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Reflection on Teaching and Assessment Strategies in the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Program

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Abstract –*In this paper, we present views on how our students in the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education programme in one university of technology in South Africa, experience our teaching and assessment strategies and what lessons we can take to improve content delivery. The objectives of this study are two-fold: (i) to unpack the meaning of reflective practice; (ii) to examine how students experience our teaching and assessment strategies so that we can improve. The qualitative research method and a case study were adopted for this study. Data were analyzed through document and thematic analysis. We found that reflection on teaching practices is a core characteristic of the Reflective Professional in higher education. Result also revealed that it is important to incorporate reflection in the programmes that are offered at the institution to enable teacher professional growth and development, as well as student learning. The study recommends that within postgraduate studies at the university, students should be taught reflective practice and how to connect this to critical engagement with the learning content.*

Keywords: *Pedagogical reflective practice; transformational student learning; active learning; psycho-social factors; formative and summative assessment*

INTRODUCTION

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey [1] suggest that teacher reflection is a continual cycle that all teacherscontinuously engage in throughout their professional life. The aim is to continually question how they teach, and self-analyse, in order to improve their own professional practice. According to Smith [2], reflective practice in higher education has two pertinent, butdistinctive components, commonly termed "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action". Aryris and Schon [3] describe "reflection-in-

action" as a personal, quick, and spontaneous self-regulatory process that enables the teacher to think over what is being taught. It normally happens as the teaching and learning process unfolds.Reflection is a significant and flexible tool for engaging students as active participants in the teaching and learning processes. We argue that, it is imperative for reflective practice to be incorporated in the initial teacher training programmes. Argyris and Schon, suggest that "reflection-on-action" occurs after a teaching and learning encounter.It is normally an orderly reconstruction process that enables a teacher to understand what transpired in the teaching and learning process and thereby and thereby effect change where necessary. In other words, "reflection-on-action" is a form of personalprofessional development strategy where practitioners use reflection for self-correction to change their practice for the better.Both "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action"practices are critical for the professional growth of teachers. Ross [4] suggests that reflection and how to write reflectively are significant elements of teaching and learning, as well as assessment strategies in higher education.

Considering the foregoing, reflection is alsouseful for students who are in higher education because of the complexnature of learning content, which requires self-directed and independent learning to a greater extent[5]. McAlpine and Weston [6] suggest that through "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action", teachers and students are enabled to make assessments about what is desirable of teaching and learning practices and the actual experiences in the moment of practice. To enhance the quality of teaching and positive student learning outcomes, the two moments of reflection mentioned above, are imperative [7]. For Platt [8], those who teach in higher education cannot be effective if reflection is not part of their teaching and learning processesthat are

supported by the institution. Platt [8] argues that reflection is a higher-level cognitive skill and a voluntary exercisethat should be incorporated in the curriculum.According to Smith [2], it is important for teachers in higher education to reflect on the work that they do. This provides the opportunity to assess the extent to which their students learn and which areas may require revision for improvement in the learning process.

In their mission, the University of Queensland [9] indicates that, "critical reflection on educational practice is a core characteristic of the Reflective Professional in higher education. It demands intentional focus on planning, monitoring and reviewing teaching and assessment strategies, learning and student development, and educational goals and purposes"[7], [10]. Smith [2] suggests that reflective practice in teaching enables one to: (i) "validate teaching strengths to build upon and share with others"; (ii) "acknowledge teaching weaknesses that require addressing"; (iii) "create understanding on how you as a teacher learn"; (iv) "develop self-awareness"; (v) "identify and learn from mistakes within teaching practices that can be creating barriers to learning"; and (vi) "record your growth and development as a teaching academic".Thus, unless teachersare encouraged to participate in reflective practice and improvethe teaching and learning activities from this reflection, it will remain superficial as a tool for professional development [11].

Thus, we need to objectively evaluate our own teaching practices through reflection [2]. In this paper, we present a reflection on how our teaching and learning strategies within the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDHE) programme in one university of technology, in South Africa, are perceived by our students and what lessons we can take to improve content delivery. Our reflection is informed by the students' reflective journals that are presented at the end of every semester. In this programme, we offer eight modules towards the qualification. However, for this study, we focus only on the research module because we co-facilitate in class. The paper will argue that unless teachers reflect on their teaching practices and pay attention to feedback from students, we may miss the opportunity to enhance student learning and to improve on our own teaching and assessment strategies.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY
The objectives of this study are two-fold: to unpack the meaning of reflective practice; and to examine how students, experience our teaching and assessment strategies so that we can improve.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
The qualitative research method has been chosen for this study with the aim to reflect on our teaching and learning strategies informed by the reflective journals of our PGDHE students. We opted for qualitative research because it is interpretivist and more naturalistic compared to the quantitative paradigm, which is more objective[12]. Interpretivism implies that there is no one single reality that exists but that individuals make sense of their own subjective reality and attach meaning to it [12]. In this case, taking an interpretive stance provided an in-depth insight into the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of our students. This is expressed in the reflective journals in which they write about their subjective experiences and interpretations of the teaching and learning processes within the programme[13]. The objective is a direct expression of feelings, emotions and meaningof teaching and learning practices in the classroom. A discussion of the research approach adopted for this study follows.

RESEARCH APPROACH
The researchers have opted for the case study design because we were interested in understanding how we teach and assesstasks from the views of our students and where we may need to improve in order to enhance their learning[14]. For Yin [15], a case study is an empirical enquiry about a contemporary phenomenon set within its real-world context, a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. Thus,the focus of a case study design, according to Nieuwenhuis[16], is to develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or multiple cases. The advantage of using a case study design is to enable an academic relationship between our students and ourselves through their narratives concerning how they experience our teaching and assessment strategies and what it means to them [16]. Their stories in their reflective journals were shared freely without coercion but as a requirement for the programme.

POPULATION, SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The PGDHE programmes comprise a diverse cohort of 161 students who come from different education backgrounds, which include engineering, tourism, fine arts, management sciences, legal studies, lecturers from TVET colleges, most of whom have no education qualification in the field of study. Most of the students (about 90%) hold a National Diploma, which is a three qualification and a Bachelor of Technology (BTech) degree, completed in one year, offered at universities of technology; and students who hold Masters degrees and a few with a PhD qualification. Performance in the assignments clearly shows that students with degrees from traditional universities, to a large extent, outperform the ones with a National Diploma and a B Tech qualification.A total of 161 reflective journals were submitted at the end of the first term in June 2017 in the PGDHE programme, for examination. From these, 15 were randomly selected as data for our study.

DATA ANALYSIS

We employed document and thematic analysis for this study. Bowen [17] suggests that document analysis can be used to interpret information that is obtained from documents, such as personal reflective journals, to give voice and meaning to the participants of the study, whilst Braun and Clarke [18] indicate that thematic analysis is an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analyse qualitative data. These two methods of data analysis helped us understand first-person accounts of our students' actions, their experiences and beliefs about our teaching and assessment strategies. In analysing the reflective journals, we first followed O'Leary's[19] eight steps of document analysis. Although the selected reflective journals were not anonymous due to a large class, we knew only a few students by name and these were omitted from the sample. In the process of analysis, it was important for us to follow qualitative analytical procedures stringently to ensure credibility of our findings. Once we had the 15 reflective journals, we started our analysis by developing an organising and management scheme, starting in a deductive way with a set of categories of reflective practice that came from the literature [4], [1], [2], [8], [7], [10], [20]. The categories listed in the table below, were useful for organising and classifying data obtained from the reflective journals [21]. This allowed us to look for patterns in the data.

Table 1: Categories for reflective practice

Domains of reflection	Description of the category
Reflection on practice	It enables a teacher to question his/her own teaching practices and provides space to correct the teaching strategies that one uses if they are not effective.
Personal development	A higher-level skill which should not be forced as this can lead to inauthentic reflection.
Reflection-in-action	Helps us to correct mistakes when our methods of teaching do not produce the results we expect from the students.
Reflection-on-action	It focuses on intentional improvement and can lead to progressive problem solving.
Assessment	Teachers assess students' learning so that they can identify positive learning and areas of difficulty where support may be needed.

Although the categories above are meant for teachers' own reflections, we used them as a way of organising how our students perceive our teaching strategies and assessment strategies and what these mean to them. Below are some extracts from the reflective journals which enabled data reduction, organisation and identification of themes.

What comes out clearly is the tone, style of writing and the purpose of the students' individual reflections. From these reflections, one can clearly see when the student acknowledges what he or she has learnt. We can also conclude that from the students' narratives, they seem to have made judgments about their own performance and that of their teachers, some showing appreciation for the opportunity to learn and others feeling that much more could have been offered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the selected reflective journals, it seems that some of the students had positive learning experiences, although engagement with content knowledge is glaringly missing. This gap is cause for concern. For example, one of the students stated: *"I learned about the importance of stating your problem correctly."*The reflection by this student shows that he or she took the lecturer's feedback on assignments seriously and he or she uses these to guide his/her performance in subsequent tasks. This is corroborated by Ramnarayan and Hande[22] who suggest that reflection enables us to develop abilities to analyseour own teaching and learning practices in order to identify gaps in student learning and address these.

Table 2: Extracts from reflective journals

Categories from the literature	Extracts	Theme
Reflection on practice	The module challenged me that it is my responsibility together with all other citizens to play our role through knowledge contribution in the form of doing research to identify areas of improvements in the education system. I learned about the importance of stating your problem correctly. The module revealed some gaps in my previous learning. I still struggle when it comes to writing the conclusion, and aligning my research questions with the research problem. Referencing was a bit of a challenge for me as I have never used any referencing methods in my entire academic life. Academic writing was a challenge. It took longer for me to understand your teaching philosophy and how you wanted things to be done when writing your assignments.	Engagement with content knowledge
Personal development	My strength was being in a group helped me to develop interpersonal skills, confidence and team spirit. I have experienced a lot of difficulties with group presentations. The lecturer dedicated time into giving me fundamental knowledge about the subject. The support and guidance we got was overwhelming.	Support for student learning
Reflection-in-action	I have learnt that there are no short cuts when one is doing the research as the results can be deliberately biased. I have learnt that motivation from a lecturer can play an important role in students' progression. I suggest that the department should find a tutor for this module, which will help the students in understanding the research assignments even after class.	Commitment to learning
Reflection-on-action	This module has helped me to be more active within the group. Students were given enough time to interact and express their views about all the topics that were discussed in class. Adult learning was promoted and there was a team-based learning environment among students which encourages active learning. Use a different pace in the delivery of the content to maintain concentration.	Social learning and collaboration skills
Assessment	I wish the lecturers could get rid of marking our assignments electronically because it takes too long to complete the marking. The lecturers should do away with submission of assignments through Turnitin because it prejudices my effort of getting the marks I deserve because it was hard to paraphrase some words. The lecturer dedicated time into giving me fundamental knowledge about the subject.	Feedback on assignments

Regarding the lecturers' pedagogical skills, from the selected reflective journals there are different experiences. Some of the students seem to have been satisfied by the lecturers and facilitation strategies, although there are those who seem not to be happy. One reflective journal that seems to communicate dissatisfaction reads: "*Use a different pace in the delivery of the content to maintain concentration.*" Another one reads: "*I suggest that the department should find a tutor for this module, which will help the students in understanding the research assignments even after class.*" One student stated in the reflective journal: "*It took longer for me to understand your teaching philosophy and how you wanted things to be done when writing your assignments.*" The Federal University of Australia [23] suggests that we need to change our traditional methods of teaching to accommodate the needs of today's learners. These reflections are important because one of the objectives of this study was to examine how students experience our teaching and assessment strategies so that we can improve our shortcomings. Bowen [17] highlights this by suggesting that analysing documents is a process of evaluating information sourced from documents and making sense of it in order to produce new insights and understanding regarding the phenomenon that is being investigated. Thus, understanding how our students feel about our teaching and assessment strategies is pivotal for our own reflection in and on practice. Furthermore, Light, Cox and Calkins[17]

argue that reflection on teaching and learning practices is part and parcel of core academic and professional activities within an institution.Christodoulou [24]asserts that reflective practice (RP), although a multifaceted term, is regarded as a means by which teachers can develop a greater level of self-awareness of practice, an awareness that creates opportunities for enhancing teacher quality learning through professional growth and development.

On the category of self-discovery of learning personal weaknesses and strengths, one of the students writes: "*Referencing was a bit of a challenge for me as I have never used any referencing methods in my entire academic life.*" At a postgraduate level, we took it for granted that students would have gone through some form of referencing techniques in their undergraduate studies. It was for us irrational for a student who is pursuing his/her third qualification not to be familiar with the Harvard or APA referencing techniques. We had, however, at the beginning of the semester, advised students to stringently follow the university's referencing style in their assignments. Another student wrote: "*Academic writing was a challenge, before we start with the lectures, the lecturers should spend time and teach us how to write academically.*" The students had been told during classes that the university has a writing centre where they could go for assistance. However, it seems that most of the students did not make use of this service. This could also be attributed to the fact that mostof our students are employed and they may not have sufficient to visit the university library. It is important,however, that we find ways of assisting our students with the mastery of referencingtechniques. This is what Hall [25] refers to as pedagogical reflective practice, which essentially focuses on how we teach and the take action we take to improve any shortcomings, we may identify as a result of this reflection.

Regarding feedback on assignments, we did not find much in the 15 reflective journals, except for one student who wrote: "*I wish the lecturers could get rid of marking our assignments electronically because it takes too long to complete the marking.The lecturers should do away with submission of assignments through Turnitin because it prejudices my effort of getting the marks I deserve because it was hard to paraphrase some words.*"To improve our assessment and feedback strategies we take a cue from Lillis[26] who points out that written feedback is a one-way communication from teacher to student and not a dialogue between teacher and student. In the mass higher education system in the UK, for example, the author argues that students are not provided enough opportunities to query feedback from their teachers, resulting in erroneous understandings of the messages that teachers are trying to convey[5]. Furthermore, Ramnarayan and Hande[22] suggest that in providing feedback, the teacher should make the right judgments about the evidence of the student's effortin comparison to the expected standard of performance. These judgments should be presented in a manner that reinforces rather than diminishes the learner's self-concept as a self-directed person[27].As Fullana, Pallisera, Colomer, Pena and Pėrez-Burie[28]noted, educators engage in awide range of assessment activities, and keeping them objective is a challenging task.

Most of the students' reflective journals seem to point to the support offered by the lecturers. One student wrote: "*The lecturer dedicated time into giving me fundamental knowledge about the subject.*" One student also wrote: "*The support and guidance we got was overwhelming.*" Bone [29] suggests that learning experiences for adult learners should: (a) "actively involve the learners in a process aimed at resolving learner needs and concerns"; (b) "be characterised by supportive and collaborative instructor-learner relationships"; and (c) "develop learners' capacity for managing their learning". For Ramnarayan and Hande[22], the main purpose of education isamongst others, to help our students develop skills of inquiry and reflection, so that they are able to apply these skillsin different contexts of their lives. Skiff [30] suggests thatreflection is a voluntary process of learning in which learners, take responsibility for planning and evaluating their own learning efforts.In other words, the learner takes: (i) the initiative to pursue a learning experience, and (ii) the responsibility for completing their learning.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers adhered to the ethical considerations of the Vaal University of Technology. For the researchers, ethical practice meant that we respect and protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality of the documents(their reflective journals) [12]. Ethics included confidentiality of data to issues of anonymity [31]. The confidentiality of information sourced from the reflective journals was ensured and the anonymity of the students was

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respected. Harm to research participants was avoided at all costs [12].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In our schema, reflective practice accentuates teacher inquiry which is critical if we are committed to improving the quality and depth of learning in the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Educationprogramme. Reflection in and on our teaching practices is also essential for our students as adult learners. From our students' reflective journals, we have learned that no matter how smart we may think we are, there are always areas for improvement. We should thus be able to acknowledge our weaknesses so that we can grow professionally and provide better learning conditions for our students. We have also realised the significance ofincorporating reflective learning and reflective practice in our modules, taking into consideration contextual factors that influence learning either positively or negatively. We believe that, reflection is a perfect tool for self-judgement, self- scrutiny, self- correction and self-improvement. This study recommends that guided reflective practice be introduced in the majority of programmes offered at the institution. This study also recommends that within postgraduate studies at the university, students should be taught about reflective practice and how to connect this to critical engagement with content knowledge. Whilst it is useful to point at what teachers have not been able to offer, it is imperative that a level of maturity is demonstrated regarding individual accountability for learning at a postgraduate level.

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