

SLAIHEE Newsletter

Volume 1, Number 1

Edited by Suki Ekaratne

Material from this Newsletter may be used with due acknowledgement.
Opinions expressed are personal to the author/s.

Contents

**Reflective Practice – a useful tool in our professional life by
Nilukshi Abeyasinghe** (pages 1 to 2)

**Harnessing staff development for raising accountability in our
universities and for national development – some sabbatical
experiences by Suki Ekaratne** (pages 3 to 6)

.....

Reflective Practice – a useful tool in our professional life

by Nilukshi Abeyasinghe
Faculty of Medicine
University of Colombo

What is reflective practice?

A part of any learning process involves thinking about what you are doing. **Reflective practice is an activity in which people recapture their learning experiences, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it** (Boud *et al* 1985).

It involves thinking critically about one's actions, feelings, interpretations and judgements from the perspective of an external observer with a view to improving one's professional practice.

In reflective practice, **reflection** forms the basis for the essential part of the learning process because it results in making sense of or

extracting meaning from the experience (Osterman 1990).

This process of experiential learning was first popularised by Kolb who described four elements in a never-ending spiral of learning.

- a) Concrete experience
- b) Observation and reflection on that experience on a personal basis
- c) Formulation of abstract concepts – application of known theories of learning to it or formulating general rules describing the experience
- d) Active experimentation – testing after modifying the next occurrence of the experience

This in turn would lead to the next concrete experience. Kolb and Fry (1975) pointed out that the learning cycle

could begin at any one of the four points.

An important part of reflective practice is to keep a reflective journal of what you reflect on. Journaling enables you to write down your thinking processes at that time, and have it as a permanent record to be reviewed whenever you want. It will also help you to develop reflective learning into a life-long experience.

Practical steps to engaging in reflective practice: -

1. Think about a learning experience you have had. It could be a lecture you gave to students, a practical class conducted by you, a presentation you made to a professional group, a workshop to develop your professional skills, where

you were a resource person or a participant etc.

2. Recall key important events in that experience – a series of questions as given below may help you to focus in on the event:

What did I do? – *e.g.* introducing a new lecture on professional behaviour into the existing course content

Why did I do what I did? – *e.g.* many allegations exist about the behaviour of professionals in this field, and their poor relationship with other professionals. I also believe that good behaviour needs to be taught

How did I do what I did? – *e.g.* I started by highlighting the importance of such a lecture in the light of existing problems within the field. I next focussed on areas where there was a deficiency in professional relationships and the problems that ensued as a result. I also suggested solutions to addressing these problems and the positive results that could come about as a result of this

When did I do what I did? – *e.g.* I felt this would be appropriate to undergraduate students who were still in training. This would enable them to take the necessary action when they qualified into such professionals.

Think about both the positive and negative results that took place

What happened as a result? – *e.g.* an evaluation

revealed that students were very appreciative of the lecture. Two final-year students in an article to the newspaper said that they had been taught professional behaviour within our module as well. A senior colleague who read my handout wrote me a letter of congratulation saying that this was a long-felt need in our module. I was also invited to give a lecture on ‘Professionalism and ethics’ in another teaching stream.

These results were all positive. If there had been any negative ones, I would have had to focus on how I would try to eliminate them the next time

3. What did I learn from this experience?

This is where application of theories of learning comes in. *e.g.* “Addressing **attitudinal outcomes** is important if there are attitudinal qualities we hope to have in our graduating students. Very often students will not have the same or desired attitudes when they start a course. The aim in such a lecture would be to move students **away from** one attitude and **towards** another” (Newble and Cannon 1994)

4. Active experimentation – How has all that I have learnt by evaluating the experience helped to change my approach to what I will do in the future?

What do I intend to do next? – *e.g.* incorporate

behavioural aspects of professional practice into some of my other lectures as well.

Once you decide what to do and test it, that becomes the next concrete experience and the cycle can be repeated all over again.

References:

Boud, D., Keogh and Walker, D. (1985) Reflection. Turning experience into learning, London: Kogan Page.

Kolb, D.A. and Fry, R. (1975) ‘Towards an applied theory of experiential learning.’ In: C. Cooper (ed) Theories of group process, London: John Wiley. In: Smith, M.K. (2001) [on-line] ‘Learning theory’, the encyclopaedia of informal education. <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-learn.htm>

Newble, David and Cannon, Robert (1994). A handbook for medical teachers. 3rd ed. Lancaster: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Osterman, K.F. (1990) “Reflective Practice: a new agenda for education.” Education and urban society 22, no.2, February 1990: 133-152. In: Imel, S. (1992) ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education Columbus OH [on-line] http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed346319.html

Harnessing staff development for raising accountability in our universities and for national development – some sabbatical experiences

by Suki Ekaratne

Staff Development Centre
University in Colombo

The government has to be congratulated in coming forward to defuse a smouldering social issue, which is that of the plight of unemployed graduates.

Having said that, I believe we must look inwards at ourselves and our universities, asking what we need to do so that the government need not be intervening like that for ever! After all, the universities should be reflectively-thinking organizations that reexamine themselves continuously in the light of inevitable and challenging realities. Are our universities serving the role of proactive ‘thinking and learning organisations’ to assist intellectual and national development, and in the imperatives of social cohesion? As is the case, should many of us continue to be oblivious to an outside world of dynamic and pressing change? Is it that we consider academics as not being ‘accountable’ to a world beyond the walls of our university?

There being a ‘lack of employment’ for graduates is one thing, but the Sri Lankan graduate being ‘unemployable’ is quite another, and overseas graduates do find ready employment in Sri Lanka! Of course, graduate employability is just one issue, brought more into the current spotlight through the recent IRQUE project.

Getting back to our university ‘accountability’, how is it that we can build this accountability, and what have other countries been doing in this regard? Can staff development help?

There is no doubt that our universities have changed, as for example in opening new universities, introducing new courses, making teacher training mandatory for new staff, ‘recognising’ teaching quality in academic staff, etc. However, are these serving the purpose/s for which these changes were designed, or have these become mere cosmetic exercises simply because we have not made the ground ready for these changes through adequate staff and institutional preparation, and because we continue to give the wrong signals to academic staff so that they erect perceptions that become incompatible with expectations of university function and management?

For example: we know that many departments of study in new universities in Sri Lanka are headed by junior inexperienced staff (due to improper forward planning), new courses are taught in subject-centric ways rather than for skills transfer (due to poor training in instructional design / preparation), newly recruited academics increasingly request for exemption from the mandated teacher training (due to training misperceptions in university management recommending such exemptions), even older universities continue to recruit inexperienced but favoured teaching staff over and above teachers with proven internationally recognised skills-transfer teaching qualifications (due to priority by interview board members for self-image appointments), the recognition accorded to research is far higher than for teaching excellence-although only teaching-learning interventions can even give us a hope to bring back our disintegrating society towards social cohesion. One can go on with regard to what the university management expects universities to righteously achieve whilst continuing to issue incompatible and wrong signals but let us get back to finding some practical ways in how we

can bring back 'accountability'.

Giving correct and matching signals for positioning, and reinforcing, the accountability outcomes we desire in HE assumes key importance if we are to realign the accountability role of HE in our social and economic development. In this regard, promoting (and recognizing) teacher effectiveness in developing student skills through university teaching has to become a key policy incentivising mechanism in the HE policy framework if we want to motivate university teachers to produce skilled graduates. Even in advanced nations, such as the USA, over 50% of staff in research universities thought that pressure to do research reduced teaching quality (Boyer 1990); such research focus may not be unjustified in advanced countries where research drives economies. Strangely, in Sri Lanka, research recognition is uniquely taken a step further, with cash awards being given to scientists for papers in international journals, irrespective of their applicability to our economy! Such cash benefit has even made some senior academics to divert teaching funds to their own research! These signals, encouraging unaccountability in Sri Lanka, show the pressing need to put the correct motivating signals in place.

Promotion of good skill-generating teaching, and the proper use of our meager teaching funds, could then emerge. Unless proper directional motivating signals are put in place by university policy makers to support skill-producing teaching, no amount of teacher training will induce academics to adopt ways for spending time and effort in unrewardingly pursuing skill-generating teaching, and the majority of academics will continue to remain 'unaccountable' to the world beyond the university precincts.

Building university accountability so that our products, the graduates, become life-long learners to fit into a knowledge economy and do not continue to languish in unemployment queues require further rethinking. One of the principal ways that many of us think will solve the unemployability issue is by introducing new courses, and that too spontaneously. Though this is possible in the short run, new courses will need to be invented as soon as specific job markets fill up with graduates from new courses, and doing it endlessly is practically impossible. This is also because it should take 2 to 3 years to train an academic to develop teaching materials and the expertise to design and teach a new course effectively. While advanced countries

shy away from offering unplanned spontaneous new courses, and engage themselves in carefully designing 'learning activities' (which is different from the 'syllabus') well in advance of offering a new course, they have found that academic accountability to build graduate life-skills lies more in HOW courses are taught rather than WHAT is taught.

For example, in designing the HOW aspect in a course, the key skill-outcomes that are to be developed would be first identified. Next, the activities in which the student will engage for developing the identified skills will be designed. The design of the testing of these skills will take place simultaneously, to enable student ranking according to the degree of competency to which skills are developed. Such a strategy, known as Constructive Alignment in curriculum design (Biggs, 1999), requires university teachers to invest considerable time and effort for instructional design. These design steps for effective teaching are taught through our teacher training courses at the Staff Development Centre (SDC) at Colombo University. Some US universities go further in their accountability responsibility, and the entire university embraces the building of key skills in students across all their university courses,

rather than restrict skills development to a specific course. While this approach is very laudable, it requires considerably more planning and coordination, as I was fortunate to experience during my recent US sabbatical stay (see 'Principles of Undergraduate Learning' example at <http://www.universitycollege.iupui.edu/UL/Principles.htm>).

A further word is merited with regard to teacher training courses and the development of accountability. While the nature of such courses could remain specific to the institution that runs them, courses need to be externally benchmarked, examined and accredited if such courses are to make us deliberate about our wider academic accountability. Even in UK, it is appreciated that "To achieve world class higher education teaching, it should become the norm for all permanent staff with teaching responsibilities to be trained on accredited programmes." ('Higher Education for the 21st Century', Dearing Report, 1997). We have found that such accreditation pressurises a course to raise accountability issues on a more holistic scale and to internalize them more effectively within our course participants. We have accordingly accredited the SDC teacher training course with the Staff & Educational Development Association of UK. Although SDC courses

take as long as ten months, many academics agree that such time investment is small when they realize that it could be the only training for academics to develop their civic accountability until their 65-year retirement age! They point out that our country has suffered enough socially and economically through mismatched undergraduate education delivered by impenitent academics, and that short circuiting this training is short-term thinking!

Another aspect that would develop accountability is to develop, and adopt, a teaching and learning strategy in our universities. Although Sri Lankan universities are yet to identify and develop such a teaching and learning strategy, the Council of Colombo University became much perturbed at the graduate employability and has involved me in such a strategic exercise that will involve considerable staff-student development and retooling.

Developing accountability also requires monitoring and assessing our performance, and staff can be developed to perceive performance appraisal as a supportive activity, rather than a punitive measure. For example, a recent staff survey by the SDC showed them to support teaching evaluation (Brock and Ekaratne, 2003). It also showed that 6 years of SDC

staff development work can develop accountability perceptions in university staff. Course evaluations, however, must be carefully carried out and simple 'popularity' course ratings by students may not always indicate teaching effectiveness. Students are very perceptive and will often flock to 'soft' courses that give them high grades, irrespective of skill-transfer effectiveness. For example, students nicknamed a teacher who was prolific in giving 'A' grades as 'the father of giving As' ('A *dun piya*'= Sinhala words), and flocked to his course, not realizing that memorizing a dictated note and sitting for his easy examinations did not bestow them with any skills to benefit their later working lives!

It must be remembered that it is the university staff that needs to be empowered if we are to change the nature and outcomes of university education, through changing their perceptions and skills for delivering greater university accountability. This is indeed achievable through appropriate staff development activities, but is necessarily not a rapid process, and it therefore urgently requires more than the limited resources that the university policy makers have so far allocated to staff development in our country. It is hoped that the exigency of such resource allocation for staff development be

recognized and deployed because “the health of higher education depends entirely on its staff, whether academic, professional or administrative. There is concern among staff that they have received neither the recognition, opportunities for personal development, nor the rewards which their contribution over the last decade merits. Over the next 20 years, the roles of staff are likely to change, as they undertake different combinations of functions at different stages of their careers. To support and prepare staff for these new working patterns, more focused and appropriate training and staff development activities will be needed” (Dearing Report, UK, 1997). This was in the UK, where the White Paper

on Higher Education adopted by the British Parliament has voted considerable resources for staff development. Perhaps it is timely for university leadership here to ponder as to when we need to make similar changes happen in Sri Lanka, and whether we should learn from the higher education experiences of other countries. Sri Lanka HE is fortunate in hosting the next World Education Conference in June 2006, and we should then be able to report the progress HE staff development has made in Sri Lanka.

References;

Biggs J 1999 Teaching for quality learning at university. SRHE and OU Press.

Brock, GW and Ekaratne, S.U.K. 2003 (October) Perceptions of Research Misconduct at a South Asian University. Annual meeting of the Society for Research Administrators, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Dearing Report 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997 (available online at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/education/ncihe/>)

(Note: following the Dec 2005 tsunami, the 2006 World Education Conference was shifted to UK – see <http://iced2006.shu.ac.uk>)
