Paradigm of Reflective Practices Pravailing in Teacher Training Programme Through Distance Education in Pakistan

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Abstract: Distance Education is a blessing for developing countries because it is a cheaper way of getting education at all levels especially at higher level. The only reasonable prospect for any developing country in achieving its manpower targets is through distance education (Urhobo). In a distance learning system, opportunities of direct contact are fewer in the form of tutorial and workshops. During the whole process students remain in isolation having many problems that is why more care is required to deal with such students. To deal with these problems involved in the learning process of students, reflective practice can do very fruitful in this regard. Purpose of the study was to evaluate the existing state reflective practices at AIOU. The population of the study consisted of 50 teachers, 80 students and 22 academicians. The main findings of the study revealed that reflective practice is a very valuable learning style and it can play a discriminative role in making teaching learning process more rich and productive. More emphasis may be given to strengthening of reflective practices during tutorial and workshops at AIOU.

Key words: Distance Education, Teaching Learning Process, Reflective Practices

1. Introduction

Distance Education is a popular mode of education throughout the world especially it is imperative for the developing countries but the distance learner is generally separated from the supporting organization and in this way suffers a lot as compared to a formal system student. He fails to get immediate feedback from the teachers, lacks access to a good library to supplement these studies and further,
he does not get opportunities to interact and meet his fellow students and the staff of his supporting organization. To deal with these problems involved in the learning process of students, reflective practice can do very fruitful in this regard. According to Karam, F. Osterman, R.B. and Kott Kamp (1993, p.19): “Reflective practice is viewed as a means by which practitioners can develop a great level of self awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth”.

Reflective practice creates problems solving competency, critical, constructive and original thinking among the learners. It also frees teaching from impulsive routine behaviour and makes teaching intentional and deliberate.

In view of the utmost importance of reflective thinking in teaching learning process this research topic had been chosen. Ferraro, J. M. (2000, p.1) quotes the concept of reflective practice as defined by schon, D. (1996) which is as follows: “Reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one’s own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline”.

Teachers and students have to develop “Capacity to cope” or bring changes in their behaviour. What it implies is how teachers think, feel and respond, as well as what they know which promotes learning and improvement in teaching reflection. Bartlett (1990, p.204) states, “Improvement of teaching may be achieved through reflection. Reflection is more than “thinking” and focuses on the day to day classroom teaching of the individual teacher as well the institutional structures in which teachers and students work”.

Promoting learning for our students involves more than just understanding and being able to apply general learning and teaching principles or guidelines. Most importantly, it is a process of being able to make an understanding of what is going on in today’s classrooms, which means understanding our students and being able to respond appropriately to their needs and feedback. It is also a process of understanding oneself as teachers which means being aware of why one does what one does and the impact of this upon students’ learning and this awareness is through engaging in an ongoing process.

2. Reflective Practice in Distance Education

Reflective practice is viewed as a means by which practitioners can develop a great level of self awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth. The profession requires specialized knowledge base and shared standard of practice, commitment to meeting clients, needs. Reflective practice creates problems solving competency, critical, constructive and original thinking among the learners. It also frees teaching from impulsive routine behaviour and makes teaching intentional and deliberate.
Hardy and Benson, R. (2002, p.2) state, “The intellectual processes of reflection...in many ways reflect the learning processes expected of students...particularly on the concept of reflective practice. Because of links it makes between reflection and professions that require high degree of formal rationality and the suggestion that reflection is required by such professionals and those educating these professionals”.

These lines show the importance of reflective practice in distance education.

Hardwick, S. (2000, p.1) states:

“Our work is based on the premise that student taking classes at a distance (like almost all students) can be taught most effectively by methods which promote optimum student participation in the learning process. Activities which stimulate reflective thinking help students gain new insights concerning themselves and their worlds”.

In these lines Susan Hardwick mentions about some activities which stimulate students and help them to understand their own assumptions and other peoples. Hardwick, S. (2000, p.1) Further mentions about those activities.

- The use of online Journals.
- Assigned written portfolios.
- Regular written reflective essays about course content.
- Group work involving collaboration vi chat groups, list servers, faxes, or snail mail and
- Concept mapping goal setting and oral reflections about learning and thinking.

3. Effectiveness of Reflective Practice in Education and in Distance Education

Student taking classes at a distance can be taught most effectively by methods which promote optimum student participation which stimulates reflective thinking helps students giving new insights concerning themselves and their worlds. Zahoo, F. (2003 P-4) explains as a result of reflective practice students:

- Become more effective independent and confident self directed learners.
- Understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context.
- Improve their general skills for student and career management.
- Articulate their personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement.
- Encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life.

In the reflective practice practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self observation and self evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners. The Quality Assurance Agency (2001’p.1) has defined personal development planning as, “A structured and supported process undertaken by an individual reflecting upon their own
learning, performance and or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development”.

Reflective practice can be a beneficial process in teachers’ professional development. The effectiveness of reflection as a learning tool has been explored by educationist, drawing on the work of Dewy (1933) and (Ausubel 1968) to use reflection as a component of learning to integrate the theory and practice. McLean’I. (2004, P.1) quotes Brookfield (1995) who proposes that this framework:

- Allows us to consciously develop our own repertoire of strategies and techniques to draw upon in our teaching, which are relevant to our particular content and discipline”.
- Helps us to take informed actions that can be justified and explained to other and that we can use to generate answer to teaching problems.
- Allows us to adjust and respond to issues and problems. For instance rather than being wasted by a poor teaching evaluation. It allows us to investigate and understand what underlies these evaluations and to take appropriate action which might be to adjust our teaching.
- Helps us to become aware of our underlying beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching so we understand why we do what we do, and what might need to be changed.
- Helps to promote a positive learning environment. Through reflection, our teaching becomes responsive to students feedback and needs which can serve to build trust in students when they see their feedback is value and taken seriously through changes to teaching.
- Helps us to locate our teaching in broader institutional social, and political contact and to appreciate the many factors that influence students when they see their feedback is valued and taken seriously through changes to teaching.
- In the light of these lines it is obvious that reflective practice plays very effective role in teaching and learning process. The advantages or benefits as encountered in these lives are as follow:

3.1 Developing New Teaching Techniques and Strategies

With the help of reflective practice teachers can consciously develop their own strategies and techniques of teaching which ultimately supports and helps in students’ learning and makes them active learners who learn through interaction. It helps teachers to come out of the impulsive routine behaviour” and makes teaching deliberative activity. It proves that teaching is not a game of chance rather it requires special training and experience. Teaching is not only an art but a science. The systematic actions of which can be learned and which is an animating spirit of a profession reflective practice helps to discover new techniques and strategies of teaching and thus refined the philosophy of education.
3.2 Helpful in Taking Informed Action

Reflective practice helps teachers for taking “informed actions” that are justifiable and explainable to others. That assists resolving many problems involved in teaching activity. Argyrols and schon (1974, p.638)

Without it individuals are not able to examine their values and assumptions in order to design and implement a quality of life that is not constrained by the status quo”.

3.3 Helpful in Resolving the Issues and Problems Involved in Teaching and Learning Process

As it is a known fact that reflective practice is based on inquiry and research which is obligating for resolving a problem. It takes its principles from problem solving method. The problem is a kind of conflict between real and ideal theory and practice interaction and outcomes’ Thinking and actions. Reflective practice helps to bring consistence between them and finds out a new or alternative route to solve these problems enhancement of “Awareness about underlying beliefs and assumptions”.

Reflective practice helps in becoming aware of our underlying beliefs and assumptions. It reflects a teacher and student attention towards an unquestioned acceptance of values, norms and practices and fosters new ways or alternative ways which make them more successful by bringing a consistency in between these values, belief and assumptions of learning.

3.4 Helpful In Promoting Positive Learning Environment

The reflective practice is an active process of learning which involves interaction and where the learner is an independent person, a teacher becomes a facilitator. Active involvement of both the teacher and the learner creates a positive learning environment teacher responses to students problems reflectively which gives than feedback as well as it is a feedback from learners to teacher which creates a trust among them which promotes to positive learning environment.

3.5 Helpful In Locating Teaching In Broader Institutional, Social And Political Context

With the help of reflective practice the teaching locates the roots of the problems in broader institutional, social and political contents or perspectives and informs that teachers should not always blame themselves for every problem in the
classroom. The effectiveness of reflection as a learning tool has been explored by educationist, drawing on the work of Dewy (1933) and Ausubel (1968) to use reflection as a component of learning through experiences and helping students to integrate theory and practice.

Florez and Mary, A.C. (2003, p.3-4) explains the benefits of reflective practice in Adult ESL. These are explained under these headings:

1. Flexibility
2. Practicability
3. Professionalism
4. Sustainability

3.5.1 Flexibility
Reflective practice can address various instructional contexts, learner groups’ curricula, available resources and amount and type of teacher preparation. This is applicable in both individual and collective process.

3.5.2 Practicability
Despite the limitation of time and resources to divide between teaching and professional development, the reflective practice in useful. It involves building opportunities to explore and reflect on new techniques, ideas into the process’ and linking between theory and practice.

3.5.3 Professionalism
Reflective practice calls for ongoing exercise of intellect, responsibility, and professionalism. It promotes deliberate action in planning and implementing instruction and organic engagement with theory. It helps teachers to improve their ability to react and respond as they are teaching to assess’ Revise and implement approaches and activities on the spot.

3.5.4 Sustainability
Reflective practice helps in providing sustained development by creating a cyclical process that allows time for reflection, implementation and follow-up. It centers on development and exercise of skills and attitudes that eventually become a regular part of good teaching. Firraro, J.M (2001’p.1) writes: “The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style and ultimately greater effectiveness as teacher. Other specific benefits...include the validation of teacher ideas beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for adversity in applying theory to classroom practice”

Using reflective ‘methods may be useful in pre-service teacher education programs by improving in “reasoning skills and teaching practice” and by creating interactive and collaborative learning environments for their students”.
Recognizing the necessary role of reflection excavating learning from experience and becoming familiar with the basic elements of a reflective practice will allow practitioners or teachers to begin to act on the notion that knowledge is embedded in the experience of their work, and to realize the importance of this knowledge in furthering their practice.

Reflective practice aims to motivate and support teacher to become actively engaged in improving and sustaining their teaching. It also helps to enhance cognition of students and faculty at the college or university level.

4. Problems in Reflective Practice

Along with a wide range of advantages of reflective practice in education here are some problems involved in its application to education or any other sphere of life. Effective change to any educational structure, philosophy or practice is not an easy obtainable goal. At each level of organization there are dynamics in operation which may resist the proposed change.

- Lack of Time and Energy
- Lack of Support
- Preferred Vision
- Lack of Holistic Approach
- Lack of Training
- Restricting the Growth of Creativity and Innovation
- Statuesque Problem
- Lack of Commitment

As distance education is a combination of print based materials, radio, audio video tapes, CD Rom, television, video cassettes, computer, teleconferencing, computer conferencing etcetera. Key players in the system of distance education are tutors, student’s course developing personnel, Faculty etc. As it is very different from formal system some of its problems involved in the implementation of reflective practice are different. Along with these problems involved in education, distance education faces some particular problems, which are as following:

- The Lack of Theory for Instructors
- Lack of Tutor Training
- Learner’s Issues
- Lack of Facilities and Resources
- Lack of Feedback
- Issues Of Course Design
- Media Based Challenges
5. Methodology of the Research

Students (30) and tutors (10) of M.A/ M.Ed. level of Islamabad. Since the study was descriptive in nature, therefore, survey approach was considered appropriate to collect the data with the PUPOSIVE sampling.

5.1 Data Analysis

The data collected through questionnaire were coded and analyzed through Ms-Excel in terms of percentage and mean scores.

Table 1. Opinion of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UNC</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A thorough reflection or deep thinking helps in resolving the problems involved in learning</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It is possible to solve problems involved in learning through one’s own individual efforts</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Problems in learning can be solved with the help of others’ simulated practices</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Students construct new methods for understanding the concepts and for resolving problems</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A student criticize himself for improvement in learning fellow student’s feedback and observation helps in resolving student’s problems</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>
Table 2. Opinion of tutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UNC</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>It is important for a tutor to consider students anticipating problems.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors notes their tutoring experiences into a diary while tutoring a course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It is important for a tutor to consider students anticipating problems.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tutors intend to see behavioral changes occurring in distance learners.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tutor keep an eye on students learning activities in the study centers.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A tutor apply different methods and techniques for educating distance learners.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tutors keep an eye on learner’s feedback on tutoring.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tutors maintain contact with a more experienced tutor about difficult issues involved in tutoring.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A tutor recommend the additional resources that may be helpful for any course</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from above findings of tutors, students and academicians.

- Distance education is an effective teaching learning process.
- Planning before entering a course and before going to study center was necessary.
- It was important for a tutor to consider student’s anticipating problems or questions arising in their minds before entering a course or study center.
- Modern techniques and strategies to make tutoring better are not employed.
- Behavioural changes occurring in distance learners are not considered by the tutors.
Additional resources for course comprehension are not advised in tutorials.
Lack of time affects tutor’s performance.
A through reflection or deep thinking helps in resolving the problems involved in learning.
Consulting with friends helps in resolving problems involved in learning.
Discussion with more experienced and senior persons helps in solving the problems involved in learning.
Problems involved in learning can be solved with the help of other’s simulated practices.
Students self criticism is useful for improvement in learning.
Awareness of a person about the nature and impact of his performance was important.
Audio Video tapes help in resolving problems in learning.

7. Recommendation

- Seminars and workshops may be held for the personnel in distance education to make them aware about reflective practice.
- Tutors may be given training in the sense to promote reflective practice before starting a course.
- Every student may be made conversant through books and journals for how to become a reflective learner.
- The interaction and collaboration among tutors students and faculty may be made frequent.
- More attentive counseling may be provided for distance learners.
- Curricula development may be made more innovative.
- Distance learners may be provided appropriate equipment for course work and research as visual aids devices audio and video tapes and films.
- Library services may be enriched at every regional office.
- In the workshops and tutorial meetings, more discussion, debate and simulation exercises may be made compulsory component for active involvement of distance learners.

References

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