

Developing Reflective Practice Skills Through the Use of a Road Map

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The purpose of this study was to expose Human Ecology final year students to the use, creation and implementation of a roadmap as a vehicle for the development of reflective practice skills. Data was obtained through the road maps created by them as well as their written reflection on the whole process. Results indicate that students initially found it difficult to understand the value or purpose of the reflective process. It was envisaged that the output would point to an understanding in students of how the skills of critical reflection can be developed and that they gain an understanding of the benefits of reflective skills. The overall findings suggest that students' engagement with the road mapping process helped them to develop their reflective skills, which in turn had an impact on their personal lives and which will hopefully assist in their future professional lives.

“We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflection on experience. Reliving of an experience leads to making connections between information and feelings produced by the experience” (Dewey, 1933, p. 78).

Working in a professional manner demands a continuous process of reflection, which involves looking at your practices, ideas and actions, then evaluating their effectiveness in order to make improvements both personally and professionally. The main attribute of a Human Ecology practitioner (also known as Family and Consumer Sciences in America and other parts of the world) is the ability to transform scholarly studies into meaningful action so as to empower individuals and families within relevant contexts to obtain social well-being. The importance of reflection which are “those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation” (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985, p. 19), is therefore an essential part of any professional role.

Doing so helps us to develop a sense of what has been achieved, what is likely to be achieved, and what could be done better. As students, and later in our careers as Human Ecology practitioners and Family and Consumer Sciences Educators, we are able with the method of reflective practice, to conclude, inform and broaden our practice knowledge.

Human Ecology is defined as a profession with an integrative and trans-disciplinary approach concerned with enhancing the quality of life by focusing on the interrelationships among individuals, families and communities and the multi-faceted environments in which they function (Stage & Vincenti, 1997). It is also described as an inter-disciplinary applied science concerned with the physical, psychological, social and material well-being of individuals and families through the use of knowledge, resources and the application of technology to meet their needs and expectations (Boshoff, 1997) and increasing their human potential within their micro-environment (Nicolescu, 1997). The mission of Human Ecology is in the empowerment of people by focusing on the improvement of quality of life, the satisfaction of expectations and the development of their potential through an interdisciplinary approach and within a holistic application context (Erasmus, 2007). Different skills and abilities, as well as the capacities which they will apply in assisting and empowering individuals, families and communities to take

initiative in acquiring a better life for themselves, in a more effective and sustainable manner, are needed by successful human ecology and community development professionals (McGregor, 2007, 2006; Cornelissen, 2006).

Reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering ones' own experiences in applying knowledge to practice (Schon, 1996). It requires us to look further, to examine ourselves and become "a person choosing to make visible and open to examination all that one believes, knows and does" (Vaines, 1997, p. 210). Hunt (2006) describes "reflective practice as a temporary resting-place on a journey where one's accompanying wagonload of ideas/experiences can be temporarily removed, checked and reordered . . . a place where one can look back along the road already travelled and at possible ways forward, and exchange stories with fellow travelers" (p. 322). Wade & Yarbrough (1996) indicate that as "we reflect, we discover the links between different aspects of our life experience and where past experiences are reconsidered in light of new information. Reflection allows us to draw conclusions about our past experiences and develop new insights that we can apply to our future activities" (p. 64).

Smith & Betts (2000) reiterates this and says that the quality of the learning, however, is not dependent on the quality of the experience, but on the quality of the process of reflection. A definition of reflection which brings together its many sides and conceptualizations is the one formed by Korthagen (2001) who states, "Reflection is the mental process of trying to structure or restructure an experience, a problem, or existing knowledge or insights" (p. 58). Maaranen & Krokfors (2007) rewrite this definition above as "reflection is a shared mental structuring process that takes place in both individual and collective settings of learning and has a positive social impact on the learning possibilities in the future" (p. 361).

Embracing reflective practice is not simply acquiring and utilizing new ideas and techniques, but striving towards becoming inquiry-oriented reflective practitioners who need to be self-analytical, critical of knowledge as well as creative in ideas (Ghaye, 2005; Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper, 2001). Reflective practitioners work is a journey with multiple possibilities where keeping-up-to-date is less an instrumental goal than a deep desire to develop questions about the most responsible and caring ways of 'empowering' (Vaines, 1997). Being a reflective professional requires you to take the time to consider your work, reflect on its objectives and evaluate its outcomes. "As a mirror reflects a physical image, so does reflection as a thought process reveal to us aspects of our experience that might have remained hidden had we not taken the time to consider them" (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996, p. 64).

Maps and Reflective Practice

Maps are important sources of primary information (Stevens, 2003) as well as abstract pictures of reality helping us understand terrain before, during and after we take a trip (Vaines, 1997). Stevens (2003) says that "maps can be seen as mirrors of reality" (p. 1), and using maps or mapping as a metaphor offer students the "ability to provide both a perspective and a way of looking at things and a process by which new perspectives can emerge" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 22). Atkins and Murphy (1993) state that "Reflection . . . must involve the self and must lead to a changed perspective" (p. 1191). Metaphors provide a useful way of seeing the familiar differently and, therefore responding to the familiar in different ways. 'Metaphor' meaning 'to transfer beyond' (Patridge, 1979) has at its roots the "ability to provide both a perspective and a way of looking at things and a process by which new perspectives can emerge" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 22). They provide "a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world

generally” (Morgan, 1997, p. 4). Vaines (1997), furthermore, suggests that maps can assist us in grasping a deeper understanding of being and becoming professional practitioners. The map is used to better understand reflective practice which is meant to empower, enlighten and emancipate individuals to make informed and meaningful choices with regard to our professional role (Vaines, Badir & Kieren, 1997).

Methodology and Context

The target population for this study was fourth year students in the Human Ecology 430 course which deals with issues relating to the background of Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Ecology as well as professional development. These students’ majors also included a module on Community Development. The majority of this group of students were Black, but the class also consisted of Coloured and White students, with different backgrounds in terms of culture, religion and economic status.

This was a stand alone assignment, but these students were exposed to reflection in other modules within the programme. However, this was the first time that they were exposed to ‘mapping’ as a tool for reflection. Permission was obtained from the students as they were old enough to give consent (they were all over twenty one years of age). Trust and confidentiality was achieved through the lecturer being the only person to read and evaluate the maps.

Intervention/Procedure

In the week prior to the handout of the assignment, the lecturer gave a presentation and lecture on reflective practice. The students also received various articles to read about reflective practice. An article about road mapping as a tool to understand the process of using a road map as a tool for reflecting/reflection was also given beforehand to read. The assignment and its expectations were discussed. Students then had to compile a rough version or draft of their road map indicating their past, present and their future. Students were required to identify where they have come from, where they are, and where they want to be in the future (personally and professionally), and to express this using a road map as a metaphor. They were also asked to indicate three places where they experienced detours, hazards and crossroads. Students were given a framework of two weeks to complete a rough draft of their maps before they submitted them to the lecturer. Feedback from the lecturer was given so that students could improve the content of their maps. The feedback was also an attempt for the students to engage more with the process of reflection. Students returned their maps two weeks later with a final copy of their road maps. At this stage students were also asked to provide a written reflection on the entire process by means of a self-reflection report.

Table 1 below illustrates the basic format the road mapping exercise took. At the end of the compilation and construction of their roadmap, students were invited to evaluate and provide written feedback on their experience of compiling their roadmap. The following steps were used as a guide in the process of creating their road map.

Table 1
Steps to Follow to Construct Map for Reflection

Stage	Activity	Cues
One	Explore/Clarify	Think back on your past. Write your life experiences down.
	Rough version of map	Construct your thoughts and experiences visually.
Two		How did you find thinking back onto your past? What were you thinking and feeling? How did you decide to include or not to include?
	Reflection	Did you find it difficult to think back on your own life?
	Final road map & presentation	Where you hesitant to engage with the process? What kind of feelings and thoughts did you have? How did you decide what should be on your final map? How did you make sense of your situation/past/present? What else could have been done? Why are there detours and hazards? What did you learn from these stops? How did you choose the places where you would like to stop and reflect on your practice/journey? What are the consequences of my decisions and actions? Identify strengths and weaknesses. Analyze your feelings and resentment towards the process.
Three	Evaluation	Process used to construct my reflective road map How did you decide on the type and illustration of your particular map?
	Written reflections on the whole process	Emotional experiences while constructing my road map What were you thinking and feeling? How did you overcome the initial hesitancy/not wanting to face your issues? Changes brought about to own map Why did you bring about changes? Learning took place: making sense of past experiences to inform future practice How did you feel about these experiences? What did I do with my strengths and weaknesses? How has this experience changed by my way of knowing, understanding, etc.

Is the reflective practice really relevant

Can I use reflection as a tool to deal with my emotions and move forward?

Does it bring clarity to issues that are unclear to you?

Results

Reflective practice is “a revisiting of an event in order to understand it better” (Check & McEntee, 2003, p. xiii). It is also the active process of witnessing our own experience in order to take a closer look and to explore it in greater depth. Learning to take ownership of one’s own actions and perspectives open up the possibilities of purposeful learning (Amulya, n.d.). Comments voiced by students illustrated that they found this type of exercise different and for some it took a little while to become more comfortable.

Some students initially identified difficulty in understanding the value or purpose of the reflective process or the strategy used to facilitate reflection. During the very first contact with the process of reflection, resistance and difficulty to start and to proceed were evident.

When I was told to do the task, I was shocked. When I was thinking of the task I just became very angry and sad. I hesitated to do the task and waited till the last minute.

The initial experience surrounding the assignment was one of “flight and fright.”

Much apprehension when assignment was given; put it off, then got angry and frustrated because I knew I was compelled to do the task given.

To be reflective entails being able to step back from the immediacy of the situation and examine one’s beliefs, attitudes, values and behavior in a dispassionate manner (Jackson, 1990). Appropriate support and guidance is needed to assist students to see the benefits of reflection in terms of their own learning. On reflection on the emotions they experienced while constructing their road map, students had different experiences:

Was difficult at first, did not want to expose myself and therefore only put the lesser emotions and experiences on my chart, in that way people could not judge me.

After receiving the instructions to construct our personal road maps I was a bit hesitant, felt boring – know my life already. Then I started feeling uncertain as to whether or not I would do a good job. As I started to think about it more, I became excited as I began conceptualizing how I would go about constructing my road map. While I was putting everything together I became more keen and enthusiastic.

Awareness of our attitudes and emotions is an integral part of appropriate reflective practice. Reflection . . . must involve the self and must lead to a changed perspective (Hunt, 2001). Evidence of this was given by a few students.

The self-reflection process was an interesting concept. . . . The exercise helped me deal with some feelings and I can now move forward. . . . When I had to put my feelings into words, my vocabulary was limited. I realized that I felt more anger and hurt all the time; had been carrying this baggage with me for many years.

While presenting my road map, comments from the lecturer and fellow students gave me an understanding of my situation. I found this to be very inspiring and meaningful. If I had not done it, I would not have learned and gotten an understanding of my situation and most importantly the advice given was important and valued by me.

. . . the reflective exercise has provided me with a building block on which to choose my direction effectively; has provided me with not only a clearer stance with regards to where I am, but a firmer stance in where I want to be.

Brown & Paolucci (1978) state that to be a professional, Human Ecology practitioners must engage in self-reflection and self-critique so that they can present themselves to the public in such a way that society is clear about what they offer. On why Human Ecologists need to be reflective, students had the following to say:

Human Ecologists should be reflective individuals as they deal with people from various backgrounds and generations. The professional also has to reflect on a continuous basis in order to remain current with issues regarding development studies and life in general in order to effectively satisfy the people they are assisting. We should also not become stagnant but should constantly review and evaluate our surrounding contexts so that we can move with the times and remain a relevant discipline.

Reflective practice supports the Human Ecologist in remaining abreast of situations affecting individuals and families . . . provides clarity on our position as well as the opportunity to move forward; granting Human Ecologist the opportunity for constant renewal.

The best evidence of the power of a reflective activity is when the learning revealed can be seen to be beneficial to the personal growth of the student (Doel, 2009). The findings indicate clearly that the use of road maps has a powerful function as a catalyst for reflection and critical dialogue amongst students:

The exercise has brought about a significant change in me and has made me aware of caring for myself. While doing the presentation I have come to realize that there are still various opportunities for me. I had limited myself.

I believe that reflective practice is extremely relevant to many people. What was astounding was that there were events and happenings in my own journey that I had just taken for granted. If people become reflective and look back on decisions made and actions taken, they can become more empowered concerning future decisions.

The overall findings suggest that students' engagement with the road mapping process helped them to develop their reflective skills, which in turn had an impact on their personal lives and which will hopefully assist in their future professional lives.

Conclusion

This paper describes the implementation of a roadmap as a vehicle for the development of reflective practice skills. This study has shown that there were clear benefits to students to partake in developing a road map for themselves. Their comments also illustrated a realisation of reflecting on their life, their decisions and their experiences. This process presented students with an opportunity to question their existing personal and eventually their professional practices that will possibly lead to reform of personal theories and change to their practices. I do believe that the reflective map is good practice and all students should be exposed to it. To this end I recommend further research on this model to refine and also to test whether it is applicable to other disciplines. I also recommend further study into the extent into which the skills and process of reflective practice, if taught at the undergraduate level, are transferable to the post-graduate stage and early professional life. "Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed action" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, p. 180).

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