Supporting Reflective Practice amongst Early Years Practitioners

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Sue White

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Aims:
- To explore how Level One students and the tutor engage with reflection on practice within the Certificate in Early Years Practice (comprising of courses E123 and E124)
- To consider how the tutor can encourage reflection through tutorial discussion and feedback on assignments
- To consider how students are encouraged to reflect on how their practice relates to the concepts and principles around creativity discussed in the course materials

Objectives:
- To use the discussions within the time-limited computer-mediated conference (CMC) on encouraging student reflection and the development of their assignments as a basis for reflection on personal practice.
- To explore student views on how reflection on their practice has been enhanced through interactions with the tutor.

Background
Alice Paige-Smith and Anna Craft (part of the course teams) initiated a time-limited computer-mediated conference, within the FirstClass Tutor conference, for the two courses in the Certificate in Early Years Practice (E123 and E124). This was initiated in 2005 in response to discussion around assessment and supporting Level One students, involving the external examiner, who supported the development of students’ reflection on their practice during the presentation of the course.
The ‘reflective practice’ CMC focused on supporting the development of students’ presentation and structure of assignments. Tutors were asked to support discussion which examined the ways that ‘reflection on practice’ can be explained, illustrated and developed and how such reflections on practice may be seen to emerge as part of written assessed work.

The following question used as a focus for the discussion:

In your experience how have students found it difficult to reflect on their practice and how have you supported them in developing their writing about their reflections on their practice?

**Area of focus for this research project**

Two of the key issues to come out of the above CMC conference were that students’ written reflection was better where they had an understanding of key concepts and principles and that some students are competent in reflecting on their practice in groups but are not able to reproduce this in their TMAs (Gomez, 15.4.05). This research, therefore, discusses how understanding of key concepts and principles can be fostered through tutorials and feedback on TMAs and how tutor support can help students to write reflectively about their practice.

‘Creativity’ has been chosen as a focus as it introduces specific concepts and principles that students may not be familiar with and challenges them to widen their understanding of ‘creativity’. It is also the focus of the second TMA in E123, as well as relating to both TMA 02 and 03 in E124. This topic, therefore, offers the opportunity for the researcher to consider how students write reflectively on their practice in relation to creativity as well as informally engaging in self-reflection.

Creativity is the focus for a Study Topic in both E123 and E124. The ideas in each topic cover similar ground, but from slightly different perspectives. The following synopsis gives
an idea of the range of concepts and principles the student is expected to have an understanding of through studying the course material.

E123, Study Topic 7 looks at ‘creativity and learning’ with the following learning outcomes:-

By the end of the study topic, you will have:
- learnt about creativity as ‘possibility thinking’
- understood the important connections between creativity and learning
- reflected on the way in which creativity is defined in a range of curriculum frameworks
- explored aspects of creativity across the curriculum
- explored some practical approaches to fostering a creative climate in your setting

E124, Study Topic 5 looks at ‘enabling creativity’ with the following learning outcomes:-

By the end of the study topic, you will have:
- developed your understanding of creativity as a ‘lifewide’ experience, and its connections with possibility thinking
- gained insights into attitudes to creativity, and how these affect interactions between the home and your setting
- considered some approaches to developing, and effective strategies for fostering, children’s creativity
- reflected on the interrelationship between creative practice, and practice which fosters creativity
- identified ways in which creativity is defined in a range of curriculum frameworks and can be integrated into your setting’s policies and practice.

Some of the key concepts and principles that students should have an understanding of at the end of these Study Topics are:

- ‘lifewide’ creativity: creativity as being more than arts and crafts type activities
- ‘possibility thinking’: creativity as involving both identifying and solving problems
- the distinction between creative practice, and practice which fosters children’s creativity
- ‘learner considerate’ and ‘learner inclusive’ environments
- Beetlestone’s aspects of creative learning
- Wood’s four elements of creativity

**Methodology**

**Participants**

I focused on child minders, who are current students of mine on both E123 and E124.

Students were selected on the following basis:

- I used students who attended tutorials as this enabled me to look at a range of tutor input. I was able to consider strategies used within both small and large group activities, one-to-one discussion, as well as looking at assignment feedback.

- 9 child minders within my cohort of students for 2007 were approached individually and asked if they would be willing to answer a few questions over the telephone on how the tutorials and TMA feedback helped them to understand ‘creativity’ concepts, to and to write reflectively about their practice.

- Of these, all said ‘yes’. I, therefore, selected 6 child minders on the basis of studying both courses together and separately to give an overall focus on the Certificate in Early Years. I felt this would enable me to have a broader range of comments and experiences and a wider range of tutorials to choose from.

- 2 students: TH and AH1 were undertaking both E124 and E123
- 2 students: HN and AL were undertaking E124
- 2 students: DS and AH2 were undertaking E123
No attempt has been made to address generalisability (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Issues relating to, for example, previous academic qualifications, length of time in childcare or whether the child minders were familiar with reflecting on their practice, have not been taken into account.

**Data collection**

As these concepts and principles are new to many students as well as featuring specifically in assignments, they are a suggested part of tutorial discussion. This will enable the researcher to gather evidence of understanding through discussion and engagement with tutorial activities.

**Written assignments** can then be analysed in respect of how this understanding is evident within their written work.

The final stage of this process will be to analyse feedback through self-reflection alongside interviewing the students to see how the **written feedback on TMAs** contribute to their understanding of the concepts and how to demonstrate their thinking around their practice through their writing.

**Key issues for this interim report**

In my experience many students on E123 and/or E124 are not used to applying theory to their everyday practice. E123 (and increasingly E124 as more and more students take both courses together) is usually the first course they have done at degree level and, although they may have a great deal of practical experience, they often lack the academic skills to go alongside their practical knowledge. They also may lack confidence in their abilities.

I have, therefore, focused the initial evidence collection on how students are supported in their understanding of concepts and principles, and making links to their practice, through analysis of tutorial discussion and written feedback on assignments. Seeking student views
on these has enabled me to have an understanding of how helpful or not certain techniques used by the tutor are in supporting their understanding.

Having engaged with the CMC discussion within the tutor conference for both E123 and E124 and read the findings, I engaged in my own reflection on the effectiveness of the strategies I use to encourage reflection.

Initially I kept a reflective diary on three tutorials carried out in May (before TMA 02) and July (before TMA 03). Entries from these were used to construct a number of questions to ask students and to inform the analysis of TMA feedback

Semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout July and August with the childminders about how their knowledge and understanding of course material and reflections on their practice have been enhanced through interaction with other students and the tutor.

All childminders were asked questions around:

- How the tutorial activities helped them to reflect on their practice and understand the ‘creativity’ concepts and principles
- Whether specific types of feedback or support were helpful or not
- What support would have helpful

The questions were tailored to specific incidents within tutorials or the particular comments on their scripts in order to make connections between the actual support given and to allow effective analysis of actual practice, as opposed to a hypothetical discussion.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed by returning repeatedly to the data and identifying themes (Brewer, 2000).
Initially I trawled through my notes making comments and reflecting on my own feelings about how the childminders may have been supported in their understanding. An attempt was made to triangulate the results (Cohen and Manion, 1994) of these reflections by looking at the childminders responses to the interview questions and trying to identify any connections between the two.

This has been an organic process. The childminder’s responses were then analysed in respect of the tutor input and how interaction could be enhanced by making more effective use of tutorial time, Tutor Group Forums (TGFs) and TMA feedback.

**Findings**

The findings relate to three main areas:-

- Understanding of course concepts and principles
- Reflecting on practice
- Linking course concepts to own practice

These thread through the findings given here.

**Analysis of Tutorials**

Some students found it difficult to understand the concepts from reading the course material alone.

This is partially supported by the responses given by each of the participants in the research to the question: ‘Using your reading of the course material, what is creativity; what do we mean by it?’ This was asked as a Round Robin tutorial ‘Starter for 10’ activity within the tutorial.
Responses ranged from:

AH1 ‘Art and craft’
TH ‘Thinking about what you do’
AL ‘Being able to produce a picture or model or something that is not copied from someone else’
HN ‘It’s about using something in a different way, like using sheets to make a den’
DS ‘Music’
AH2 ‘Creating something….like a dance’

It is interesting that none of the students used the terminology from the course material within their answers. However, there are many possible reasons for this. Maybe they thought I wanted explanation, not terminology or they may have been trying to say something different to the others, for example.

In the follow-up interviews after the tutorials it seemed that one of the reasons may be that they were not confident about their understanding of the course concepts.

AH1 ‘I’m dyslexic so I think I just read it wrong’
TH ‘I think I understand it then…at tutorials……I realise I haven’t, properly. The tutorials help a lot to put it (ideas) in context.’
AH2 ‘I need a practical example to help me. Where they do that in the course material, that’s good.’
AL ‘It just doesn’t sink in when it’s nothing like your own practice’
HN ‘I didn’t use the terminology just in case you asked me to explain what it meant. I wasn’t sure enough that I’d remembered it right!

All the childminders commented that tutorials helped them to make sense of the course material. This was particularly noticeable where the course material introduced completely new ideas, for example, ‘possibility thinking’. In these situations the childminders needed input where the connections were made to their activity for them.
An example of this was a tutorial discussion with AH1 around a creative activity and how it related to ludic play (linking p162 and p144 in the course Reader). Initial discussion related to whether the particular activity being described to the whole group of 15 students demonstrated ludic play. Questions were asked such as ‘how does that fit with the points listed within Holland’s chapter’? ‘Do you think there are only elements of this point within your activity? ‘Could you have done anything to increase the opportunity for ludic play’? Body language and voice tone etc. was used to convey whether I agreed / how much I agreed with what student was saying. In this way she was led through the process of analysing her activity in relation to ludic play.

By increasing the student’s understanding of the concept I hoped to enable her to be able to go back to her observations and analyse them in respect of a range of concepts and principles within the course material.

Although AH1 said that the discussion around ludic play and picking up on points within her observation helped her to reflect on her own practice in respect of the particular activity discussed, she felt that it did not help her to reflect on other activities she provides for the children.

AH1  ‘I can’t look at ..... other activities and do the same’ *(AH1 attributed this to her dyslexia)*

Other students, however, felt this was a good use of tutorial time:

HN  Going through one activity like that helped me with my own activity, because I could see how to pick it to bits........to analyse. It helped to see I need to keep thinking ‘why’ and ‘how’........ You’ll have those two words on your tombstone!!

A number of factors seem to impact on students’ ability to reflect on their practice during tutorials.
- How confident they feel about their practice
- The size of the group
- Whether they are awed by other people

While it seems that students benefit from tutorial discussion around the concepts and principles, the tutor needs to be sensitive in the way that this is approached in order to encourage and enable the students to be able to say what they want in a safe environment.

Confidence seemed to be a major issue in students being able to reflect on their practice within the tutorials.

AH2 I think I must be a bit thick or something but everyone else seems to get it…….. I don’t like to show myself up in a big group

TH Because our practice is so different from the course material ...we don’t do lots of planning for the children’s learning......we follow their lead......I worry what people think....

I see part of the aim of tutorials as getting students to believe in their own practice, giving them a confidence-boost and getting them to value their own practice and feel able to justify why they do it, particularly if they feel that their practice is not supported within the course material.

TH follows a very Steiner-like way of working alongside very little (although there is some pre-planned learning through topics). She has homed in on what she sees as an emphasis on planning for learning within the course material and is very under-confident about justifying her own practice. Within the tutorial she had started to apologise for the fact that she had not followed the planned activity of a hospital role play because the children had commented that they could not have a hospital without an ambulance to bring patients / people to the hospital. The children had then spent the whole day building an ambulance, and the next day ‘causing’ pretend accidents so they could drive the ambulance to the hospital. As she had brought lots of photos in of the ambulance I drew the rest of the
students in to look at the photos and discuss how this showed evidence of knowledge and understanding of the world, possibility thinking etc. I encouraged everyone to see how this one activity linked with the course material and asked questions to encourage the students to reflect on the practice evident in the photos and the student’s outline of the activity.

Working from the student’s activity in this way boosted her confidence and enabled her to reflect on, and justify, the merits of building the ambulance in relation to the course concepts and principles.

TH  ‘I couldn’t have started a discussion of my activity........you backed me up when I was talking and made the links to the course material for me.....this made me feel more confident ....I know the children got a lot out of it, but I couldn’t explain why....like...use the words in the course material.’

Discussion is a major part of tutorials. However, student comments showed how important this was in respect of being able to discuss their understanding of key concepts in small groups. The confidence came from talking to others and not being with others they believed were more knowledgeable (Although not part of the research this actually cut both ways as the EEST in the group was worried the other students would think she didn’t know it when she felt she should!)

AH2  ‘It was helpful to discuss with others in a small group......when they were talking I realised they didn’t know it all.......that made me feel better!’

DS  ‘I’m only a childminder. Having EESTs (Early Education Support Teachers) in the group really put me off ..........I daren’t say.... In case I’m wrong. I was alright in the little group – it was more private.

In addition to how comfortable students felt with other because of how they perceived them, another factor that appeared to have an impact on their ability to reflect on their practice, was the amount of experience they could draw on.
AH2     I’ve been a childminder for nearly 18 years ..... when we were discussing ‘possibility thinking’ I could think of a lot of times when the children had done that – like the slide activity we talked about ........that was when S was small (10 years ago)

Analysis relating to TMA Feedback

Tutorial discussion was very focused on the assessment (an issue in itself!) although it was linked to the students’ own practice. The TMAs are the vehicle through which the tutor can formally assess knowledge and understanding of course concepts as well as whether or not the student is able to reflect on their practice, but I wonder whether or not the focus on TMAs discourages students from reflecting on their practice outside of the assignment requirements.

As a result of this concern I have looked at how I use my feedback to encourage the student to reflect on their practice in relation to the course material around creativity. However, there are two main issues that came out of the research on this which may impact on how relevant the feedback is:

- Academic writing ability
- Choice of activity

It is evident that the student’s ability to write academically is very likely to have an impact on their ability to prove they are reflecting on their practice, and that they understand the course material in relation to their own practice. For example, AH1 provided good discussion about ludic play within the tutorial, but her assignment summarised the whole discussion into ‘When she created the den Ruby’s  play was ludic (Holland, 2003, p144)’.

Discussing this with AH1, her comment was that it made perfect sense in the tutorial, but when she came to write it up she realised she didn’t really understand it that well.
This suggests that greater emphasis is needed on making sure that knowledge is consolidated. I try to draw the students towards making the link between tutorial discussion and their assignment in my feedback.

There is another issue; that it is also possible that the practice discussed in TMAs is not ‘everyday’ practice. How useful then, is commenting on assignment activities? HN commented that she picked the activity to discuss based on what she thought would interest me and show me that she offered brilliant activities to the children.

HN ‘I find myself looking for an activity that looks impressive......something fancy......something that you are going to say ‘Wow, what a fantastic activity!’

AL also noted that in the last assignment she had ‘looked at the best activity she had done’ and that it was ‘human nature to pick something you have done well for the assignment, rather than something that has gone wrong’.

**How does TMA feedback help students to understand the concepts of creativity and apply them to their actual practice?**

The analysis of assignment feedback identified a number of ways in which an attempt was made to support students in their understanding of course concepts and encourage further reflection on practice:

- Linking tutorial discussion and feedback
- Asking questions
- Encouraging justification

I have extracted a range of TMA feedback comments to illustrate the types of comment made in respect of the above points.
Linking feedback to the tutorial is designed to give the student a frame of reference for the comment.

‘You have briefly mentioned an extension activity, but you have not addressed the issue of how you could further extend the children’s learning. Knowing from tutorial discussions that you work very much from the child’s lead, rather than from long-term planning, it would have been appropriate to make this point here. Maybe you could have noted that you are reactive, rather than proactive in planning a session, but that, as Ben was so insistent on having working switches etc that you could do some work on circuits. Perhaps a get-well card with a flashing LED on it?’

Asking questions within the feedback is designed to encourage students to be able to reflect on their own practice, using the course concepts.

‘Where is your evidence for this and how does it relate to the course material? In attempting to make a seed packet was he, for example, engaging in possibility thinking?’

‘To extend your discussion here and demonstrate ‘excellent discussion’ maybe you could have commented on how you feel Aiden coped with this freedom to explore the activity in his own way and being presented with a new activity. Was he straight in there or did he wait to be told what to do? Did he seek reassurance for his actions? Commenting on these issues would enable you to see whether or not Aiden is confident with new experiences and has a positive learning disposition, for example.’

Encouraging students to justify their comments is designed to help them to question their conclusions, and reflect on whether the evidence is there to support their conclusions.

‘This needs a bit more explanation ‘why’, to clearly demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of ‘possibility thinking’. Where is the
evidence that Todd was *thinking about how he could solve the problem* of the tower falling down? Using his left hand may show evidence of knowledge and skill rather than ‘possibility thinking’.

‘These are good points but think about how you could demonstrate a link to your analysis of your observations. For example, for point 2 you could have said something like: *Observation 2 shows J getting quite concerned about making a mess. This can inhibit creativity (ref). In order to encourage J to a more relaxed attitude I intend to (ideas for encouraging J to make a mess/get messy).............’

Students quite often make the link between the course material and their practice but did not give the reasoning behind

This is a relevant quote, clearly showing that engaging with the course material is encouraging you to think about your practice. To meet the higher bands you need to explain *why* and *how* you feel the activity did this.

Good link to the course material showing that you are using the course material to consider your own practice. To complete this discussion within the higher bands think about, for example, providing an explanation of the benefits to the child’s creativity of being allowed to become engrossed in an activity and take it where they want it to go.

There were a number of examples identified where feedback did not encourage students to reflect on their actual practice.

This was particularly evident where:

- Feedback focused on assessment
Analysing the feedback showed that not all feedback focuses on the students’ own practice and that there are times when my feedback to the students is focused on meeting the assessment needs rather than encouraging them to reflect on their practice.

‘You have looked into extending the activity rather than the children’s learning. The aim here was for you to analyse and reflect on the children’s experience and note where their learning needs were. If they had displayed any curiosity around why you didn’t hand wash your clothes etc., then this might be relevant to KUW.’

‘To demonstrate a full understanding of the concept here you needed to give an example of how the activity promotes possibility thinking.’

Equally, TMA content requirements do not always allow students to reflect freely on their practice, with students often reflecting effectively on their practice but not linking their discussion to the assignment.

How is this relevant to the TMA brief? Think carefully about the relevance of the information you are including. It may help you to proofread your work against the TMA brief and justify to yourself why you are including information. There are no marks for off-focus discussion.

**Conclusion**

To summarise, it seems that the tutorial input served two purposes in supporting students’ reflection on their practice. Firstly, it helped students to understand the key concepts and principles and, secondly, it helped students to make the link between the course concepts and their actual practice. Understanding of the concepts was very important for students to be able to effectively reflect on their practice.
Students were supported in their understanding of the concepts and through a range of activities with links being made to their actual practice, rather than using hypothetical examples. Confidence in what they did also seemed to be necessary for them to be in the position to be able to discuss, and reflect on, their own practice.

Although students need to tackle the assignments to pass the course, there needed to be greater connection between the course material, assignments and their own practice to enable them to continue to reflect on their everyday practice. Student comments on their TMAs suggested that they view the TMAs as relating to assessment rather than their practice. This is a valid point and one that I need to address in that TMA feedback is heavily focused on how they can meet the marking criteria.

I have become aware through doing this research that the students have to make their own leap from the TMAs to their practice.
I felt I was reactive in assignment feedback and did not make best use of tutorial time to make links that may have helped students to make the connections between reflecting on practice as part of their everyday routine and reflecting on practice for the assignment.

I feel I need to think more carefully about how I can encourage reflection on practice as a process outside of the course assessment.

**Taking the research further**

I have explored my own practice in relation to supporting students to reflect on their practice through both tutorials and assignment feedback. To complete the current research it would be appropriate to ask the following question and analyse the responses in conjunction with my own reflection:

- How helpful the TMA feedback was in encouraging them to reflect on their practice?
The original research proposal included considering how the course materials support students to reflect on their practice in the areas of inclusion and creativity. This is not an issue that has been explored fully within this research, although the feedback from the selected students seems to suggest that the materials on their own are not sufficient. However I not only interviewed students who attended tutorials, but the emphasis was on how the tutor supported their understanding of the course materials. Consequently students were very unlikely to say that tutor input added nothing to their understanding!

To carry this research further there is scope for exploring how the course materials support students to understand what creativity is and to reflect on their practice in the area of creativity and inclusion. This could include how the tutor uses the course materials to support the students’ understanding.

References


Gomez, C (15.4.05) ‘Reflection’, E124 Reflection Sub-conference