

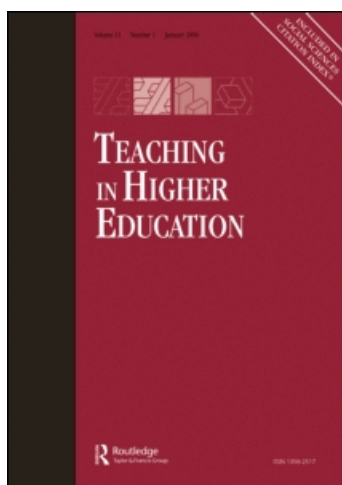
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POINTS OF DEPARTURE

The reflection game: enacting the penitent self

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Introduction

'Reality' shows dominate our television screens. We see the personal 'transformation' of hapless novices into competent singers or dancers, rude and irritating 'brats' reinvented as loving teenagers or shopaholics converted into more financially savvy individuals. The attraction of these programmes is watching the 'journey' of personal transformation even though the real 'reality' may be somewhat less dramatic or possibly long lasting. The formal requirements of this 'journey' invariably consists first of blithe denial on the part of the miscreant, followed by a tearful admission of inadequacy extracted via 'tough love'. Only then is absolution granted and a programme of self-improvement embarked upon in earnest – which conventionally features a few initial wobbles – before the joyous personal transformation is complete.

The reflective assignment

The educational equivalent of the reality show is the reflective assignment, often associated with the linked contents of a teaching 'portfolio'. This form of assessment is now increasingly common in higher education and examples can be found in subjects such as nursing or teacher education. Students are asked to reflect on their workplace experiences and, in the process, link the theory of their subject with what they encounter in the hospital, school, university or other workplace setting. This often relies on a tedious, 'court of law' style process of documentary collation in which an assessor checks that certain pieces of 'evidence' have been presented. In the case of teaching portfolios, this invariably includes examples of peer observation. Portfolios also normally include some kind of 'reflective commentary' where the student is expected to link their experience of practice with the theoretical constructs of the subject.

However, less explicit attention is paid to other, more subtle forms of 'evidence' required to be displayed in these accounts, via what might be termed the 'hidden curriculum' of emotional performativity. In exploring the hidden curriculum, we will focus on the reflective commentaries found within portfolios produced by those pursuing university 'learning and teaching' certificates. Our criticisms of this means of assessment though might apply equally to other subject areas. The intention of

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this short article is to open up a debate about the use of reflection in the assessment of students in higher education. We will start with three tips for anyone starting on a learning and teaching certificate who wants to be a true portfolio ‘star’.

Tips for contestants

Tip 1: eat humble pie

Reflective exercises impose certain expectations. Firstly, they require individuals to open themselves up to an admission of their insecurities and uncertainties paralleling the world of reality TV. In place of the sobbing of the wannabe pop star, reflective assignments encourage novice practitioners to unload painful admissions of personal mistakes and errors in the classroom. Their first lecture was a disaster, they talked too much ‘at’ students rather than trying to understand their individual learning needs or perhaps they were just too nervous to remember to breathe. Admitting the error or naivety of one’s ways is all part of the ‘journey’. This kind of confession is a means of getting the assessor on-side. It may not ‘prove’ that you can ‘reflect’ yet but shows that you are being ‘open’. Suitable penance has been done.

Tip 2: revelation brings conversion

Through penitence comes learning. Salvation comes in the form of a ‘critical incident’ that transforms your whole perspective about what it means to be a lecturer. Inspiration can come from the practice of colleagues (or better still ‘a mentor’ or ‘peer’) or the views of students who have both challenged and changed your original attitude to teaching. Relating such dramatic incidents gives a verisimilitude to the journey. There is nothing like a convert. This is the favoured route by which to demonstrate your zeal via the breathless introduction of PgCert-approved ideologies, turned to the teeth of the crisis.

Espousing various ‘commitments’ evidences your ideological conversion: to encouraging ‘deep’ as opposed to ‘surface’ learning, to ‘andragogic’ principles, to widen participation, use e-learning in your teaching and, indeed, anything else that might currently be in vogue within your university’s strategic plan (insert flavour of month). Marshalling examples of how your practice supports this eclectic mix of theories and politically motivated policies is a nice way to show you can ‘weave’ theory with practice, and is likely to gain you more marks from ‘the judges’.

Tip 3: toe the line – or else!

Taking issue with any aspect of this conventional *pot-pourri* of received wisdom is a dangerous strategy. Saying that you enjoy being didactic and giving long lectures is a fatal error. This shows absolutely no respect for the prevailing orthodoxy of ‘student-centred’ learning and is likely to get you into a lot of trouble. It is fine to say you were *originally* this way inclined or thought that students were supposed to listen to you. But stubbornly refusing to admit the folly of being ‘teacher-centred’ is simply asking for trouble – you may even be voted off the show. Nor is it wise to question random or theoretically vacuous elements of the *status quo* such as the need to use e-learning in every course regardless of the context or the type of learners it might involve.

While learning and teaching certificates are often portrayed as independent postgraduate programmes, the reality is that many are ‘aligned’ very closely with institutional expectations. Passing the certificate (which is often a condition of your probation too) requires demonstration that you are ‘committed’ to the institution’s espoused values.

Hopefully, on completing your reflective commentary you have shown an obligatory amount of remorse about how mistaken, or simply naïve, you were in the first place about the nature of ‘good’ teaching (sorry, ‘student learning’). You have also demonstrated a personal journey or, better still, evidenced some sort of ‘social transformation’. Finally, remember not to tell anyone that you have applied these tips. Otherwise you might be accused of using your time too efficiently, what in the jargon is referred to as ‘surface learning’.

Conformism, (in)authenticity and (un)fairness

Ironically, while most learning and teaching programmes like to promote the virtues of social constructivism in reality, they tend to be assessed in a way that reinforces behavioural conformism. Indeed, they are only considered ‘effective’ if they bring about a change in belief systems. A number of research studies about learning and teaching certificates (e.g. Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson 2008; Knight 2006) have shown that they purportedly ‘change academics’ approaches to teaching from being teacher-focused to being more student-focused’ (Hanbury, Prosser, and Rickinson 2008, 480). These courses are not about a critical engagement with a range of perspectives. To borrow a phrase, they demand governance of the soul (Rose 1990).

We are not all Machiavellian in our approach to passing the reflective commentary. However, it needs to be understood that lecturers are intelligent people who, as successful students by definition, will work out how to pass. Some do engage enthusiastically with reflective commentaries and are happy to toe the line. The more critical thinkers have limited room for manoeuvre. The pragmatic opt to conform or self-censor especially when, as is not uncommon, learning and teaching certificates are viewed as an irritant that takes time away from activities that universities *really* value in practice – like research.

The risk of relying too heavily on reflection in assessment is that it can be just as prone to inauthentic writing as the plagiarised essay. In the same way as students writing about their ‘research ethics’ are schooled in a standardised lexicon to express concern about obtaining the ‘informed consent’ of their subjects and maintaining ‘confidentiality’, reflective writing can be little short of a confidence trick or, perhaps more worryingly, an exercise in self-justification and a conformism with the psychologised curriculum of learning and teaching (Zukas and Malcolm 2002). This conformism is embedded in the political correctness of ‘student-centred’ learning and the expectation that students of teaching and learning will valorise concepts based on the work of writers such as Schon, Knowles, Marton and Saljo, and Biggs. The broader terrain of the sociology, politics, history and philosophy of (higher) education is left largely untouched.

There is now a considerable literature about the positive benefits of using reflective writing in education. However, our own experience as internal and external examiners of learning and teaching courses at a number of UK universities has made us increasingly doubtful of the merits of imposing this particular form of assessment

on students. It promotes conformism to a narrow set of values which are left unexamined and can also impact negatively on students from certain disciplines (and cultures) schooled to write in a more formal and technical manner. For these students a reflective style of writing – with the need to be personal and self-revelatory – is essentially alien to their disciplinary discourse. This can result in a higher relative failure (or referral) rate among such groups. If we were really concerned about ‘widening participation’, we would provide an alternative means of assessing students from disciplines outside the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, reflecting on experience is not always the panacea it is made out to be, especially when familiarity among participants is in most cases very recent or partial to one institutional context or group of students.

Emotional performativity/enacting the penitent self

But perhaps the most insidious feature of this performance is not that it compels a display of conformity to dominant discourses – this is already routine in education (Ball 2003), and in higher education across a range of text types (Bansel et al. 2008; Ruth 2008).

The more troubling aspect of the ‘reflection game’ is that it must appear to be woven from the very fabric of the subjects’ day-to-day embodied practice and emotional subjectivity, brooking no ‘hiding place’ of disagreement or ambivalence. The subject is corralled into an insidious form of performativity – wrapped in a therapeutic discourse of self-discovery – which requires a ‘textual enactment of academic life’ (Ruth 2008, 99): at best formulaic, at worst amounting to a colonisation of the private self. What is implicitly rewarded is initial fragility, tentativeness and penitence, followed by uncritical adherence to some deeply flawed and outdated rules of thumb. The forced enactment of this can result in a grotesque simulacrum of authenticity in response to a powerful normative regime of surveillance, at root unconcerned with individual or context. The details may vary – but the ‘journey’ has to reach the ‘right’ destination, via the correct stages (new lecturer as supplicant/pilgrim?). Only then is the ‘transformation’ complete.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago the use of a reflective method of assessment, allied to developing an understanding of emerging literature about teaching and learning in higher education, was a means of challenging a *status quo* which might then have been characterised as ‘teacher-centred’. However, educational developers have now created their own set of dogmas around ‘student-centred’ learning, and are using this form of assessment as a means of social engineering and monitoring of conformism – in Foucauldian terms as a means of control through self-regulation (e.g. Dreyfus and Rabinow 1986). However, although this position of critique may be persuasive, the question for development remains: can reflection be driven by a real critical evaluation of theory? If so, a step towards building any sense of authenticity would be to encourage new academics to contest existing orthodoxies about teaching, rather than simply demonstrating that they have internalised the mantras presented to them on their PgCert. Crucially, however, this could only arise through a questioning and critical stance on the part of the academic developers themselves;

which for some may involve a radical re-examination of some of the ‘universal truths’ of teaching and learning.

Reality shows are based on the dramatic appeal of the ‘quick fix’. The tear-jerking stories of the winners seduce us but can subsequently prove of limited value, where sustainable talent is required. They create an exaggerated mirage of achievement as we are carried away watching ‘the journey’. In order to encourage lecturers to have a genuinely critical frame of reference in thinking about their teaching, we urgently need to ‘change the channel’.

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