was just sort of looking back over what has happened but it is more um , it is deeper than that isn't it, you are analysing and actually making it useful rather just running through this happened and that happened, it is more of an analysis



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