PROGRESSIO

Self-assessment and self-reflection in higher and distance education: Existential reflections

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Abstract

This article explores and describes the value of self-assessment and self-reflection reports of adult learners as an integral part of non-venue linked portfolio assignments and examinations in the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa. The study is based on a qualitative content analysis of the approximately 9 000 typed or written reports submitted in the module *Communication Research* during 2002–2006. The results illustrate the extent to which continuous practice of applying self-assessment and self-reflection becomes an integral part of learning in higher and distance education on a personal, cognitive, social and critical level.

INTRODUCTION

In 2002 portfolio examinations for final-year undergraduate BA Communication Science learners (NQF level 6) were introduced in the module *Communication Research*. These portfolio examinations require learners to submit a portfolio containing three research tasks in *lieu* of the examination, plus a self-assessment and a self-reflection report based on each of these three research tasks.

MAIN RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RELATED ISSUES

The main research problem is to conduct a qualitative content analysis to explore and describe the value of adult learners' self-assessment and self-reflection as an integral part of formative and summative assessment in higher and distance education. The following five contextual issues related to the research problem need to be explicated:

The teaching/learning approach applied in the module

The planning and design of the learning materials are based on a holistic approach, rooted in a learning and transactional paradigm, plus reflective practice. According to the learning paradigm (as opposed to an instructional paradigm), the aim is to enable learners to take co-responsibility for their own learning. In terms of this learning paradigm, there is not one correct answer to questions, or one prescribed way in which to execute learning experiences and any answer which demonstrates the achievement of the learning outcomes formulated, is approved (Barr and Tagg 1995, 20).

When study material is planned, structured and written according to the transactional paradigm, its aim is to enable and encourage learners to actively interact with the learning material, values, constructs and meaning bases. The study material becomes an extension of the role of the lecturer as facilitator. In-text questions and activities are learner-centred and practical research tasks are learner-controlled. The prescribed study material contains interactive texts, skill-building activities and tasks, as well as questions that require a critical review. The learning outcomes formulated for each study unit in fact act as a means of self-assessment.

The teaching aims of the module are to equip learners with the theoretical knowledge and practical research skills (techniques and methods), attitudes and competencies to write a research proposal; to conduct research of diverse communication problems and issues; and to evaluate research reports published in accredited journals.

The strategies of evaluation (examination)

Learners' content knowledge is evaluated on the basis of recognition, free recall and aided recall. Recognition refers to the learners' ability to make an appropriate selection from different options (e.g. selecting a stratified random sample as sampling technique when conducting a communication audit). Free recall takes place when learners describe information or events that they have experienced or to which they have been exposed. Aided recall involves the formulation of questions (aids) to which learners have to formulate answers or responses, without being offered a list of options (e.g. conducting motivational research to prepare the message content of an advertisement, requires invention or development of a new or original product or service).

The evaluation of learners' portfolios is not only based on the measurement (ratings)

of knowledge content. Higher intellectual skills (to think creatively and analytically, do research, solve problems, resolve issues, evaluate and reflect) are also assessed.

Formative assessment

The assignment research tasks focus on planning and reporting on research studies and not on the actual implementation thereof. Through formative assessment lecturers guide and, if necessary, correct judgmental errors.

Summative assessment

Summative assessment rates the completed research studies submitted as a portfolio and are driven by the learning outcomes set for the syllabus, as well as methodological criteria which research studies are required to meet. Performance indicators as assessment criteria are given upfront and learners know which criteria will be applied in the ratings of their portfolios.

Criteria for effective evaluation (examination)

The evaluative approach applied in this subject is essentially criterion-referenced assessment, whereby the learners' evidence of performance is measured (rated) against specified methodological criteria. Learners are provided with a grid of 18 or more criteria, with a 5-point ratings scale for the assessment of each of the criteria. The same grid and ratings scale are used by lecturers in their assessments.

Grids with criteria specified for each research task have four advantages; viz. the identification of the criteria translates the learning outcomes to be achieved into measurable entities – internal validity. This has a beneficial effect on the lecturer (for the construction of study material and on the teaching process), and on the learner (providing clarification as to how the achievement of learning outcomes will be assessed and serving as guidance during the learning process) – reliability. Secondly, the assessment of the learners' performance as a whole, based on the assessment of each criterion, promotes the accuracy of assessment – objectivity. Thirdly, in the case of formative assessment, learners receive feedback in the form of a structured evaluation, which corresponds with the criteria they were given from the outset – fairness and utility. Fourthly, such a structured grid of criteria contributes to the development of their ability to conduct a self-assessment. An additional advantage has been found in the utility of such structured criteria in post-summative assessment discussions between lecturers and learners, especially those who have failed the examination.

Non-venue linked portfolio evaluation (examination)

Non-venue linked portfolio examinations reduce examination anxiety experienced by learners, and the introduction thereof was prompted by three arguments:

1   A two-hour (venue linked) written examination tests learners' ability in only a portion of the subject content covered in the syllabus.
2   The nature of the subject content requires that learners be able to demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge by means of independent research and applications.
3   The more comprehensive coverage of syllabus content promotes a more reliable and valid diagnosis and assessment of learners' strengths and weaknesses.

By conducting research projects on a small scale, learners are enabled to acquire knowledge, develop as competent communicators and acquire critical orientations. None of UNISA's traditional 2-hour essay-type examinations enable learners to, for example, demonstrate their ability to conduct interviews, or how to fulfil a tolerant, yet pivotal role as a moderator when solving reconstruction and development problems by means of focus-group interviews in a community.

Self-assessment and self-reflection

Reflective practice means that learners are encouraged to reflect on and assess their own choices, decisions, ideas, reasons, research designs and procedures according to the objectives, learning outcomes and constraints of each research task they undertake. It is assumed that such self-assessment and self-reflection can expand and influence learners' choices in the midst of doing the research task, or can serve as guidance as to how future research studies can be improved or undertaken in a different manner.

Critical thinking (thinking which is based on reasoning and evaluation) and a constructivist approach to learning are integral parts of self-reflective behaviour. In this module such thinking forms the basis of problem identification and assessment; identification of different courses of action and compiling an appropriate action plan; implementation of the research design or plan of action, and assessment, for example, of a research article. A constructivist approach to adult learning on a higher level is based on the assumption that learners actively construct their own meaning on the basis of their interaction with people, problems, experiences and different situations in the environment. The approach also assumes that adult learners come from diverse backgrounds, interests and past experiences on which they build to *construct* new meanings.

Reflective practices make provision for several sources of meaning, or ways of knowing, which can contribute to learners' knowledge base. These are knowing theories as generalisations of a particular phenomenon; tenacity as a way of knowing, based on the assertion that something is true (or false), based on the perception that learners believe it is true (or false); the *a priori* way of knowing; empirical and experiential ways of knowing.

The above paradigms and sources of meaning share four important educational requirements for learners in higher and distance education. They underline the importance of learners becoming actively involved with the learning materials; shift the focus and

aim from instruction or teaching to learning; provide a link between learning content and practical research studies; and promote critical thinking through self-reflection by providing learners with experiences, which require judgmental and evaluative actions.

Self-assessment and self-reflection activities are based on both the content of the work, the nature of tasks that require the application of different research methods, as well as their responses to self-review questions. Such review questions must be valid and relate to the learning outcomes that the learner is expected to achieve.

GOAL, OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The goal of this study is applied research because it aims at investigating practical issues; viz. an analysis of learners' expressions and formulations (existential reflections) in their self-assessments and self-reflections. The objectives are exploratory and descriptive. Exploratory objectives focus on obtaining new insights into learners' expressions, while descriptive objectives focus on *what?* (learners report) and *how?* (they use reasoning and thinking skills).

The analysis specifically investigates these research questions:

1   What have they learnt (what knowledge have they gained) by doing the portfolio task?
2   What skills, abilities and orientations (attitudes and values) have they accomplished?
3   Which strengths could they apply in their future life and work environment?
4   Which shortcomings do they need to address in future?
5   To what extent have they achieved the learning outcomes formulated for each study unit?

Additional research questions arose from the theoretical postulations described below and as the analysis progressed.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

According to social identity theory (Lee and Nass 2004, 207) self-conception consists of the two components: social identity (self-descriptions that are related to group identity) and personal identity (self-descriptions that are related to personality traits and individual attributes). The above theory prompts the following additional research questions: Is there evidence of associations with fellow learners that belong to the same learners group? Having been labelled as a group and sharing a common research goal, does the process of social identification take place? Given the premise that different situations will prompt different self-schemata, is there evidence that learners mainly respond in terms of their personal levels of identity?

The following hierarchy of progressively demanding questions are posited and used as additional criteria to determine the intent of the learners' reports:

1   Is the intent of the report to prevent a negative reaction from the assessor/ lecturer?
2   Does the report reflect an awareness (recognition, reconstitution and recall) of having behaved in a particular way?
3   Does the report serve as judgement on whether having behaved in a particular manner was appropriate?
4   Does the report express a substantiated motivation (desire) to behave in a particular (different) way in future?
5   What has the learner learnt by having carried out the research task?

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

Research design

The research design of this study is mainly qualitative, and allows for theoretical triangulation in that the same verbal/descriptive data can be analysed from two or more theoretical and conceptual perspectives. The analytical procedures applied are flexible as they are guided by specific research questions and assumptions, and are adapted during the content analysis. The main focus in a qualitative research design, or what McQuail (2000, 49) refers to as 'an alternative paradigm', is to provide a qualitative, but yet authentic, (re-)construction of learners' experiences and to discover reality *through their eyes*.

Research method and data collection

A qualitative content analysis increases the relevance of research – it focuses on learners' experiences from their individual perspectives and provides an in-depth view of the motivations, perceptions, feelings, attitudes, insights gained and ideas behind learners' behaviour.

The target population consists of approximately 9 000 self-assessment and self-reflection reports submitted by approximately 3 000 learners. The extent (or time dimension) is longitudinal as the data was collected over a four-year period. The reports are treated as learning products, which – when combined with a critical view of the teaching/learning process – are regarded as reliable sources of data for the purposes of the research reported in this article.

The population parameters are learners' reports, presented in English or Afrikaans. The units of analysis are individual reports, which are further delineated into sentences. Individual sentences are a form of 'disembodied language' (Lee and Nass 2004, 183) that yields the readers' imagination of the virtual *speaker* (author), based on linguistic

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clues in the writing. These clues include, among others, the different types of statements and thematic content.

DATA ANALYSIS

The critical reading and re-reading of the verbal (typed/written) reports included the formulation of an analytical scheme of pre-coded content analysis categories guided by the research and conceptual questions posed above, as well as different categories of reasoning and thinking skills. The analytical scheme makes provision for construct validity, as it is based on both content-related evidence and criterion-related evidence. The analytical procedure is adapted as the process develops, especially regarding the analysis of themes.

The analytical procedure is flexible and the reliability and validity of the analytical scheme is promoted by considering the factors that influence equivalence; viz. the communicative roles fulfilled by learners; the communicative contexts; the conceptual content and types of statements made.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The illustrative examples below are responses made by learners with regard to the first five research questions.

1   **What have they learnt (what knowledge have they gained) by doing the portfolio task?**

- This was an eye-opener, I had to cope with the real world.
- I can assess my own learning but I don't know if it's fair.
- I have learned that published articles are not always accurate.
- Behaviour patterns of black persons sitting down without being asked, or of their strong hand shake being too aggressive, does not impede effective communication.
- I have learnt a lot about the language diversity in my community and how to apply the uses and gratifications theory in a survey.
- The company policy does not meet the requirements as set out in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (no 75 of 1997).
- The advertisements in these magazines rely heavily on stereotypes that are very out of date and therefore, may be insulting to a potential buyer reading the magazine.
- I have learnt that it is essential to research the target market in order to position the product accurately in the market.
- There is poor communication among employees of Telkom (East London) because of the absence of universal cultural norms, and because of different values and attitudes in the work environment.

- In below-the-line marketing it's advisable for the coordinators to be correctly trained in order for them to function effectively as "teachers" of a brand.
- I have realised the importance of conducting a communication audit to measure the effectiveness of an organisation's internal communication, for example the finding that the majority of the employees do not read the weekly newsletter, mainly because it focuses on top management.
- I have learned that it is easy for an author to be a victim of plagiarism.
- If parents were made aware of the impact of their positive parenting, they could be building these children's self-esteem.

Responses indicate that knowledge gained is related to personal experiences. Most of the learners based such knowledge specifically on their research findings. These examples illustrate how learners fulfil two communicative roles. They formulate their self-reflection from the perspective of a participant (expressing their intrapersonal communication). When the emphasis shifts to self-assessment they fulfil the role as spectator, judging themselves and others (interpersonal and critical thinking). In the latter instance one learner, for example, criticised a questionnaire distributed by the Automobile Association of South Africa, due to the fact that the ratings scale did not adhere to the rules of correspondence.

2 What skills, abilities and orientations (attitudes and values) have they accomplished?

- Doing this task has given me confidence in myself as a researcher.
- I can now probably analyse the work given to me by other journalists.
- To develop a questionnaire which is reliable and valid.
- I have accomplished different kinds of skills and abilities, for example how to be patient during an interview.
- I have become more sensitive towards the needs of the youth.
- The Limpopo area needs a community newspaper to cover local events.
- Cultural differences have to be respected.
- The data provided during the focus-group interviews were often rich in ideas and provided opinions which I did not anticipate.
- Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the children, parents and teachers are flexible and revealed surprising information, in most of the cases.
- These children are driven towards cannabis use due to peer pressure, there is a fear of not being accepted by the "in group".
- I will probably be more welcome to interview the women in the village if I first obtain permission from the chief.

In addition to illustrating the roles of participant versus spectator, comments also represent degrees of deference. The first five comments reflect a level of intimacy

(personal), which is unique (idiosyncratic) to the learners' experiences. They illustrate values that can be related to rectitude, self-respect, self-confidence, pride and self-worth, as well as orientations, such as sensitivity and patience. The skills and abilities in most of the reports are linked to becoming a more critical reader and being able to develop measuring instruments, as well as collecting and interpreting data.

The other examples quoted reflect distance, or impersonal references to objects, ideas and persons. They describe values of enlightenment and respect for *the other*, whether in terms of community needs, cultural differences or the acknowledgment of traditional customs.

3   Which strengths could they apply in their future life and work environment?

- I can now critically evaluate my own work.
- I can evaluate reports more objectively by making deductions.
- I feel that I can contribute to my work as a teacher in future by applying the observation skills I have learnt.
- Having analysed the article will assist me in the structuring of writing my own reports in future.
- I now realise that different factors determine which research method to use and will be less ignorant in future research.
- I can probably apply the perseverance and discipline I have acquired to future work situations.
- I have developed the ability to work independently, in a strange environment and to respects other people, their culture and language.
- To think independently. To work outside of your comfort zone and at irregular hours.
- I will use my knowledge gained about multicultural and business communication in my work environment as I am a manager.

As a heuristic device, the above comments illustrate that the communicative context is a factor when analysing learners' writing. The comments contain references to temporal, spatial and even psychological settings related to their learning experiences. Given the prompting of different self-schemata, the above examples contain evidence that learners responded mainly in terms of their personal levels of identity.

The responses reflect a desire to behave in a particular (different) way in future, based on what the learner learnt by having done the research task. Motivation to do so is treated as two-factored in this study, and the premise is that motivation could occur separately (in two separate reports by the same learner), or it could be combined in one report. The motivation to take on new attitudes or behaviours, or new ways of life – to do future tasks in a different manner – is based on a measure of trust in learning experiences. The motivation to change the attitudes, decisions and/or actions ascribe to in the past can be linked to perceptions of lack of achievement.

4   Which shortcomings do they need to address in future?

- In any intercultural business it is advisable to learn as much as possible of the other cultures.
- When developing communication skills among personnel, I need to take their aspirations into account.
- I need to pay more attention to the world around me, especially the elderly in Soweto.
- I have a problem applying the theory to a practical situation.
- I battled to draft my research proposal in a proper way.
- I need to be more critical and not take all academic reports at face value.
- With more time I could've done better.
- I think I still have a road to travel at developing my language.
- I have discovered that I am easily distracted and have a tendency to be paralysed because I find a task too daunting or overwhelming.

A measuring instrument widely used in Communication studies, is the semantic differential scales developed by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957), which reveal connotative, rather than referential meanings of the conceptual content along the dimensions of:

- evaluation (valuable/worthless; honest/dishonest; good/bad)
- activity (active/passive; fast/slow; sharp/dull)
- potency (strong/weak; large/small; heavy/light).

When analysing how learners rate *self* on the semantic differential scales, it is found that most responses are formulated in terms of the evaluation dimension, whereas the last two address a combination of all three dimensions. The responses illustrate that learners feel safe enough to honestly criticise their own performance. In fact, no evidence could be found that the intent of any of the reports was to influence the lecturers' rating (assessments) to benefit the learners.

Responses also illustrate that learners develop an awareness (recognition, reconstitution and recall) of having behaved in a particular way, and are able to judge the implications of whether or not having behaved in a particular manner was appropriate.

5   To what extent have they achieved the learning outcomes formulated for each study unit?

- I have learnt how to conduct environmental monitoring research based on the SABC.
- I have actually learnt how to conduct a communication audit!
- I think I have learnt how to evaluate and analyse a research article by applying scientific criteria and guidelines.

These responses illustrate a general trend, viz. that learners imitate the wording used in the learning outcomes. Very few reports contained qualifying phrases to substantiate why or to what extent the learning outcomes were achieved.

6   What types of statements did the reports contain?

The analysis reveals that a distinction can be made among the following types of statements.

Statements of description

The most accurate statements of description are those based on learners' observations ('The company's policy does not meet the requirements ...'). The majority of examples illustrate that descriptions can also be personal experiences, such as 'I have a problem . . .', which makes verification by means of observations difficult.

Statements of inference

Statements of inference refer to internal conditions that are described, and which can not be observed ('I think I have learnt . . .', 'I feel that . . .'). Such statements can be ranked depending on the extent to which they are probable and the extent to which they can be verified. As statements are linked to and reflect on very specific research tasks, the verification can be undertaken by comparing the inference ('I have learnt how to develop a questionnaire which is reliable and valid') with the actual content of the task (i.e. the actual questionnaire).

Deductive and inductive inferences are found in learners' reports. Deduction is reflected where something (e.g. awareness of language diversity in the community) follows essentially from something else (e.g. having conducted a uses and gratifications survey). Inductive thinking skills are reflected in those instances where reasoning takes place from particular experiences to a generalisation. ('Having analysed this article I have learned that published articles are not always accurate'). Such reasoning also includes inferring to hypotheses which, are presumed to be true, real or genuine ('If parents were made aware of the impact of their positive parenting, they could be building these children's self-esteem').

Higher levels of abstraction are further removed from the sense data of what one perceives and include highly valued terms. Examples of such terms used in statements are 'cultural norms, values, confidence, perseverance, discipline, work independently and aspirations'.

One or combinations of the following tests were used to assess their meanings.

1   Is the statement (or term used) final or tentative? Very few learners gave some explanation to justify or to confirm what they claim.
2   Is the statement (or term) absolute or probable? It is unlikely to find terms such as *always* or *never* being used in a self-reflection or self-assessment. Qualifiers, such

as *probably*, or *most of the cases*, or *tend to*, or *often* are conventionally used and are found.

3   Is the statement based on inductive reasoning? Some of the statements illustrate that learners' reasoning is done from the particular to the general (e.g. applying specific knowledge acquired in a wider community or work context). Some of the statements are clearly based on learners' personal experience alone, whereas others represent reflections of the experiences of others as well (e.g. employees in an organisation).

4   Does the statement apply in practice to a specific case or does it represent a theoretical principle which lacks exemplary verification? Very few learners make use of hypotheses that offer explanations *why* something happened, or offer a plausible explanation as to why a particular decision was taken. Their comments, applicable to *strengths* and *weaknesses*, do contain examples of guesses or statements of prediction about something that will or may happen in future, based on their past experience.

Based on above discussion, it is clear that inference fulfils an important function in learning behaviour when performing research activities.

Statements of judgment

A statement of judgement is not a description of anything that can be observed and, although it can be based on an inference which a learner has felt, it incorporates learners' values. Conclusions based on value judgements give a substantiated opinion, for example, by pointing out the positive or negative characteristics, such as 'focus-group interviews were rich in ideas'.

When considering the credibility of learners' statements of judgment, the following three findings transpire; namely, that most of the conclusions are implied and not explicitly substantiated; the majority of the opinions expressed are one-sided and do not contain two-sided arguments; and very few reports contain reasoned arguments. Instead many rely on emotional appeals.

Whilst doing the content analysis, the question arose as to whether learners formulated sentences in which conjunctions are used, especially conjunctions of causality ('because, since, then, although, therefore'). The formulation of logical (causal) justifications for propositions which they could have made, are surprisingly absent.

Learners who did present justifications use the following three types of causal relations in their reports:

- A cause-and-effect relationship, which marks a relation between two events or two phenomena ('By having analysed the article, I can now critically evaluate my own work').
- A relationship between reason and consequence, a logical relation or an implication, which is a relation between two judgments or ideas, rather than two observed facts or

two events ('These children are driven towards cannabis use due to peer pressure').
- A third relationship bridges above two, which Campbell (1976, 22) calls 'relation of motive for action or the psychological relation'. It is a logical relation because reason or motive is introduced as a cause. For example, '. . . if I first obtain permission from the chief (reason as a cause) . . . I will probably be more welcome to interview the women in the village'.

Linked to above causal relations, a second question arose during the analysis; namely, whether thoughts and experiences were expressed in a discontinuous idiom, in contrast to a deductive style of reasoning. Discontinuous idiom can be described as a learners' inability to link the relations between the types of research task undertaken, with personal experiences. Generally, this did not occur, because the self-assessment and self-reflection reports are presented in the specific contexts of and related to the different research studies.

7   What types of themes were addressed in the reports?

The themes which learners addressed are grouped in two broad categories: those that reflect on the study material, and those that reflect on experiences, including self-realisation.

Reflections related to study material

Several learners commented that the *advance organisers* (table of contents, introductory overviews and stated learning outcomes) provided them with focus before studying a particular study unit. *Marginal notes* and *in-text activities* were found useful. 'The activities made me feel involved. I wanted to check whether I'm on the right track. The open spaces were like an invitation to respond'. An *executive summary* (at the end of certain sections, or whole study units) were used by learners as summaries: 'to do revision; to check how much I remembered'. Several learners commented that the assessment of learning outcome *grids* and 5-point ratings scale helped in the structuring of their self-assessment.

Afrikaans-speaking learners commented on the usefulness of a *bilingual dictionary* that assisted them with the English terminology used in prescribed texts. Problems with the subject-specific and scientific terminology experienced by mother tongue speakers of one of the African languages, were also recorded.

Reflections related to practical research tasks

Time management

Many learners pointed out poor time management as one of their weaknesses. They attribute this to having registered for too many modules; they did not anticipate how

time-consuming practical research would be; and their differential allocation of time between UNISA studies, social activities, vocational or employment obligations, and/or especially home/family responsibilities.

Increased awareness of, and involvement in the community

It is more intuitive for a learner to state a research problem and in the end propose a solution or tentative solution. A number of learners focused on another dimension; namely, being motivated to 'look at life through different lenses'. One task involved an analysis of the functions, nature, goals, corporate climate and participative strategies used in a community organisation or service centre. Involvement with the people involved in institutions, such as Alcoholic Anonymous, Lifeline, Police Crisis Line and the Salvation Army, resulted in comments, such as 'These *druggies* are normal people like you and I; and I have decided to spend some time with these children on a voluntary basis over weekends'.

Another task involved researching the feasibility of initiating a community project that will improve the quality of life for a specific group in that community. A learner's negotiation with the local owner of a shebeen to have a certain percentage of the profit made at the shebeen paid towards her community project, illustrates how involvement in the community also promoted innovation and creativity.

Some learners reported on their increased knowledge of social problems in their communities. A learner identified lack of knowledge regarding community health, guidance on child care, family planning, HIV/Aids and diseases (malaria and trachoma). Another learner identified lack of knowledge in her local community regarding environmental hygiene, including water-related diseases and waste disposal. In rural areas, where many inhabitants still lack the ability to read and write, knowledge and skills were communicated by means of verbal communication, songs, dramatised dancing and practical demonstrations. Language was also identified as an important mediator (or barrier) of research, which confirms that communication research is not independent of social factors as possible constraints. Some learners had no choice but to conduct interviews in one of the African languages (instead of English).

Group work with fellow learners

Learners who worked in groups commented on the positive effects which group interaction has had on their academic insight; it also provided them with social and especially emotional support. Interaction also served as memory recovering triggers, whereby one participant's input would trigger other participants' memory.

Responses serve as evidence of associations with (previously) anonymous fellow learners that belong to the same learners' group. The sharing of common learning outcomes shows that the process of social identification (psychological group formation) does take place. Interaction and participation by individuals in groups who are involved

in the processes of learning not only makes learning a unique experience; but also promotes intrinsic motivation for continuous learning. One group reported on how a positive version of the Hawthorne effect took place. They performed better, were motivated more, built their self-confidence and even developed cohesion as a group because of the special attention they received from one another.

Self-realisation

Self-reflection resulted in some learners consciously becoming aware of their own thinking, which they experienced as a medium of their self-realisation ('This has been a story-telling and story-sharing experience. Thanks for listening'). One learner showed originality in doing a SWOT analysis as part of her self-reflection: Internal strengths (S) 'I work in a media environment. I am artistic and summarise the research procedure by means of mind maps'. Weakness (W) 'My time management is poor. I made a mess of the interview because I did not record all the responses'. Opportunities (O) 'My husband is very supportive of my studies. My work environment is conducive to doing communication research. I will be able to do a communication audit of the whole organisation in future'. Threats (T) 'The computer programme which I use is outdated. I do not have regular access to the Internet. I was over optimistic and registered for far too many modules'. This example illustrates that self-assessment can contribute to building learners' confidence and in the process, promote self-reliance. It also illustrates that learners do turn to other sources or criteria when judging their own work and experiences.

The integration of knowledge, thoughts and behaviour by means of self-reflection increases the probability that the learner's behaviour is congruent with the overtly stated learning outcomes. Learners become more conscious of the outcomes which their decisions and behaviour promote. Self-reflection forces learners to become conscious of thoughts, assumptions and patterns which guide their decisions, of which they may otherwise have been unaware. Self-reflection therefore, enables learners to question conventional practices and facilitate systematic analyses of occurrences in the real world.

CONCLUSION

Explicative reflection provided learners with opportunities to analyse, synthesise and assess new experiences against the background of their personal knowledge, feelings and past experiences. Learners' own knowledge, assumptions, expectations, decisions and actual experiences were also assessed and reflected. The findings revealed that the factors most reflected upon by the learners can be grouped in two key areas or levels; on a strategic level, the success of their research tasks relied on whether or not there were clearly demarcated and measurable learning outcomes – on an operational level, learners had to devise rigorous action plans, which spelled out what had to be achieved, by whom

and by when. These point to the importance of a personal mindset – a continuous self-assessment and self-reflection which is subjective, yet cautious, attentive and exact.

Self-assessment afforded learners opportunities to assimilate and integrate reality into cognitive structures, which is fundamental in learning. Through the processes of assimilation, transformation and self-regulation, learners develop cognitive structures, which are built on their own activities. On a cognitive level, these required reflection on the relevance of theory, as applied in practice, plus the feasibility, researchability and relevancy of conducting research in real-life situations.

Group work with fellow learners was beneficial to individual learners through discussion to attain and exchange knowledge; to develop communication skills; to find solutions for academic problems; to experience mutual support; to bring their own past experiences, knowledge, attitudes and research skills to the discussions; and to plan and conduct research in a collaborative manner.

It is argued that learners will not be taught fully how to know something or how to do something, unless they also develop the ability to assess and reflect on their own. On a critical level, their consciousness or awareness of moral, ethical and/or social values were heightened. Such developments contributed to learners acquiring an *authentic voice*, which was confirmed and reinforced through the processes of self-assessment and self-reflection. A continuous practice of applying the canons of criticism is an effective way to develop critical skills – it is therefore, concluded that self-reflection and self-assessment are an integral part of portfolio examinations as evaluative and training activities, due to the fact that they take place on personal, cognitive, social and critical levels.

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