

STRATEGIES USED BY PEER-FACILITATORS TO PROMOTE REFLECTIVE LEARNING AMONGST THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF ONE UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The views of peer facilitators on the strategies used to promote reflective learning on the first-year students were explored in this study. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, which is a qualitative inquiry situated in the interpretive paradigm. The researcher also used in-depth interviews to collect data and analysed data using the thematic analysis. The study found that the peer facilitators used group work, group discussion, spider diagrams and limited technology. However, it emerged that besides the limited technological strategies crippled by the disabling conditions within the institution, the lack of support from both students and lecturers is a demotivating factor for some of these peer facilitators and thus this affects their efforts to assist students. The paper recommends the implementation of the multi-sectoral approach, training and continuous professional development of peer facilitators on reflective practices using both conventional methods and digital technologies, the inclusion of reflective learning in the facilitation methods within the module learning guides/ course outlines to promote reflective learning.

Keywords: Learning, reflective learning approach, peer facilitation, first-year students, university

INTRODUCTION

Peer facilitators play a very pivotal role in teaching and learning process particularly in universities because they do not only assist other students in fitting into the university context but there is a notion of when peers are talking to each other, active learning does take place (Davis & Richardson, 2017) in the learning process. In such cases, peer facilitation includes the modern role for the senior students who encourage the learning of other students. The part played by the peer facilitator is centered on learning through supporting the learning of other students in a more social than the conventional part of learner, which is focused on self-reliance for learning. Extant literature also show that reflective learning although is one of the critical elements that is needed in university education (Fullana, Pallisera, Colomer, Fernández Peña, & Pérez-Burriel, 2016) especially for the 21st-century students. However, it appears that in most universities, most students don't know how to be reflective learners and as such it may be through peer facilitators through the Teaching and Learning Centre who had been roped in to assist working together with lecturers that can facilitate reflective learning to the first-year students. This question on reflective learning approach is provoked by the constant cry of high dropout rate and low attritions rate in the first-year students in the South African universities despite the student academic development practices that are functional in universities. The researcher feels that creating students' awareness of their learning process would enable the first-year students to realise the importance of systematic

and strategic learning when responding to the learning activities designed for reflexivity by the peer facilitators in the Teaching and Learning Centre. Hence this paper now looks at the strategies that were used by the peer facilitators to promote reflective learning specifically amongst the first-year students.

South African Higher Education Context

Reflective learning is a valuable strategy that can be adopted via universities in all disciplines due to the fact it tries to fulfil the cause of more excellent schooling of openness, transparency and accountability in learning. Harrison, Short and Roberts (2003) endorse techniques that could be adopted to promote and boost reflective getting to know throughout disciplines explicitly. Their notion implies that teachers have to exhibit evidence of reflective learning in the curriculum planning and development, educational development and the attainment of the learning effects in the higher institutions. Learning abilities improvement is entrenched in the curriculum the place institutions must attempt to build on the strengths possessed via first-year university students as a substitute than the usage of the deficit mannequin that focuses on studying deficiencies (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). Therefore, it is of fundamental importance to merchandising reflective gaining knowledge of in the sketch of teaching and gaining knowledge of assessment strategies. Students will be able to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses; evaluate growth and understand skills to improve achievement in the gaining knowledge of manner as cited in Kolb (1984) cycle of experiential learning theory.

Academic literature states that reflective getting to know can aid university students to synthesize new facts using discussion blogs (Lee, 2010; Fakude 2014; Muncy, 2014), or diaries (Fullana et al., 2016), or reflective journals (Mahlanze & Sibiyi, 2017, Ryan, 2015), or portfolios (Dreyer, 2017) and or examination papers (Castelli, 2011). Writing and discussions can build a rapport between facilitators and students, contributing to a pleasant environment for active learning particularly for the undergraduate students (Percar, 2016). Students can pay extra attention to their mastering and grow to be accountable for their getting to know and have a voice towards expertise creation. Students can reap a deeper understanding of the gaining knowledge of system through becoming metacognitive, advance independence or autonomy in learning, creativity and critical thinking. This will assist them to fee studying higher than merely acquiring a certificate. Students can make that means in the concept and see the hyperlink on the quantity of effort that one desires to put in learning and what and the output at the quit of the mastering exercise and method when in the real world of work

Moreover, the university's' function will be to mirror on the weaknesses, format a motion plan to fill in the gaps and prepare for continuing expert development. However, research suggests that some academics resit to pedagogical research on the promotion of reflection in the curriculum (Harrison et al., 2003). This idea of reflective gaining knowledge of calls for the paradigm shift from the teaching-focused discipline to the learning-focused discipline.

Reflective learning has a long history dating back to the development of constructivism and critical thinking. Moreover, it has been identified as one of the teaching and learning approach meant to students to become more active learners than passive learners who read, follow teacher's instruction, write examinations and forget what was learned.

Unfortunately, observations have been made that reflective learning as a meaning-making approach to the learning material appears to be dysfunctional within the higher education system in South Africa particularly for first-years to assist them in bridging the gap between high school and university curriculum.

Though student academic development is populated in SA universities and worldwide to assist students on improving engagement and on developing students into becoming reflective learners with personalised approaches to learning the status quo subsists (Prebble et al., 2004; Boughey, 2010; Cummings, 2014;). The pivotal interest in this study was also to promote authentic education in the first-year classrooms whereby student gets into the conversation with self, classmates and teachers as the community of learning. Due to the understanding that reflective learning has its profits and benefits in university education, society expects lecturers to prepare and train students in the learning process because reflective learning takes time and practice. As such students are expected to challenge their assumptions, correct misconceptions, revise their beliefs, ask new questions, make sense of their involvement in the process, test the nature of their knowledge and put what they have learned in a more profound memory as active learners. Unfortunately, the extant literature paints a different picture as students have been accused of failing to ask questions like what, so what, and what next due to dearth of promotion of reflective learning and timely feedback from the lecturers (Linsley, Kane, & Barker, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher's argument is strengthened by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2002) to address the importance of reflective learning for meaningful learning. Kolb (1984) explains the sequencing of learning cyclically, reflecting on experience for meaningful learning to take place. The ELT involves studying in four phases of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2009) that are connected with doing, sensing, observing, reflecting, thinking and planning (Sharlanova, 2004). The application of this theory to the study helped to facilitate the understanding on how its assumptions can be transformed to first-year reflective learning experiences to enable students' engagement and motivation, hence, influencing them to be positive embracers of reflective learning. However, motivation to learn for success takes place when students receive satisfaction on the basic human needs such as autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, Shernoff, 2003). Framing the study on the two theories ELT and SDT cements Dewey's notion on the views that the purpose of educational is on building the individual's character intellectually, morally and emotionally (Toni, & Makura, 2015).

Colomer, Pallisera, Fullana, Perez-Burriel, and Fernandez (2013) further confirm that the learner integrates theory and practice in the reflective learning process; the thought and action. By implication, higher education faces challenges on transformation issues, especially in the first-year students so that excellence can be attained. This necessitates conversations with peer-facilitators on their ways of interacting with first-year students concerning students' behaviours in learning and their performance. The conversation is to explain how reflective learning is promoted by peer facilitators, more on how they conduct their session or the procedural knowledge more than the proficiency in content mastery. Pečar (2016) believes that the use of technology does not only promote interactive communication in peer

learning but also an enabler to promote students' reflective learning skills and ability to make connections between theory and practice, and experience. However, Stott (2016) highlights the poor levels of students' engagement in online discussions in promoting their learning. As such, students struggle to put across their knowledge views to their counterparts. In this vein, we have set out to explain strategies used by peer-facilitators that could assist in promoting reflective learning in the first-year students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised the interpretive paradigm to investigate strategies used by peer facilitators on promoting reflective learning to the first-year students. According to Rubin and Babbie (2016), a paradigm is a frame of reference shaping the researcher's understanding, experiences, perceptions of participants and guides the behaviour of the researcher to construct reality through social factors (Wahyuni, 2012). In line with the interpretive paradigm, a qualitative approach is used to settle on open-ended inquiry (Choy, 2014).

Case study design

The case study design was adopted in the study because it facilitates in-depth investigation in the real-life context (Yin, 2014). The case study allows observation in the current position/stance of the strategies used by peer facilitators, and the researcher may have the future predictions on strategies used by peer facilitators on promoting reflective learning.

Sample

A total number of 3 lead peer facilitators were purposively selected comprising of 2 female facilitators and 1 male facilitator from one university. Based on the "intuitive feel of the researcher" Rubin & Babbie (2016), selection focused on seniority level in the peer facilitation programme because they have more experience and training in the peer facilitation programme and they also possess the expertise of guiding/coaching other peer facilitators.

Instruments

The researcher used in-depth, one-on-one interviews to elicit information from the peer facilitators. Interviewees allow a chance to develop participants' ideas and speak broadly on the issues raised by the researcher. (Patton, 2015). Data was analysed by organising and categorising data, comparing the emerging patterns, concepts, themes and meaning, through the peer facilitators' responses in the university under study.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the one-on-one interviews were analysed through thematic analysis (Vaismoradi, & Snelgrove, 2019). All the interviews were transcribed by listening to tape recording and some notes taken during interviews. This assisted the researcher in coming up with similar and different themes capturing the phenomenon under study from the university. Identification codes were utilised as a form as adhering to the

privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The recurring pattern of responses led to the following themes as discussed below.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

There is a crucial role to be played by both the facilitator and the students to make reflective learning operational and successful. The environment created for teaching and learning should be conducive to the approach being pursued together with the teaching and learning resources that are in use should assist students in practising reflective learning. The participants echoed the following comments in the excerpts below:

PF1 said that:

“I think one of the strategies in our sessions is to working in groups, grouping them and then have one spokesperson to present back to the class. I think in that way, you can see that okay, they really understand what’s going on, because they discuss amongst themselves and each one has his/her own opinion and input and they present it back.”

According to Chiriac (2014), group activities are used as a means for studying at all ranges in most instructional structures, from basic education to higher education. The overarching purpose of organization work in academic exercise is to serve as an incentive for studying. Group work is regularly used in higher education as a pedagogical version inside the study room, and it is viewed as equal to another pedagogical practice (i.e. in an entire class or person work) (Chiriac, 2014). In support of the above views the following sentiments were echoed below:

PF3 noted that:

“Okay, I used to use the group discussions when we have a problem and I will not give an answer. I will just present the problem, group them, for example, each group has to present and then we discuss with the class do we agree/disagree? If we agree, why do we agree and the whole class gets to solve the problem. That’s what I do.”

Research shows that dialogue in groups have regularly been defined as locations wherein students can engage in a casual surrounding that is instrumental in concerning principle to practice, growing perception into themselves and their practical experience which for that reason allows students to increase professionally and personally (Habibi et al., 2018). In addition, the researcher supports the view that the dialectical nature of dialogue enables the institution individuals to view a situation from a couple of perspectives and spot alternatives to their thinking that are important elements of the mirrored image as advanced (Levitt, 2019).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the research on reflective learning helped the researcher to identify different strategies that can be practised in the reflective learning process of students. The approaches

consisted of issues that deal with structured class discussions, class presentations, group work, and reflective journal, writing tasks, student feedback and use of technology. The first step towards the process of reflection is to gather information about what happens in the class during lectures, followed by an analysis of the data. Therefore, participants in this study pointed out the following strategies that were used as part of their reflective learning process:

Structured class discussions

Peer facilitators and lecturers use this type of method to promote the sharing of ideas amongst students. Above all, it can be used to encourage collaboration and cooperation amongst students boosting their confidence, motivation and learning. However, one weakness that was identified is a large number of people in the class which makes it very difficult to have meaningful and constructive teaching and learning. For instance, some students highlighted that they preferred not to participate even if they knew the answers, whereas other students highlight the fact of being scared to speak in class because of stuttering. Using online blogging could assist such students (Lee, 2010) together with the online forums Makoul, Zick, Aakhus, Neely, & Roemer, 2010). However, Jindal-Snape & Holmes (2009) identified class discussions as a beneficial method of reflective practice, especially when reflective conversations occurred with a mentor or reflective supervisor and as exchanges between peers or communities of practices.

Class presentations

Class presentations are another method that was used as part of the reflective learning process of first-year students. Class presentations can both be in the form of group presentations or individual presentations. This is largely informed by the number of students in the class. If the class is large, students normally engage in group presentations, and if the class is small, they engage in individual presentations. However, Chingos (2013) is convinced that students will learn more in smaller classes. There are more opportunities to receive individualised instruction from the lecturer. In this study. The researcher noted that class presentations were viewed as a good initiative to encourage students to interact and engage in collaborative work with other students to boost their confidence and presentation skills. However, on the other hand, this proved difficult due to hindering factors such as language barrier, large classes and lack of commitment from the students.

Group Work

It was established by the study that group work encourages students to work together in solidarity and encourages collaboration through this interactive type of work. Moreover, the study found out that this method creates excitement amongst students leading to an exciting learning process. This allows for students to fully partake in this exercise and creates a platform where they are able to reflect and share their experiences. These findings reverberate with Henderson, Berlin, Greeman, and Fuller (2002) view that semi-structured reflective group discussions enhanced students' enjoyment and perceived learning. In agreement with the foregoing scholar Pope (2001) acknowledges that peer rating improves writing skills and as such work rated by peers seems to induce students to write and present their work at a higher standard.

Writing tasks

This finding is in line with a study conducted by Freebody and Muspratt (2007) which notes that students are often penalised in assessment for an inability to express their knowledge and understanding in discipline-appropriate ways, yet teaching time is not necessarily allocated to the development of this crucial element of assessment. Such gaps have resulted in the poor performance of students within their first year at university. These findings resonate with the findings of the study where a majority of students that are enrolled in the first year come from poor backgrounds, subsequently affecting their writing and reflective skills. This is replicated in their writing skills through assignments, tests and examinations where they perform poorly due to lack of critical thinking, creativity and reflective learning as highlighted by the lecturers and the peer facilitators.

Using Re-capping as a form of Student feedback

According to Sloan (2007) and Delić, & Bećirović (2016), questioning in higher education one of the popular sited method in recapping what was learnt in the class in the previous lecture prior to the commencement of a new one. This view resonates with the findings of the study where lecturers and peer facilitators asked students questions to recap on what was learnt in the class in the previous lecture or just soon after the end of a lecture so that immediate feedback could be given. This is a popular Socratic method (Maxwell, 2013) that is used in encouraging students to be able to recall what they would have learnt and being corrected if there is a need to do so. In addition, such discussions provide immediate feedback, clarity and clear confusion amongst students by asking the lecturer questions.

Use of technology

Literature suggests that technology-facilitated learning is quickly becoming conventional in most higher education institutions (Strampel and Oliver, 2007; Lord, Chen, Cheng, Tai, & Pan, 2017). With the influx of technology in the tertiary classroom in recent years, special attention has been paid to using these technologies to foster reflective thinking (Strampel and Oliver, 2007). This concurs with the findings of the study where technology is being used in the classroom as part of the teaching and learning process. During lectures, projectors are used, and teaching is done through a PowerPoint presentation to share some of the ideas and notes on a certain subject or topic. Besides, emails are used to share some of the reading material between students and lecturers. Moreover, students also log onto their blackboards within the university website to access any content or material related to their modules or courses. In this study, it was established that some students are struggling to embrace technology within their learning experience at university. This is largely attributed to their unfamiliarity and lack of knowledge of these technologies as a result of their deprived backgrounds and lack of early exposure to digital use.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of reflective learning was evident with both students and lecturers concerned about the effectiveness of their teaching and learning methods which failed to materialise in the performance and growth of students academically. These views were echoed by peer

facilitators. Challenges identified about the absence of reflective learning amongst first-year students include the following; the understanding and practice of reflective learning, language barrier, confidence and motivation of students, cramming and memorization to pass tests and examinations, student expectations vis-à-vis peer facilitator/lecturer expectations, large classes and absence of reflective learning practices in the modules. In the same vein, the study noted the need for monitoring and support systems from the university and other stakeholders to ensure that reflective learning practices are adhered to through professional development programmes and continuous development of peer facilitators in this respect. Based on the findings, the study came up with the following recommendations for universities, lecturers, peer facilitators and students: Implementation of a multi-sectoral approach in the implementation of reflective learning; continuous professional development programs; training of lecturers on reflective learning practices; establishment of ICT centres to train lecturers and students on technology use and its relation to reflective learning; Inclusion of reflective learning in the teaching and learning methods of first-year students; and alignment of student expectations vis-à-vis lecture/peer-facilitator expectations. Given the recommendations made above, further research in the area of reflective learning could focus on any of the following topics;

- The impact of ICT on pedagogical content and knowledge strategies on reflective learning.
- Research on the role of a multi-sectoral approach by universities in supporting first-year students in the promotion of reflective learning.

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