Reflective Practice – The laser striking new chords in Communication.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of reflective practice introduced by Donald Schon (1983, 1987) and initially taken aboard by teacher educators, is applicable in most tertiary learning situations. Reflective practice is the cultivation of the capability to reflect in action—while doing something—and to reflect on action—after it has been done. It creates an alternative to the ‘first learn theory, and then put it into practice’ that forms the basis of traditional education.

In this alternative the “deep” approach as opposed to the “surface” approach is emphasized. Through reflection in action, students exercise their imagination and relate new ideas to their “repertoire of past experiences… to make sense of the current situation,” (Cervero, 1988) and undertake spur-of-the-moment experiments to make decisions on appropriate courses of action. Kolb’s Learning Cycle advocates reflection on action, which is the need to reflect on the overall situation, as there are always other ways of meeting learning outcomes. Thus the student is able to engage in a process of continuous learning through this recurrent introspection.

This paper presents strategies for reflective practice in the learning of communication, through the integration of both experience with reflection and theory with practice.

Reflection is learning to learn

Reflective practice can be defined as the meta-management of concentration, comprehension and affect, through which a communicator considers the variables in the communication process and looks at alternative pathways to convey the message effectively and efficiently. This reflective reconstruction of the communication event, the emotions of the sender and receiver as well as the feedback in the communication process, enables the communicator to adapt to overcome barriers in a variety of situations.

Learning is stimulating the brain to assimilate, to encode and decode. Reflection is the stimulation of the brain that is comparable to the laser, where the flashes of light are directed to get the atoms in an excited state to work efficiently. Reflective practice is different from ordinary thinking, in the same way that laser light is very different from normal light. Just as the laser is directional, concentrated and coherent so also is reflective practice. Thinking about one’s own thinking—meta-cognition—provides the checks and balances, to ensure that one is not deviating. Self-monitoring of the thinking process, enables the communicator to reflect critically on and evaluate all aspects of the communication experience, thus developing the capability to make informed decisions and most importantly promoting self-directed continual improvement. In Schon’s terms it is “reframing” past experiences to see them in a new light that suggests new actions in the communication process. It reinforces the integration of theory with practice and promotes ongoing professional development and life long learning whatever be the context of the communication.
Reflective practice is an integral component in experiential learning. It involves an analysis of feelings and knowledge. The outcome of reflection is learning that involves reflection of the self and has its foundations in both cognitive and humanistic learning theories. In addition reflection is multi-dimensional, therefore further exploration is required in order to gain deeper understanding.

**Skills essential for the reflective learner**

The reflective learner needs to develop a continual self-awareness of the situation and the learning while the communication is going on, as well as being able to sit back and assume the role of an external observer, after the event is completed. The feedback of the receivers also needs to be considered. This should be followed by the ability to describe and critically analyse the experience, breaking it apart to understand how it fits together and making connections with other situations. Finally, it is essential to have the ability to evaluate the practical aspects against the theory and then synthesize those ideas, to change and improve future communication. Further experimentation testing the new ideas or concepts on future communication events, confirms the improvement and the cycle continues.

The process can be represented by the table below based on Kolb’s learning cycle.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>COMMUNICATION EVENT</th>
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<td>ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION</td>
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Boud (1988) suggested that individuals are only ready and equipped to increase their skill base and become effective communicators when they have completed reflecting on their previous communication events. Reflection on action under normal conditions is not deliberate and most often arises only when there is a problem and miscommunication occurs. As a result important considerations arise on how the situation might have been handled differently or what other knowledge might have been beneficial. Thus learning takes place because it results in making sense of or extracting meaning from the experience (Osterman 1990).
Strategies for Reflective Practice in the Learning and Teaching of Communication.

Engaging in reflective practice is time consuming. It requires laser like concentration to stimulate and direct the thinking process to focus on the communication and strike new chords or alternatives to extend the learning.

Roth (1989) presents a list of strategies to facilitate reflection
- Questioning – what, when and how one communicates
  - asking what, when and how others communicate
- Seeking alternative ways of communicating
- Keeping an open mind and using reflective listening techniques
- Comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences of perceptions in various communication situations
- Seeking the theory underlying the communication
- Viewing the situation from various perspectives
- Asking “what if?”.
- Asking for ideas and viewpoints from others
- Using prescriptive models only when adapted to the situation
- Considering long term and short term consequences and outcomes of the communication
- Hypothesizing
- Synthesizing and testing
- Identifying and resolving problems.

Keeping a reflective journal

The purpose of communication has become increasingly utilitarian. The communication process is an interaction that pervades all disciplines and cannot be taught in isolation. Group problem solving, negotiation, meetings, persuasive techniques, intercultural communication, personal and interpersonal skills, presentation skills, to mention a few, is communication capabilities required by every discipline. UNITEC’s Diploma in Applied technology includes three courses: Communication and Customer Services, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, and Health Safety and Professional Ethics, delivered as an integrated block. The class consists of students from different disciplines: Marine, Automotive and Building Construction.

A reflective journal is a written account of confusions, frustrations, questions, intentions, hypotheses and assumptions pertaining to the communication event. These are informal writings not recounting the content of the event itself, but perhaps a brief summary with emphasis on questions following the outline for reflection of Mezirow (1994) described shortly. What did you do well? What would you change? Do you think it was successful? Why? Which conditions were important to the success of the outcome? Did anything unexpected occur? Were there other approaches you could use? Besides writing, the reflective journal can also include pictures, mindmaps, drawings, articles cut from newspapers or magazines.
The students keep a learning log (a reflective journal) using Mezirow’s (1994) outline for reflection as follows:

1. Identifying a problem or undesirable outcome.
   Picture the event.
2. Self Examination of affect.
   What are your feelings? Describe them.
3. Critical evaluation of assumptions
   What does it mean to you to feel this?
   What advice can you give yourself?
   How do you interpret what is happening?
   What is your intention?
4. Exploration of new possibilities
   How would you prefer this to be different?
5. Planning a course of action
   What are you aware of that keeps this from happening?
   What are the dangers if you make changes?
   What are the benefits of staying the same?
6. Acquiring skills and knowledge for implementation
   What will you need to know/learn/overcome for this to occur?
7. Trying out new roles
   How will you know when you are more on track?

Each event recorded in the journal, requires reflection on past events, recognising the communication problem, responding to it by looking at similarities in other situations and the unique pattern of the particular situation. Reviewing the journal entry with peers or supervisors in terms of what happened and what was learned is invaluable. An effort is thus made to frame and reframe the problem thus experimenting and discovering the implications of various solutions and evaluating them to determine whether the outcomes are desirable. Developing more than one thinking strategy, known as heuristics, increases the learning and problem solving ability.

The “deep” approach as opposed to the “surface” approach is emphasized. The initial thinking and recording in the learning log is very superficial but as the reflection continues there is deeper knowledge and learning. New knowledge is organised and rearranged in the context of the students’ previous knowledge. The students exercise their imagination and relate new ideas to their past experiences to improve their interpersonal communication and to learn new capabilities.

Some examples of entries from student logs

The range of examples varies from surface thinking to deeper thinking. Examples are quoted exactly as written by the students.

“the video we saw on Group think about the Challenger disaster was good. I recognised some of the actors”

“we will have to work harder with them (the group members were from various cultures) it will be an effort to communicate to each other.” “I with English as my
first language get impatient with the rest and get angry. I must look at strategies to overcome these barriers and learn to be more patient and understanding

“What didn’t go well today was that we weren’t prepared for the questions. But in saying that we weren’t prepared I think it was more relative to the fact that the questions were so broad that it was hard to give a definite answer. What I think could be done about our answers would be to just place more thought into the broad spectrum of things. But if we could rewrite history and answer them again we could make our answers more thorough. Just because we heard various answers to the same questions from other groups.”

“learned today that the most important part of verbal comm. is listening and not talking and being able to respect other people’s opinions”

“I was quite a bad communicator and I definitely need lots of improvement as I am a stubborn person always wanting my way” About communication with customers “sometimes hard because you need to react instantly and you are not always given enough time to think about what you want to say”

“the less organised you are the more likely you are to make wrong judgements, create waste and misunderstandings”

“discovered mind mapping today and was amazed at how a group of pictures can represent so many words takes some deciphering to figure out the language behind the drawings. Even so some may be visible only to the person who created it. How can I be more creative myself? I grabbed a pen and started drawing the ideas in my head and soon had an entire page of drawings accompanied by notes which explained our project”

“Our group was all of the same ethnic background so we might encounter some communication difficulties in the process of developing our business. Our similar thinking could be seen as an advantage but we decided it was a disadvantage in today’s multicultural world. How can we break this multicultural barrier?”

Getting to write the learning log was easy for some but challenging for others. Those who are articulate in oral communication seem to write confidently and reach a deeper insight more readily, enhancing their learning. Those who are reluctant to write because of language barriers soon realise that the goal, is learning through reflection and language skills are not being tested. Language skills are essential for expression and understanding but not crucial to the learning log.

It must be acknowledged that bridging the gap between superficial description and deep reflection presented some difficulties in teaching. The sample exercises on reflection “The Park” and “The Presentation” devised by Jenny Moon (2003) from the University of Exeter make it easier for students to understand and undertake reflective practice. It demonstrates how to move from a purely descriptive account of a communication event to a deeper meta-cognitive stage.
Conclusion

The key to a laser is a pair of mirrors creating a cascade effect that reflects some light and allows some light through. Reflective practice is using the thinking processes to communicate in the same way, to promote lifelong learning and continual personal and professional development that is vital in the new knowledge economy.

References


Osterman, K. F. "Reflective Practice: A new agenda for Education." Education and Urban Society 22, no.2 (February 1990)


Appendix 1

COMMUNICATION EVENT
Concerned with something that has happened to you or that you have done
Concerned with adopting your new ideas

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION
Concerned with trying out new ideas as a result of the learning from earlier experience and reflection.

REFLECTION ON COMMUNICATION
Concerned with reviewing the event or experience in your mind and exploring what you did and how you and others felt about it.

EVALUATION AND SYNTHESIS
Concerned with developing an understanding of what happened by seeking more information and forming new ideas about ways of doing things in the future.