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Reflection as a strategy to improve management practice: Insights from management education

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Orientation: This study examines the role of reflection as a learning strategy for management students and how this process can contribute to developing a cadre of useful and effective managers.

Research purpose: Using data from MBA student work, the aim of the study was to explore reflection as a pedagogical strategy to enhance management practice within an emerging market context.

Motivation for the study: The development of more rigorous, thoughtful and decision-focussed management is among the challenges facing organisations in South Africa. Within management education, reflection is seen as a potential strategy to address this issue.

Research approach, design and method: This qualitative study sampled 513 students' reflective assignments. Students were given an individual task as a deliberate strategy to reflect on their own learning and provide insight on the benefits and challenges of the process. Coding was conducted along thematic lines.

Main findings: The findings showed that students gained self-awareness and insight into their own management and organisational practices. Their application of concepts, tools and techniques was also enhanced, as was their understanding of working with others.

Practical implications: Personal growth, transformation and development in terms of current and future management roles were all outcomes of the reflective process. Skills such as probing, analysing and synthesis – all essential to managers – are encouraged through a reflective mindset.

Contribution: The findings of this study indicated that a deeper understanding and improved clarity of management and organisational practices ensued as an outcome of the reflective process.

Introduction

The potential for using reflection to improve understanding or provide further insight for management students has been suggested for some time (Inamdar & Roldan 2013; Kayes 2002; Mintzberg 2004, 2011; Raelin 2001; Reid & Anderson 2012). The practice is even more important when coupled with the intent to encourage critical thought within increasingly complex organisational environments in an emerging market context. In this article, I discuss the use of reflection as a pedagogical strategy for Master of Business Administration (MBA) students and examine how reflection and reflective practice can contribute to developing a cadre of useful and effective managers. Management education needs more than theoretical competence combined with insight from practice. If we agree with Rousseau (2012:616) that 'the greatest opportunity to fundamentally change management lies in the education of new generations of management', then the educational space needs to allow for this change. The experience in the classroom should encourage students to contemplate, shift their perspectives and increase their capabilities to describe and explain their decisions and actions. The kind of manager that a business school should produce needs to be able to 'reflect upon different ways of knowing and understanding their own conditions as South Africans in a transnational world' (Nkomo 2015:27). Reflection is thus positioned as an increasingly valuable skill for managers. Coupled with findings that those who develop reflective skills have enhanced learning capacity (Fullana *et al.* 2016; Lombardo & Eichinger 2000), this establishes the importance of using reflection as a pedagogical tool within management education.

Reflection: Concepts and perspectives

"Reflection" has been described as an active and on-going consideration of our beliefs and knowledge (Dewey 1991); an exploration of our experiences (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 2005); and a form of purposeful mental processing (Moon 2004). Reflection may also be used to integrate

theory with practice (Mezirow 1991); broaden perspectives through interrogating ambiguous conditions (Kayes 2002); achieve self-understanding (Marsick 1988; Ryan & Ryan 2013); and improve academic performance (Lew & Schmidt 2011; Tsingos, Bosnic-Anticevich & Smith 2015). It is also considered helpful in transitioning classroom practice to the work environment (Francis & Cowan 2008; Heel, Sparrow & Ashford 2006). These explanations suggest that reflection has the potential to enhance our understanding, to provide new meanings and insights and to speak to issues central to the development of managers within an emerging market context.

Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action

There are a number of different forms of reflection. These include reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön 1983). Reflection-in-action is a process whereby individuals indulge in mindful, in-the-moment reflection to deal with challenges and ambiguities occurring in the present time. It involves individuals thinking about what they are doing while they are doing it. Reflection-on-action, the focus of this paper, is well described by Raelin (2001:11) as 'the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning [of] what has recently transpired'. This typically occurs after an event as a retrospective act and is consciously undertaken. This form of reflection is not without criticism. Dohn (2011) suggests that this form of detached reflection can create secondary representational practices, while Fenwick (2009) is concerned with the static and separate nature of the process. These concerns can be offset through the promotion of double-loop learning.

Double-loop learning involves reflecting on our actions, analysing such knowledge and exploring our assumptions and theories-in-use (Argyris 2002). This form of learning results in new insights and a shift in values and assumptions. Brockbank and McGill (1998) advocate double-loop learning for postgraduate students. Within the management education context, this form of learning would enable students to have a more critical perspective regarding their roles in the workplace and would promote the ability to acquire new information, to critique and, over the long term, to potentially diminish any dysfunctional behaviours.

Encouraging student reflection in management education

Several scholars support the need for critical reflection among students (Boud *et al*. 1985; Rarieya 2005; Schön 1987), highlighting that self-reflection has, at its heart, the intention to improve student learning, encourage critical thought (Francis & Cowan 2008; Mezirow 1991; Reid & Anderson 2012) and stimulate deep-level learning outcomes (Garcia 2010). Indeed, as Cranton and Carusetta (2004) explain, self-reflection speaks to encouraging student authenticity. Reflective practice is regarded as an essential managerial competence as the work environment grows increasingly complex (Hibbert 2012; Mintzberg 2004). Management

students need to learn to be more thoughtful and aware, make meaningful connections between what they do and how and what they learn, and see the potential for active and ongoing learning. Reflection has the potential to develop a new understanding of the world and an ability to change management practice. In essence, the management student should critique his or her own taken-for-granted assumptions and become more receptive to different ways of thinking, being and behaving (Gray 2007). This occurs when, during reflection, we examine our experiences and the way in which we act, respond and learn (Pavlovich, Collins & Jones 2009; Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper 2001; Wong 2016).

The process of reflection is quite complex and personal, as Daudelin (1996:39) explains:

> When a person engages in reflection, he or she takes an experience from the outside world, brings it inside the mind, turns it over, makes connections to other experiences, and filters it through personal biases. If this process results in learning, the individual then develops inferences to approach the external world in a way that is different from the approach that would have been used, had reflection not occurred.

Several authors have suggested that reflection occurs along a depth continuum, ranging from fairly shallow description to more nuanced levels (Bell *et al*. 2011; Grossman 2008). Indeed, as Nolan and Sim (2011) argue, the process of completing a reflective task does not in itself ensure that reflection extends beyond the descriptive or that it does indeed take place. Other criticisms note that the depth of student engagement with the task affects the levels of complexity, depth and criticality (Hibbert 2012; Kreber & Castleden 2009). These statements indicate that the ability for self-reflection is unlikely to be innate for many and thus students need to be assisted to develop this capacity. Moon (2006) believes that, if the reflective task is purposeful and requires students to exhibit evidence of learning or behavioural shifts, then it is more likely to engage students. This raises the role of the educator in the process. For reflective practice within the management education sphere to be effective, some form of scaffolding of the process (Carrington & Selva 2010; McIntosh 2010) is required to develop appropriate cognitive capacities and to encourage a shift in reactions and behaviours.

Methods
Research context

A paired assignment, an assessment required on one of the core courses on the MBA programme, provided an opportunity to facilitate a reflective exercise. For this assignment, students were randomly assigned to pairs. They completed a company investigation on a self-chosen area of people management over a 6-week period. The pair were expected to compile a 12-page report on the process that included problem identification, a literature review, data collection, analysis and a set of practical but theoretically supported recommendations. Following Hedberg (2009), I assigned an individual reflective task as a deliberate strategy to extend the students' cognitive repertoire. Students were

required to complete a one-page reflective note at the completion of the assignment to reflect on their own learning and provide some insight on the benefits and challenges of the paired process. In order to ensure engagement with the individual reflective assignment, credits were allocated to the task. The task itself was structured in a way that allowed students to describe their individual experiences and to work through feelings that might have shaped their interpretations, with the purpose of making sense of new learning and insights (Boud, Keogh & Walker 2005). In particular, I wanted to avoid students following a checklist through a predetermined set of questions, as this ran the risk of the reflective process being understood as linear, completed mechanically and remaining uncritical (Boud & Walker 1998).

Ethical considerations

Students were approached to participate in the study after the assessment process for the course was completed and their marks had been communicated to them. Therefore no student felt compelled to be part of the study. As part of the ethical process, students were approached via an email request to participate in the study. A total of 66 students declined to participate. The extracts used to illustrate the various themes in the findings have all been assigned pseudonyms. Thus no student can be identified and their confidentiality is respected. Ethical permission was granted by the university within which the students were based at the time of the study.

Data analysis

The reflective papers of 513 students across eight cohorts spanning 4 years were analysed. Each anonymous paper was between one and a half and three pages in length. Each paper was reviewed using a thematic analysis technique drawn from Ryan and Bernard (2003). This ensured some flexibility in data coding. Given that the data were in qualitative form, each 'unit of meaning' was identified through key storylines in each student dataset. Although time-consuming, to ensure reliability of the analytic process and thus the emerging themes, I trained two raters, who revisited the student papers and coded independently. We discussed any differences and revised categories and recoded extracts where appropriate. Using these methods, I then clustered extracts from the data under significant thematic categories. Categories developed quantitatively as I subsequently looked at the frequency of responses to determine the overarching themes.

Results and discussion

Several key themes emerged from the data, with the most significant ones discussed in this section. The first was insight into self and own management practice; the second was enhanced insight into organisational practice; the third was the application of concepts, tools and techniques; and the final theme was working with others. Table 1 shows the number of student comments per theme. As the majority of

TABLE 1: Student response categorisation.

Theme	Number and percentage of student comments
Insight into self and own management practice	479 (31.1%)
Improved insight into organisational practices	443 (28.8%)
Application of management concepts, tools and techniques	364 (23.7%)
Working with others	251 (16.3%)

Source: Author's own work

the sample made several observations regarding their insights and learning areas, the percentages shown relate to the sum of comments made rather than the number of student papers.

Insight into self and own management practice

Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the assignment task, the most frequently mentioned theme in the reflection papers indicated a level of self-insight and enhanced awareness of the student's current or future management practices. Insight into these aspects was seen in the following comments:

'As a leader of the organisation I have been complicit in the performance management practices and was a part of the disconnected senior management. I have learned that the opinions of all employees count and that I need to listen more.' (Participant 355)

'I realised that I will never know it all and that only the willingness to expand my horizon and to evaluate my management style against different situations will continue to make learning possible.' (Participant 162)

'Having critically analysed the management practices at the organisation made me realise the important qualities I need to possess in order to be an effective leader.' (Participant 200)

'This process immediately got me reflecting on my own leadership style, and I was left recalling numerous occasions and incidents and thinking about whether I could have in fact acted differently to affect the result.' (Participant 15)

Students highlighted the importance of 'keeping an open mind' and being open to new ways of thinking and new ideas. This, they argued, would help them grow as people and ensure that they were continuously learning and improving themselves as managers.

'No matter how well you think you are doing things, if you look hard enough, you will find a way to improve. You must then be willing to make those improvements and not be upset that someone has found fault in what you are already doing, and rather see it as an opportunity to learn and the chance to develop.' (Participant 367)

'I have made significant progress in being open to other people's suggestions and contributions. I have also made a good progress in developing trust and confidence in another's ability to do a good job. These are all skills needed in my job as a manager.' (Participant 248)

'One of the greatest challenges of this MBA is making sure you do not leave what you learn by the wayside, as you are simply too busy to think about how to implement it in your work and in your life – I was reminded of that again now. It's something I must remember to focus on for the duration of the programme or a lot of this effort will have been wasted.' (Participant 202)

'I will need to mature as a leader and being one means that I have learnt and will still continue to learn most of my competencies as a leader 'on the job' as I get exposed to different situations and circumstances.' (Participant 343)

These extracts reveal that students exhibited a level of awareness of their own leadership and management styles and were able to think about future actions where they might behave differently. I would argue that this shows that double-loop learning can be encouraged in management students through a reflective writing exercise.

Improved insight into organisational practices

In the second most cited aspect in their reflections, students considered the benefits of a fresh view on practice:

'I feel I gained valuable insight into an organisation that I presumed I understood but did not.' (Participant 18)

'I always thought that the people management problems are faced by big multinational companies where maintaining communication is the biggest challenge. It never crossed my mind that a small organisation of six to seven employees would also face problems in communication and eventually people management issues.' (Participant 352)

'Conducting the investigation gave me the opportunity to learn what my colleagues feel about the firm and understand what are the intentions or lack thereof of certain systems and procedures. For example, it was eye opening to learn that the appraisal system was not really developed with the intention to drive performance but rather as an attempt to measure some components of performance.' (Participant 488)

The process of linking theory to practice in the assignment task triggered emotions and engaged students in an additional level of learning, as identified by Yorks and Kasl (2002):

'As I did the interviews I recognised information and knowledge that I had learnt in a very theoretical manner. When I saw it in practice it was invigorating.' (Participant 167)

'I have learned that solving real world problems is much more complex than solving a one or two dimensional case study in class.' (Participant 365)

'By just asking people their thoughts and opinions you are unlocking a world of knowledge from which to learn. This amazed me.' (Participant 402)

For the assignment, students could choose to investigate the practices of an organisation where they were employed or had been employed. The advantage of having a fresh perspective from a fellow student unacquainted with a context familiar to one of the pair proved invaluable:

'Having my partner and more importantly his biased/unclouded view of the organisation was hugely informative, enlightening and interesting. I believe that doing this project by myself I would have found it to be very difficult to come in with his fresh view.' (Participant 12)

'My partner acted as an excellent barometer during the analysis. She contributed learnings from her own organisation and advised which processes she considered valuable and which required revision. Furthermore, she helped identify possible improvement areas.' (Participant 297)

On occasion, students expressed the views that this experience was disconcerting and uncomfortable, citing trouble with remaining impartial and noting taken-for-granted assumptions about their organisations. In contrast, comparisons between organisations were inadvertently made at times, with students feeling fortunate to be working at their companies when learning of some of the challenges faced by their assignment partner.

Application of management concepts, tools and techniques

The third theme was that of applying concepts and techniques, not only from the core course but drawn from across the MBA programme. The ability to apply research tools and techniques was commonly cited, ranging from aspects such as questionnaire design, to focussing on the lengthy process of compiling a literature review and the presentation of findings:

'The most appealing aspect of this study was that I was able to relate the research methods being taught in class with practical experience.' (Participant 163)

'I learnt how important it was to structure questionnaires in a way that the answers flow from one to another.' (Participant 211)

'I need a lot more practice in conducting qualitative interviews before I undertake my dissertation.' (Participant 255)

'I had never really understood the value of a thorough literature review until this assignment.' (Participant 335)

'Combining all the literature to make an argument was challenging, but also very insightful.' (Participant 240)

'I enjoyed the analysis of the findings and grouping trends. My assignment partner is fairly handy with analysis tools in MS Excel and consequently I learnt one or two useful things which I will apply in my everyday presentations.' (Participant 419)

Students also described how their subject-specific knowledge had been enhanced through the assignment process:

'I learnt a huge amount about incentives and motivation; I otherwise would never have thought of sourcing articles to find evidence.' (Participant 363)

'I have had new insights in the topic of high-performance work practices and how these practices influence individual and organisational performance.' (Participant 58)

'The assignment significantly deepened my understanding of and around the subject of multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion.' (Participant 165)

'What I really understood after this assignment was that most people management problems can be eliminated through good internal communication, periodic training and development of staff, and engaging employees in decision making.' (Participant 285)

It would be surprising for students not to have experienced a deeper appreciation of the subject matter covered in the course curriculum. These extracts show that application of

classroom material encourages a deeper level of learning and allows students to develop meaning from their experience. As all the MBA students in the study had a minimum of 3 years' work experience and an undergraduate degree, it was also an opportunity to 'resuscitate buried skills' (Participant 222), with the assignment 'waking up long forgotten skills of research and literature reviews conducted 8 years ago during undergraduate and postgraduate degrees' (Participant 508).

Working with others

Due to the paired nature of the assessment, the students articulated various levels of anxiety regarding teamwork and collaboration. Students are accustomed to being assessed on their own efforts (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999) and are often expected to learn alone and compete rather than collaborate with their peers (Baldwin 2000). Furthermore, the tension regarding peer work is exacerbated within the context of competitive programmes like the MBA. The tension implicit in the process was, in the words of the students, 'quite nerve racking' (Participant 33) and 'approached with dread and anxiety' (Participant 406).

Even though the students were paired with their classmates, the random selection process meant that they were likely to be paired with someone other than friends or their traditional group members:

'My pair was a completely different person compared to what I initially thought. It was a great journey as I discovered a great person with a great life history and a completely different perspective. What a brilliant mind.' (Participant 216)

'Working with a partner made me realise that I was not as particular and detailed in my work as I had thought.' (Participant 140)

'My paired partner is very accommodating and would listen to my ideas and challenge me where appropriate. We sometimes had a difference of opinion on how to approach the paper, but each was mindful of the other and there was consensus before the document was finalised.' (Participant 389)

Although these were in the minority, some of the paired experiences were less than positive:

'My partner missed several deadlines to share critical components of the work that he had been responsible for, and as the quality of the work he had shared was not in my opinion of MBA standard, my trust in him quickly started waning.' (Participant 79)

'I have always believed (and have been told) that I work very well with people. Unfortunately, I realised during this experience that while I work well with most people, some people do not work well together. Although I found it difficult to work with my pair, I reminded us both of our goal in order to keep focus.' (Participant 411)

Students developed various strategies in order to function optimally through utilising different effective ways of communication and identified the best method to address misconceptions and misunderstanding. For example, as Participant 362 reported, 'we split the work out between each other and the delegation process went well, better than it might have gone in such a situation'.

Implications

The intention of the reflective exercise was to critically prompt students to think about their experiences in completing an assignment with a partner. The research findings showed that students were able to reflect in varying degrees on a number of pertinent issues related to their actions, organisational realities, their managerial and leadership roles, and the process of working with a randomly selected partner. Although the references were quite generalised in some instances, students did refer to future practice and the intent to approach situations differently in the future.

As many authors have suggested, reflection has the capacity to reinforce learning; it can be argued for that alone it has the potential to be a useful pedagogical process. For students in the study, it allowed for personal growth, transformation and development especially in terms of their current and future management roles. The ability to self-manage is what Gosling and Mintzberg (2004) describe as 'the reflective mindset', which is the ability to see both ways: through their own behaviour and beyond the immediate condition. Completing the paired assignment allowed students an opportunity for the discovery of new knowledge and skills that changed their attitude about the way they intended to conduct themselves in the future, particularly in their managerial roles.

The MBA students gained renewed perspectives on practices within their own and other organisations. Beyond assisting managers with making sense of their own experiences, this exposure builds new knowledge and leadership competency that can only benefit both managers and their organisations. Many students spoke about the fresh look at current organisational practices through both the data collection process and in reviewing how literature portrayed the concepts. This enabled students to see things in a different light and observe their organisations' shortcomings as well as the areas in which they excelled. The emotive aspects of reflection also surfaced through student descriptions where drive, willingness, passion, involvement and motivation were all mentioned.

A deeper understanding and improved clarity of the subject matter being learnt across the programme was expressed by a large percentage of the students. Although this kind of reflection has been described by Hedberg (2009) as a basic kind of learning, it can kick-start the reflective process and is therefore essential. Ultimately, active application is vital to both learning and retention of key concepts, tools and techniques (Ryan 2013; Townsend, Linder & Williams 2005). What becomes clear is that MBA students in this study were able to apply techniques taught in the classroom in a real-world setting, thereby enhancing their understanding and usage of these skills.

The experience of working with a partner in an assessed piece of academic work places strain on the relationship, as several of the students noted. However, for many others, this form of collaboration yielded unexpected insights into the student's own abilities and personality as well as awareness of the role of the other. Where students learn from and with each other in an academic milieu, skills such as teamwork, communication and cooperation are promoted. These benefits can also offset the possible limitations inherent in the reflective process. Although Seibert and Daudelin (1999) say that there is a tendency towards single-loop learning for managers even when they are made aware of this inclination, Cardno (2007) notes that these skills can be learnt, practised and productively applied by those in leadership positions. In the case of the MBA students in the study, I would argue that the experience of the peer assessment moderated the tendency to engage in single-loop learning and promoted the full potential of double-loop learning.

Limitations

Two criticisms of this study can be made. The first concerns the obligatory nature of the reflection exercise. As some authors claim, the process cannot be imposed, as higher-order cognitive processes and a level of complexity are required; however as Coulson and Harvey (2013) and McIntosh (2010) suggest, reflection can be taught though careful scaffolding and support. The reflection task designed for these students satisfied Boud and Walker's (1998) proposal regarding non-mechanical, non-linear and critical processes and thus an attempt was made to address this aspect through avoiding a checklist for students to follow. The second drawback of the study relates to the first. It should be acknowledged that as the reflective exercise was an explicit assessment requirement, this may have caused some students to simply comply with the task on a superficial level. Here I would submit that not assessing the task could have sent the message that the student effort was not being recognised appropriately. Frequent comments in their reflective papers showed students being appreciative of the exercise in terms of the opportunity to document their own learning.

Conclusion

Business schools need to create an environment that encourages reflection through probing, analysing, synthesising and struggling with issues (Albert & Grzeda 2015; Gosling & Mintzberg 2004). This ensures that management learning and teaching is supplemental to students' own experiences. As educators we should subscribe to and promote contemplative learning processes such as reflection. Shifting the tacit self-knowledge of students into concrete plans for improvement has the potential to increase the value gained from the learning process (Mavin & Roth 2014; Smith & Pilling 2007; Thompson & Pascal 2012). What the findings of this study suggest is that MBA students who do critically reflect show more application of classroom concepts and techniques, more engagement with the task, are able to critique their own management identity and practices, and appear to be more present in and aware of their learning processes. If we wish to encourage critical thought and

to acknowledge how essential that would be in developing more rigorous, thoughtful and decision-focussed management in South Africa, then the double-loop learning implicit in the reflection process should be encouraged. This compels management educators to create learning opportunities where managers begin to grasp the importance of rethinking why and how they lead. It is a messy, ambiguous and hectic world that managers inhabit and those who practise reflection and know how to learn from their own experiences are better placed to deal with this environment (Mintzberg 2011). We need to share the concepts and techniques of reflection with our students as the practice is an essential tool in the pedagogical process that supports on-going management development (Hedberg 2009). These skills are even more desirable within South African organisations given the current challenges of transformation, change and developmental priorities.

Acknowledgements

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