

EVALUATING TEACHERS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

John Kwame Boateng 

Institute of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

jboat2009@gmail.com

Caleb Boadi

University of Ghana Business School, Legon, Accra, Ghana

Abstract

This study was concerned with Reflective Practice in the professional practice of university teachers. One hundred Teachers from the University of Ghana, and the Wisconsin International University College were evaluated for the extent to which they understood and engaged in reflective practice teaching adult learners in the university. Study instruments comprised seventeen items representing the diversity of available definitions of ways in which reflection is used in the literature on the professional development of university teachers. Opinions of teachers were sourced from their understanding of reflective practice and its relevance to their practice. A five-point Likert scale was used. Results showed that majority of teachers associated relevance of reflective practice to evaluating the effectiveness of one's teaching practice, examining teaching from the perspective of the learner, conscious and self-awareness deliberation on professional practice, making changes to one's professional practice in the light of experience and deepening their understanding in their role as professional teachers. Above all, they embraced teaching and learning support that is informed by an understanding of how learners develop knowledge and learning skills, allowing themselves to be challenged by some of their deeper, social, and cultural thoughts, feelings and reactions.

Keywords: Education management, Reflection, Reflective Practice, Learning, Professional, Development, Adult learners, University teachers

INTRODUCTION

Reflection and Reflective Practice are immensely used ideas in many fields of learning, training and professional development, including continuing and distance education and the professional preparation of teachers in higher education (Roessger, 2014b). Reasons cited for this has included the important connection between self-awareness and learning. It has been suggested that the practice of teaching could be developed through a chain of action and reflection, where the teacher teaches and reflects on his teaching and plans new teaching, which is informed by the results of the reflection.

In a study carried out with reflection papers as data, and exploring teachers' statements about the impact of the course work and the projects on their teaching and beliefs about teaching of English Language Learners (ELLs), teachers' stated that they felt they had grown as teachers, were more reflective, and more confident about teaching in general, and teaching ELLs in particular (Sowa, 2009). According to (Roessger, 2014b), perhaps nothing over the past twenty years has captivated work-related adult education like reflective activities. Citing (Boud, 2010, Boud & Walker, 1998, Fook, 2010) Roessger, shows that reflective activities or structured learning events, thought to occasion distinct phenomena as reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice, are now commonplace in continuing professional education courses and workshops (Roessger, 2014b).

Roessger further points out that, reflective activities' popularity likely stems from the value stakeholders place on their putative targets: reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice. In teacher Education, according to literature research outputs accessed through Roessger, 2014b reflection has been described as something so fashionable that courses omitting it are viewed as operating outside the educational mainstream (Cornford, 2002). According to more further research outputs cited by Roessger, 2014b, critical reflection, has been praised as a pivotal process for improving skill transfer (Sellin, 2003) and a way to "feed the roots of lifelong learning" in skills-based vocational programs (Marr & Rose-Adams, 2010).

Reflective practice also has been described as an indispensable methodology of professional development (Brookfield, 1995, Schon, 1987, Schon, 1983; cited by Roessger, 2014) and an innovative and beneficial addition to competency-based employee training (James & Mulcahy, 2000; Cited by: Roessger, 2014b). Kato, (2012), showed that there are potential benefits for developing a continuing program for experienced advisors by introducing the reflective dialogue. Another study found an interaction was between reflective activity and reflective propensity on error rate: In the critical reflection condition, nonreflective learners had higher error rates than reflective learners (Roessger, 2014a).

Bard, (2014) writing on the significance of learning to reflective learners and the feedback from teachers, notes that teachers have a role as mediators to develop the abilities of learners and promote autonomy other than knowledge transmission and pointing out the value of promoting dialogue in class and the need to consider feedback as teachers' response to student tasks. Boud, (2001) discusses journal writing as a way to aid reflective practice and describes the main features of a model for learning from experience that he has been developing. The model assumed that learning is always grounded in prior experience and that any attempt to promote new learning must take account of that experience. Thus, he concluded that, learners must make links between what is new and what already exists if they are to make sense of what is happening to them.

The model assumed that the process of learning from experience is an active one and that, reflection takes place in anticipation of, during, and after an event during which times journal writing has significant role to play. However, Ferry & Ross-Gordon, (1998), wrote about the use of reflection-in-action by adult educators in problematic situations. The focus of the study was to explore aspects of Schön's theory. The results supported the basic assumption of Schön's theory that reflecting practitioners use a constructivist decision-making perspective while non-reflecting educators use an instrumental problem-solving approach.

The findings demonstrated that reflecting educators, whether novice or experienced, use reflecting-in-action and reflecting-on-action as a means to develop expertise. The presence of experienced educators exhibiting minimal reflection and presence of one highly reflective novice indicates that experience alone is not the "master teacher" of the reflective process. Curtis & Szestay, (2005) observe that, the ability to look at the classroom differently with a deeper understanding of the learning processes have enabled teachers to become more reflective and aware when planning their lessons and when making decisions in the classroom. It is believed that the teachers' demographic characteristics and beliefs may affect the teacher's ability to reflect in his or her practice.

Structured learning events termed reflective activities are now widely used throughout work-related learning (Roessger, 2012b). These activities are thought to occasion reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice. Researchers have attributed the teacher's ability to reflect in their practice to their level of experience, teaching and learning context, demographic characteristics of teacher, their beliefs, and other possible factors. Although researchers have established benefits and outcomes associated with reflective activities in work-related communicative learning contexts, the effect of reflective activities in relation to teachers' demographic characteristics which might impact their experience level, teaching and learning contexts and beliefs about reflective practice learning contexts is largely unknown. Also

attributes of reflective practice that are relevant in the Ghanaian education context have not been investigated. So this study is carried out to address two research questions:

1. Does the demographic characteristic of teachers of Adult learners have influence on their reflective practice?
2. What are the attributes of reflective practice that are relevant in the Ghanaian education context?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Three reflective phenomena

In this section, three reflective phenomena are mentioned and subsequently defined. Reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice share a feature: each is traditionally considered a cognitive process rather than a pedagogical activity (Roessger, 2014b) defines. Reflection has been defined as a form of mental processing or a form of thinking that may be used to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome or that may simply “be reflective” and then an outcome can be unexpected. Reflection is applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess (Moon, 2004; p. 82)

According to, Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, (2007) critical reflection, can be defined as a process of identifying, examining and questioning assumptions underlying how one understands experience. When the process is continuously applied to professional practice, a person engages in what is commonly referred to as reflective practice. Educators wishing to occasion any of these three phenomena use structured learning events referred to here as reflective activities (Roessger, 2014b).

Concepts of reflection

The first proponent of reflection Dewey conceptualized reflection as a pausing of action, a stop to impulsive thought. He described reflection as the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions that it makes (Dewey, 1933; p. 9). Dewey argued that, when a person reflects, one progresses through five steps: (a) identifying a possible solution to the problem, (b) restating difficulties into a problem to solve, (c) proposing hypotheses related to the solution, (d) analyzing the hypotheses against one’s past experiences and (e) implementing the solution overtly or covertly while assessing its results against past experience.

Bandura on his part argued that people could regulate their behaviour to some extent by visualizing self-generated consequences (Bandura, 1976; p.392). Dennett, (1995), described a

process whereby higher-order thinking organisms mentally preview acts and their consequences before proceeding, allowing for successful outcomes at better than chance rates.

It is important to note that Dewey's model establishes links between present and past experience to generate meaning. In a later research (Dewey, 1938) he argued that the link between the present and past experience to create meaning was a necessity to construct effective learning experiences. According to Roessger, (2014b), the emphasis on meaning may be what distinguishes reflection from critical thinking. But it was Warnick & Inch, (1994: p. 48) which suggested that learners who think critically "explore a problem, question, or situation; integrate all the available information about it; arrive at a solution or hypothesis; and justify one's position". The only way Warnick & Inch's conceptualization differed from Dewey's reflection was only in its omission of recalling past experience to create personal meaning. It appears that when learners engage in critical thinking they mainly use given information, often without immediately identifiable connections to past experience, to determine a belief or action's effectiveness or legitimacy (Roessgers, 2014b).

Schön, (1983) and Schön, (1987) categorized two forms of reflection as problem solving processes. Reflection-in-action was termed as the process by which professionals examine in the moment their knowing-in-action (i.e., the tacit information underlying performance). As novel conditions arise, they use reflection-in-action to assess the potential outcome of an action, the action itself and the skills and knowledge embedded within the action. In so doing, they considered how adaptations could maximize success. Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, was the process by which professionals retrospectively examine their actions or an event against current experience, skills and knowledge. In this manner, professionals considered how their knowing-in-action contributed to unexpected outcomes.

According to Kolb's experiential learning model, learning is an individualized process of four stages: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization and (d) active experiment. Learners emphasize individual stages in different contexts, but optimal learning involves a discrete linear progression through each: Learners first experience the feelings associated with a learning event, then observe and note its salient details, then think about it and draw conclusions, and last act based on new understanding (Kolb, 1984). Although he termed the second stage reflective observation, stages two and three of Kolb's model share characteristics of both Dewey and Schön's reflection (i.e., observation, analysis, reasoning, and hypothesizing). These stages, Kolb argued, give meaning and purpose to experience and action.

Critical Reflection

According to Merriam et al, (2007) critical reflection involves manipulations of meaning, and its intention is principally emancipation instead of problem solving, and aims to change a person's worldview by identifying, analyzing and questioning assumptions. Brookfield, (2000) argue that learners are encouraged to identify how their assumptions and beliefs are influenced by various social structures. Mezirow, (1990) added that learners' participate in a critique of the presuppositions on which their beliefs have been built. According to Mezirow, when learners critically reflect, they critique three presuppositions: epistemic distortions (personal beliefs about the nature and use of knowledge), sociocultural distortions (hegemonic belief systems about the nature of power and social relationships), and psychic distortions (personal thoughts and feelings that occasion anxiety and impede action). Inherent is the learner questioning the validity of what is being reflected on Mezirow, (1998) rather than examining actions under accepted principles (Silverman & Casazza, 2000).

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is the continual application of reflection or critical reflection to professional work for the purpose of problem solving and growth. Researchers who support this view include (Clouder, 2000; Florez, 2001; Ruth-Sahd, 2003). They see reflective practice mainly as the self-examination of professional action for improving problem solving and accomplishment. In this view, professionals continuously evaluate and adjust their daily actions to foster professional development, refine practice and improve competence, depicting a sustained approach to improving practice and problem solving. Applying above view to professional practice, it is observed that the concept on reflection expressed by Kolb, 1984, Schön, 1983 and Schön, 1987 all are in support.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive design method. One hundred Teachers from the University of Ghana, and the Wisconsin International University College were evaluated for the extent to which they understood and reflected at one time or another in teaching adult learners. The study instrument comprised seventeen items representing the diversity of available definitions and ways in which reflection is used in the literature on the professional development of university teachers. Opinions of teachers were sourced from two levels of understanding or the relevance to their teaching and the extent to which they had engaged in the activities themselves. A five-point Likert scale at two levels was used. A random sampling technique was used to select the one hundred teachers who completed survey.

This paper investigated two research questions as follows:

1. Does the demographic characteristic of teachers of Adult learners have influence on their reflective practice?
2. What are the attributes of reflective practice that are relevant in the Ghanaian education context?

Population and Sample Sizes of the study

Population for the study comprised faculty from the University of Ghana and the Wisconsin International University College. The study population was estimated to approximate about 500 faculty members. The sample size was 100.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire employed Likert scale with five levels ranging from strongly agrees (5 points), agree (4 points), uncertain (3 points) disagree (2 points) and strongly disagree (1point) was used.

Validation of Instruments

The instruments for the study was assessed for content and construct validity. Each item of the instrument was carefully analyzed and checked to ensure that it conveyed the necessary message.

Data Entry and Analytical Approach

Quantitative data resulting from the survey was entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Data entered was analyzed and mean responses were examined. Descriptive Statistics (tables of means, and standard deviations) were used to present results.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

One hundred questionnaires was completed and successfully verified from the survey, from the total number of study respondents, 51.0% (n=51) were males, while 49.0% (n=49) were females. The distributions of males to females were fairly represented to avoid gender bias from the study responses.

Majority of the respondents were from the age 50 and above years indicating 57%, showing that majority of University teachers are within the old age, where those from 41 to 49 years were 36.0%. However, data from the study showed that few of the University teachers were below 40 years an indication of 7% of the study respondents.

Considering university teachers level of practice study respondents indicated that a whopping majority of were practiced at the postgraduate level. 76.0 percent of the respondents indicated that they were postgraduate practiced while the rest 24.0 percent were undergraduate practiced. With regards to the institution of which study respondents teach, it was shown that majority of the respondents teach in the Public Universities, an indication of 58.0%, While 42.0% were Private University teachers.

Table 1: Respondents Demographic Characteristics

Gender	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Female	49	49.0
Male	51	51.0
Total	100	100.0
Ages		
25-30	1	1.0
31-40	6	6.0
41-50	36	36.0
50 and above	57	57.0
Total	100	100.0
Residence		
Rural	2	2.0
Urban	73	73.0
Peri-urban	25	25.0
Total	100	100.0
Level of Practice		
Undergraduate	24	24.0
Postgraduate	76	76.0
Total	100	100.0
Institution		
Private	42	42.0
Public	58	58.0
Total	100	100.0

It was also indicated that most of the teachers are residence in the urban cities in Ghana, this could be as result that most of the Universities in Ghana are located in the urban areas, 73.0 percent of respondents indicated this. The Peri-urban and the rural areas followed subsequently with 25 percent and 2 percent indication.

In the study objective one the study was to find out whether the demographic characteristics of teachers' of Adult learners' have influence on their reflective practice. Since the independent variables (demographic characteristics) were categorical, a dummy variable regression was performed on the dependent variable (reflective practice).

Table 2: Model Summary

R	R Square	F-Stat	Sig.
0.225	0.051	0.973	0.438

The model: $RefPract = B_0 + B_1DMale + B_2Urban + B_3Peri_U + B_4Postgrad + B_5PubUniv$

The above is the specified multiple dummy regression analysis model indicating how the independent variables were used to determine University teachers perception on reflective practice. The R-Square value in the model summary depicts the degree of variation among the dependent variable, which is explained by the model (the independent variables). From the table, we can infer that R Square value is 0.051, indicates a considerably less relationship between the dependent and independent variables of the regression model.

In other words the demographic characteristics of University teachers can explain reflective practice at 5.1%. Also, the results indicate that there is no significant reliability between dummy demographic variables and reflective practice ($F = 0.973$, Prob. of $0.438 > 0.05$). This shows that the demographic characteristics of University teachers can't predict reflective practice in their teaching. Thus the chain of action and reflection, where the teacher teaches and reflects on his teaching and plans new teaching is not dependent on the gender, the place of residence, level of practice and institution in which they teach.

From Table 3 the regression output indicates that the dummy variables individually insignificantly determine reflective practice. However, it is shown by Beta values that teachers staying at the Urban and Peri-Urban areas have positive influence on reflective practice. Also, it was shown that teachers teaching in the Public University would have a positive influence on the reflective practice. Considering the beta value of education and gender, it is shown that highest (post graduate) does not have a positive influence on reflective practice, while the male teachers perception and reflective practice moves in different direction.

Table 3: Regression Output

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	4.177553	0.340678	12.26249	5.57E-21
Male	-0.04528	0.066105	-0.68496	0.495109
Urban	0.213367	0.200118	1.066203	0.289152
Peri-Urban	0.131939	0.206494	0.638951	0.52446
postgraduate	-0.12889	0.071395	-1.80526	0.074342
Public	0.005468	0.068093	0.0803	0.936175
31-40	-0.20884	0.293971	-0.7104	0.47927
41-50	-0.23401	0.271926	-0.86055	0.391747
50 and above	-0.14971	0.270175	-0.55411	0.580866

In the study objective two, the study sought to determine the attributes of reflective practice that are relevant in the Ghanaian education context. On the scale of measurement of a low rating of 1 and a high of 5, the mean and the standard deviation indicate University teachers perception about reflective practice in Ghana.

From the Table 4 we can infer that teachers perceive that all the attributes of the reflective practice mentioned are consistent with the Ghanaian education context. There was an indication from the mean response of at least of 3.67 (Agree) to a high of 4.46 (strongly agree). Amongst all the attributes it is shown that reflective practice as an approach to teaching and learning support that is informed by an understanding of how learners develop knowledge and learning skills (mean = 4.5).

Also we find that reflective practice as an approach that challenges some of the teachers' deeper, social, and cultural thoughts, feelings and reactions is strongly relevant in Ghanaian education context (mean = 4.4), So is the reflective practice approach that examine teaching from the perspective of the learner (mean = 4.4).

The results also find that, the reflective practice approach that reflected Schon's views of intuitive and implicit application of professional knowledge to specific teaching and learning settings was strongly relevant in the Ghanaian education context (mean = 4.3). So was the approach that questioned the teacher's routine, convenient, everyday practices and ask self about what really does and doesn't work (mean = 4.3), and also the approach that have a deep understanding of self and students' and evaluates the effectiveness of the teacher's teaching practice (mean = 4.3).

Other reflective practice approaches, that was found relevant in Ghana's included those sustained self-awareness with respect to the teacher's own processes of learning and development (Mean = 4.2) and enabled the teacher to think on his feet and took a long term view of his work (mean = 4.1).

Other reflective practice approaches also found relevant in the Ghanaian education context included; approaches reflecting Kolb's views that encouraged the making of changes to the teachers' professional practice in the light of experience (mean = 4.1) and those that encouraged good understanding of the organizational contexts in which work takes place (mean = 4.1); also that which based professional decisions upon feedback (mean = 4.0) and one that permitted the teacher to make conscious and self-aware deliberation on his professional practice (mean = 4.0).

Table 4: Attributes of reflective practice

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Evaluating the effectiveness of one's teaching practice	4.26	.465
Examining teaching from the perspective of the learner	4.36	.644
Conscious and self-aware deliberation on one's professional practice	3.92	.895
Intuitive and implicit application of professional knowledge to specific teaching and learning settings (reflection in action; Schön)	4.34	.699
Self-awareness with respect to one's own processes of learning and development	4.18	.761
An approach to teaching and learning support that is informed by an understanding of how learners develop knowledge and learning skills	4.46	.784
Making changes to one's professional practice in the light of experience (based on Kolb's)	4.04	.994
Deepening one's understanding of one's role as a professional teacher in the light of experience (Kolb's view)	3.81	.940
Basing professional decisions upon feedback	3.94	.983
Theorizing from experience, that is constructing abstract models or analytical frames based on practical experience of teaching	3.81	.895
Think strategically and act with commitment	3.67	1.006
Think and act at a number of levels	3.85	.892
Have a deep understanding of self and students	4.26	.981
Have a good understanding of the organizational contexts in which work takes place	4.04	1.044
Think on one's feet and take a long term view of one's work	4.13	.837
Embraces complexity and uncertainty, seeing them both as part of an opportunity to learn and develop	3.72	1.064
Question one's routine, convenient, everyday practices and ask self about what really does and doesn't work	4.33	.711
Challenges some of one's deeper, social, and cultural thoughts, feelings and reactions	4.39	.831

DISCUSSIONS

Nesbit, Leach and Foley, wrote about teachers' that are considered to be 'great ' and argued that such teachers; 'think strategically and act with commitment. When we watch these teachers we can see, and admire, their grasp of teaching technique. But these teachers have more than skill; they also think and act at a number of levels. Such teachers have a deep understanding of themselves and their students, and of the organisational contexts in which they work. They think 'on their feet', and take a long-term view of their work' (Nesbit, Leach and Foley 2004: 74). Based on the findings from this study, we can speak of teachers surveyed in the Ghanaian University context in much the same way.

No matter their gender, the educational level at which they practiced, the number of years in practice, whether in public university or private and whether in rural or urban residence, these teachers had more than skill; they thought and acted at a number of levels. They had a

deep understanding of themselves and their students, and of the organisational contexts in which they worked. They thought on their feet, and took a long-term view of their work. Above all, they embraced teaching and learning support that is informed by an understanding of how learners develop knowledge and learning skills, they allowed themselves to be challenged by some of their deeper, social, and cultural thoughts, feelings and reactions and examined teaching from the perspectives of the learner.

Schön (1983) argued that reflection could help professionals to develop their practice. Schön saw practitioners as encountering many problems, grey areas and uncertainties in their work, and used the term phrase 'swampy lowlands' to describe those areas. Lecturers in the Ghanaian University system are surrounded by many of such 'swampy lowlands' on all sides. Schön made a contribution that, professional practice could be developed and improved through a spiral of action and reflection, where the practitioner acts, reflects on the action and plans new action, which is informed by the results of the reflection.

The spiral is continuous, and can be interrupted and incomplete, and the reflection will not always solve problems. It could even cause problems. However, it helps to create awareness about problems and uncertainties and offers an opportunity to examine for solutions. This is what the concept of critical reflection is all about which as we have shown in the literature review represents an important part of reflective practice

CONCLUSION

Reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice are widely used ideas in many fields of learning, training and professional development, including the professional preparation of teachers in higher education. One reason for this has been a growing recognition within higher education of the important relationship between self-awareness and learning. In fact, they are now so widely used that it is increasingly difficult to offer a single definition that attracts consensus even within a specific context such as higher education teacher development (Roessgers, 2014b; Itslife, 2010). The study has focussed on reflection as it relates to the professional practice of university teachers. The principal concern was with Reflective Practice in relation to the professional practice as university teachers, rather than in relation to student learning. Of course, the two domains are by no means separate, since the main objective of the former is to facilitate the latter (Itslife, 2010). The study establishes that, the demographic characteristics of university teachers can't predict reflective practice in their teaching. Thus the chain of actions and reflections, where the teacher teaches and reflects on his teaching and plans new teaching is not dependent on the gender, the place of residence, level of practice and

institution in which they teach. The study also established that, the teachers in the survey had more than skill; they thought and acted at a number of levels.

They had a deep understanding of themselves and their students, and of the organisational contexts in which they worked. They thought on their feet, and took a long-term view of their work. Above all, they embraced teaching and learning support that is informed by an understanding of how learners develop knowledge and learning skills, they allowed themselves to be challenged by some of their deeper, social, and cultural thoughts, feelings and reactions and examined teaching from the perspectives of the learner. The study findings aligns with the diversity of available definitions according to (Itslife, 2010) presented as few ways in which reflection is used in the literature on the professional development of university teachers.

- evaluating the effectiveness of one's teaching practice
- examining teaching from the perspective of the learner
- conscious and self-aware deliberation on professional practice (sometimes called reflection-on-action, after Schön)
- intuitive and implicit application of professional knowledge to specific teaching-and-learning settings (sometimes called reflection-in-action, again after Schön)
- self-awareness with respect to one's own processes of learning and development
- an approach to teaching and learning support that is informed by an understanding of how learners develop knowledge and learning skills
- making changes to one's professional practice in the light of experience (based on Kolb's cycle of experiential learning)
- deepening one's understanding of one's role as a professional teacher in the light of experience (again based on Kolb's cycle of experiential learning)
- basing professional decisions upon feedback (e.g. from learners and/or colleagues)
- theorising from experience that is, constructing abstract models or analytical frames based on practical experience of teaching

In conclusion, the study findings are in agreement with the argument that, the reflective practitioner makes use of most or all of these kinds of reflection at one time or another (Itslife, 2010). Reflective practice therefore, as suggested should be viewed as an umbrella concept, and as a theme that cuts across all the work of the university teacher. It is a way of being, rather than a set of practical strategies or set of demographic characteristics that the teacher possesses, or techniques or an attitude of mind. It is a way of understanding oneself as a developing professional, and a commitment to continuous improvement and deepening knowledge.

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