Reflective Practice through Blogging: An Alternative for Open and Distance Learning Context

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the use of blogs as an alternative tool to encourage reflective practices among distance education students. The participants were Post Graduate Certificate in Education students enrolled for a one year teacher education programme at the University of South Africa. The data collected were qualitative in nature, consisting of student teachers posting messages and comments on a university-hosted blog. Students' postings were read, coded, analysed and categorised thematically. The results showed that students' blog entries were descriptive and haphazard. Although there was interaction among students, there was little indication that students understood reflective practice because they did not reflect on their practice. The study recommends that reflective practice be integrated in the curriculum and blogging should be guided to ensure that it enhances reflectivity among students. Suggestions for the use of blogs to promote reflective practice among pre-service teachers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing availability of technology-driven learning tools in education has led scholars to explore ways in which learning could be enhanced through emerging technologies (Absalom and de Saint Léger 2011). This trend has been given stronger impetus with the development of Web 2.0 technologies and the explosion of social networking practices such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and blogs, to name but a few. According to Luqman et al. (2012) the 21st century is the era of uncertainty, chaos and complexities and this is a major challenge to the educational institutions. Laqman et al. (2012) further state that keeping ourselves up-to-date with the changing technology is very much important and institutions lagging behind in technological sector are unable to face the pace of the world.

The above quote suggests that educational institutions – especially those offering ODL (Open and Distance Learning) – need to keep up with the pace of developments in technology so as to ensure that they stay relevant and continue to produce students who will be competitive with their counterparts. The use of technology to enhance students' learning experiences is gaining momentum in higher education institutions around the globe. This trend is reflected in the case of the University of South Africa (Unisa), a dedicated open and distance education institution. Open and distance learning (ODL) entails

a student-centred approach that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where and how they learn (Unisa 2008). Makoe (2012) posits that distance education is, by nature, different from other forms of education in that students are physically and socially separated from their lecturers, their peers and the institution. This separation affects teaching and learning profoundly (Moore 1993). The challenge facing Unisa is to offer support for these students. In an attempt to provide such support and to cater for its diverse student population, Unisa makes various facilities and services available. One of these services is myUnisa – a Learning Management System (LMS) intended to provide interaction and technological resources that support all areas of teaching and learning. The multimedia approach that Unisa uses is much more effective than using a single method of delivery. The use of technological innovations has created the idea of access to materials anywhere, promoting out of class learning in the academic environment. As an ODL institution, Unisa needs have to be responsive to the students' needs for convenient access to course information, materials and the lecturers. Despite these efforts, the majority of students still find it extremely difficult to adjust to and succeed in distance education.

There is a body of international literature that supports the effectiveness of blogs in the enhancement of reflective practice (Paquet 2003; Herring et al. 2004; Duffy and Bruns 2006). Despite the widespread emphasis on reflection,

research into reflective practice has yielded dis-appointing results. Studies show that pre-service teachers have difficulty achieving high levels of reflectivity (Korkmazail 2009). This study seeks to address this concern by exploring the use of blogs for enhancing reflective practice in a dis-tance education context. The goal professed in higher education – of developing students who can think critically and are self-directed in their life pursuits – must become more than mere rhetoric (Boris and Hall 2005).

The study focused on Post Graduate Certifi-cate in Education (PGCE) students enrolled in a one-year teacher education programme at Unisa and doing the teaching practice module PFC104T (Language Teaching). This module aims at en-hancing students' communication and their skills in the teaching of first and second additional lan-guages. Students who enrol for this course al-ready hold a bachelor's degree but do not have a professional teaching qualification. They are expected to undertake ten weeks of teaching prac-tice. Teaching practice placements are done by the university based on the students' choices of schools. Teaching practice is regarded as a vital element of the PGCE curriculum as it affords student teachers an opportunity to put theory into practice and to explore different educational con-texts of teaching and learning. However, distance education students are often isolated and lonely and it is therefore important that technological tools such as blogging be used to address this problem. Encouraging reflective practice through blogs in which students can share their teaching practice experiences is vital in an open and dis-tance learning context.

Conceptualisation of Reflective Practice

Blake (2005) defines reflective practice as a means of self-examination that involves looking back over what happened in practice in an effort to improve or encourage professional growth. The importance of reflective teaching in the South African context is recognised by the Norms and Standards for Educators (DoE 2000). The Norms and Standards for Educators require teachers to have "reflective competence" and it is expected that teacher education institutions should integrate reflective practice into the teacher education curriculum. The changing de-mands and responsibilities placed on teachers require them to be reflective in order to respond

appropriately to their changing circumstances (Killen 2007). Teachers need to question their practices and be open to different possibilities in their teaching experiences.

Reflectivity on the part of teachers has re-ceived attention from researchers over a period of time and it showed that reflection, helps to shape the nature of teacher knowledge. Research-ers such as (Killen 2007; Conley et al. 2010; Jacobs et al. 2011) argue that teachers can de-velop their expert knowledge through reflection. (Killen 2007; Conleyfull citation for first time to use them et al. 2010; Jacobs et al. 2011). Reflec-tion means thinking that is focused, intentional and purposeful and that aims to deepen under-standing and to inform further thought and ac-tion (Conley et al. 2010). Conley et al. (2010) add that reflective teaching is an approach in teacher education in which teachers or student teachers critically examine their own actions and attitudes, and then contemplate how they can improve them. Teachers need to make themselves aware of their own thinking and ideas about their experiences and from this awareness draw out learning points to help guide their future actions.

Borich (2000) contends that it is through teachers' reflecting on their decisions – and through their own professional judgment about their practices – that their knowledge of teach-ing grows. He further argues that teachers reflect on their day-to-day experiences in the classroom and use them as yet another input in the planning process. In the absence of a lecturer able to guide this process, distance education students can use blogging to interact with their peers and their lecturers about their experiences. According to Zeichner and Liston (1996), a reflective teacher examines, frames and attempts to solve the di-lemmas of classroom practice, is aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to the classroom, is attentive to the insti-tutional and cultural context in which he or she teaches, takes part in curriculum development, is involved in school change effort and takes re-sponsibility for his or her own professional de-velopment this sentence is too long, keep your sentences to three lines only! It is necessary for teachers to make a concerted effort if they are to develop such qualities themselves. Students need to be given opportunities to practice their reflec-tive skills through the use of structured journals, blogging and online discussion groups. This is especially important in distance education be-

cause there is no face-to-face contact between students and their lecturers.

Technological innovations such as blogs have been proposed as tools that could enhance reflectivity among students. According to Darling-Hammond (2005), blogs provide a unique and authentic opportunity to glimpse the written reflective processes employed by practicing teachers. Blogs are seen as tools that allow for the exchanging of information and for personal development.

Blogs

To reflect on their practice, teacher education students can use blogs as online journals (Herring et al. 2004). Duffy and Bruns (2006) define a blog as a website with dated entries, presented in reverse chronological order (so that the most recent entry is posted at the top) and published on the internet. Users can continuously update their blog pages online and in their own words. Paquet (2003) identified five features of blogs, namely: personal editorship, hyperlink posting structure, frequent updates, free public access to the content via the internet and archived posting. This suggests that blogs can enable students to continuously up-date their posting and also allows interaction and collaboration among , whatstudents. is your view about these five features of blogs?

Several research studies have shown that student interaction is important, especially in the distance education context (Moore 1993; Yang 2009). Unisa students are geographically separated from their lecturers. A blog, therefore, offers them an opportunity to interact with and exchange ideas with each other and with their lecturers.

Value of Blogs

Some theoretical and empirical endeavours have been made to determine the distinct value of blogs (Deng and Yuen 2010). Blogs enrich the learning experience and provide an opportunity for learners to shift from surface to deeper levels of learning (Bartlett-Brag 2003). According to Yang (2009), blogs transpire to be helpful tools for teachers to establish an encouraging and nurturing discussion space that enhances students' reflection. Blogs allow students to exchange information without space and time con-straints, to broaden their knowledge and to meet personal needs and interest (Yang 2009). Additionally, blogs give students ownership over their own learning and an authentic voice, allowing them to articulate their needs and inform their own learning. Duffy and Bruns (2006) view learning as socially constructed, therefore the use of blogs will facilitate knowledge construction among students and their peers. This will ensure that students are involved in their own learning and view themselves as knowledge creators.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical framework and methodology will be presented in this section. This study draws from Schön's (1983, 1987) and Thompson and Thompson's (2008) models of reflective practice. Schön identified two approaches to reflective practice, namely reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-on-action can be defined as the self-evaluative thinking that teachers engage in after most lessons. Killen (2007) regards reflection-on-action as a deliberate attempt by the teacher to understand past events in order to shape future actions. According to Conley et al. (2010) reflection-in-action refers to reflection while one is engaged in practice. This means that teachers, while teaching, question what they are doing, why they are doing it and the impacts on their learners. Killen (2007) maintains that for teachers to reflect in practice they must be able to frame problems almost subconsciously, generate hypotheses, and immediately test them. Killen (2007) reiterates that both approaches to reflection involve framing and reframing problematic situations – the difference, though, is that they occur at different times. Thompson and Thompson (2008) include a third approach to reflective teaching: reflection-for-action. This implies that teachers need to think about their lesson beforehand, anticipate what they might encounter, and then plan their lessons accordingly.

Experience forms a base for reflective practice. Teachers need to plan learning experiences, interpret new experiences using new perspectives, and develop new ways of teaching based on those experiences. Every student teacher has his or her schemata or cognitive structure that informs his or her beliefs about teaching and learning. Therefore, reflection will provide the opportunity for such a teacher to refine or reject

his or her own beliefs about teaching and learning. Killeavy and Moloney (2010) argue that one of the espoused benefits of reflective practice for teachers is the development of a deeper understanding of their own teaching and greater effectiveness as teacher. It is through reflection that teachers rethink their philosophies about teaching and learning.

Sampling

The study used volunteer sampling based on the participants' willingness to take part in the research, rather than on systematic sampling strategies (Gall et al. 2005). All students registered for the teaching practice module (PFC104T) are linked to the blog facility on myUnisa. Of 358 students registered for this module, only ten participated in the study. Students were asked to reflect on their teaching practice experiences using the blog. Data was collected from PGCE students enrolled for a one-year teacher education programme at Unisa. Part of the programme requires students to undertake ten weeks of teaching practice.

Data Collection

The researcher asked students teachers to post entries on the blog on myUnisa. Students were asked to reflect on how they had taught individual language lessons, their feelings about these lessons and how they could be improved. The idea was to encourage students to think critically about their lessons and decide what they could do to improve them. This exercise required them to think about their teaching and learning philosophies, their teaching methodologies and theories, and learners' backgrounds and interests. Students were encouraged to write a least one journal entry per week to reflect on their teaching practice experiences and to comment on their peers' blogs. E-mails were sent to students to encourage them to write their blogs. To preserve student anonymity, the researcher made use of pseudonyms for this study (Fraenkel and Wallen 2003).

In order to obtain the necessary quality of interaction and cooperation that would lead to improved learning, participation was voluntary. In addition, participants were free to withdraw from the study for any reason and at any time. The purpose of the study was explained to the students who gave their consent for participation. It is noted that, for reasons of confidentiality, the blog on MyUnisa is accessible only to students who have registered for the course. This reduces the fear of publicity outside the programme.

Data Analysis

Students' blog postings were downloaded from the myUnisa Learning Management System. The data collected was qualitative in nature and consisted of messages and comments posted to the blog by student teachers. The qualitative analysis process used in the study involved data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman 1984). The collected data was organised thematically and data collection and analyses were carried out continuously. This was done in order to build a coherent interpretation of the data, to check the data, to determine emerging trends, and to identify ideas that needed to be followed up.

Ethical Considerations

Blogging was voluntary and was not part of students' assessment. The blog page was created on the myUnisa LMS which is intended to provide interaction and technological resources that support all areas of teaching and learning. To preserve student anonymity, the researcher made use of pseudonyms for this study (Fraenkel and Wallen 2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected were consolidated and categorised into themes. Four themes were identified: low posting and use of blogs; blogs for description; interaction, diverse topics and positive comments.

Low Posting and Use of Blogs

Of the 358 students enrolled for the teaching practice module PFC104T (Language Teaching), only ten posted entries to the blog. The low posting levels could be attributed to the fact that posting was not compulsory – indeed, when participation is voluntary, most students opt out. Low posting levels could also have been as a result of the fact that that the students were to be assessed through their workbooks and that no marks or assessments were attached to their postings. The

formative value of reflective tasks is not easily reconciled in higher education settings where assessment requirements traditionally favour product over process (Absalom and de Saint Léger 2011). In addition, low response levels could be the result of the fact that students might not feel comfortable with the degree of transparency necessary for the benefits of the network to take effect (Anderson 2009). The research done by Potter and Banai (2012) on students' experiences of the use of blogs showed that students are more comfortable and experienced in traditional academic formats than they are in the reflection-made-public required by the blog format. Furthermore, in most instances students use myUnisa for checking their assignment marks and for reading announcements concerning assignment submission dates.

Blogs for Description

The result also revealed that students *described* what they had done instead of reflecting deeply on their practice. Such descriptive writing could be encouraged by the voluntary nature and the loose structure of the blogging activities (Deng and Yuen 2010). Extracts of examples of students' comments:

It took me three hours to prepare the lesson. I prepared a PowerPoint presentation and had made a worksheet. My worksheet went well as they were adequate. I had spelling errors in my PowerPoint presentation, which the children pointed out for me, which left me embarrassed. I then lost my focus and I was unable to manage my class better. (John)

Wow, my teaching prac has been a wonderful experience so far - of course it has had its many learning curves encompassing challenges, spontaneous learning and adaptation and successes. (Lerato)

The lessons themselves have gone well but as most will surely know, the planning takes long. I love being creative though and love trying to find ways to make a 'relatively boring topic' and make it exciting or easy to understand and grasp. (Neo)

The above postings show that students commented only on lesson planning and what transpired in their classrooms. This is referred to as "surface reflection" as it is more "technical' or descriptive (Larrivee 2008: 342). According to Larrivee (2008), surface reflection occurs when students focus their reflection on the strategies and methods they have used to reach a predetermined goal. Students' values, beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning are not considered at this point. Xie Ke and Sharma (2008) posit that, when past experiences merely flash through the mind, the student is not involved in deep levels of reflection and the representation of the thinking process is mostly descriptive. Students' reflective levels remain at the level of reporting rather than at the level of analysing (Parson and Stephenson 2005). There is variety of factors that could have contributed to students' mere description of events. For example, students often lack familiarity with reflective tasks (Absalom and de Saint Léger 2011). In addition, blogging is a skill which develops in stages (Bartlett-Bragg 2003). Different students could be at different levels as far as the use of blogs is concerned.

Despite the benefits of technological devices in teaching and learning, it appears that students do not know how to use blogs to reflect on their practice. Ray and Hocutt (2006) highlight the fact that the use of blogs by teachers is relatively a new phenomenon. Furthermore, Makoe (2012) argues that, despite studies showing the benefits of using mobile technologies, the use of technological devices as educational tools has not gained the momentum it should have. This, according to Makoe (2012), could be grounded in a variety of issues including a lack of awareness of the affordances these technologies could offer. Killeavy and Moloney (2010) add that teachers find it difficult to reflect on their own practice and that this could be due to lack of understanding of reflection, or due to reasons linked to teachers' personal identities and their classroom practices.

Interaction

Interaction among students – even critiquing each other's entries – is key in ensuring that they learn from each other. The results showed that blogs provide students with high level of autonomy and with opportunities for interaction with peers (Korkmazail 2009). Blogs can also be used to encourage interaction among students (Yang 2009). Examples of such interactions follow:

(Mpho) It is difficult to get senior educators to help plan lessons, especially if it is a subject that you are not teaching. Our school is very

busy. I am a Maths teacher, (so) planning a social science lesson is a bit challenging, (but) generally (I) love teaching

Response from Lizzy: I also found it hard with my first Natural Science lessons as I had a high school teacher make me hate it. I was visited by a supervisor today. I have to give credit to my senior teacher and the advice she has given me throughout the practice period

I have just come out of the most frustrating lesson and just feel like giving up. It was a Maths lesson for Grade 9's and they have been doing graphs and linear functions. We are onto the point where they have to try and find the equation for a graph from either the graph or a table of x and y values. It makes perfect sense to me, but we spent the whole lesson going through 4 examples and I really got the feeling that the kids were being deliberately silly and asking silly questions. (I) hope I never have such a horrible lesson again! (Donald)

I teach grade 9's Technology. My advice is, don't take them to heart....that is the age at which they believe they are the champs of all. If a few listened to you, you are a step closer. (Jane)

The results of this study showed that students used the blog to post entries about their frustrations and about the professional challenges they faced during teaching practice. Deng and Yuen (2010) emphasise that the flexibility of academic blogging fosters individual expression, reflection, social networking and peer support. The results also showed that students used the blog to give each other support and encouragement during teaching practice. One salient advantage of blogs over person-to-person communication tools such as the telephone and e-mail is their affordance of group-wide communication (Deng and Yuen 2010). It is worth noting that, although students' blog postings have social characteristics, they seldom show reflective elements.

Diverse Topics

Ferding and Trammell (2004) in Farmer et al. (2007) indicate that blogs provide opportunities for diverse perspectives among students. Although specific guidelines were given to students to guide their postings, student used the blogs to talk about their teaching experiences in general and not about language teaching. They also commented about other things outside the topic. This is in line with Razaee's (2008) statement that, in the process of blogging, the student becomes involved in commenting on diverse topics and ideas. For example:

This experience has made me happy as I believe I'm in the right field as a sport coach and educator. I am doing my last three practical lessons this week and next week my mentor has arranged that I take about twelve hours a week till the year ends of teaching her Grade 5 classes. She believes it will make me understand how it feels to start and to finish the day in class without being supervised formally. (Gift)

Wow I luv Maths so much, currently working around the school assisting my learners completing a fun exercise. We're doing measurements of length, width and perimeter

Well I have been lucky to have been taken in by a school that is a believer in educators. I am an intern for the primary side and the high school has also opened their arms to me teaching their grade 8 and 9 classes (Ronny)

The above posting suggests that students write things that they wish to write about and combine text with conversation in a very personal way (Yang 2009). The haphazard blog posting by students, minimal commitment between students through their blogs and poor or inadequate quality reflection on their own teaching as evidenced in blog content shows the challenges faced by students regarding the use of blogs as a reflective tool (Krause 2004). This is further emphasised by Larrivee (2008) who suggests that prospective, novice and experienced teachers alike seem unable to engage in pedagogical and critical reflections to enhance their practice. Critical reflection and enquiry do not come naturally to most teachers, so the appropriate opportunities for reflection should be provided to teachers (Yang 2009). Students used this forum to share their problems regarding the module instead of to reflect on their teaching experiences.

Positive Comments

The results also indicated that some of the students' postings were positive, that they were happy about the lessons they had presented and that they had not identified any problems in their teaching. The following quote captures their comments:

I felt great, everything went well and my learners performed very well as I expected. I believe the learner-centred method that I used worked very well. I felt proud to have taught the

lesson as my learners were so keen to do more examples. (Fred)

All for me went well. I believe nothing went wrong and learners showed their knowledge and learnt more. I was impressed because learners were so enthusiastic and more-hands on. They have presented their observations very well. (Queen)

The above quotes suggest that the teachers felt that they had accomplished their goals because the teaching methods that they used assisted learners to perform well. The results confirm Akbari's (2007) statement that the identification of a problem is not an automatic process and, indeed, there are many instances when teachers are not able to see what is wrong with their classroom performance. It is important that teachers recognise that any particular method that they use in their classes is but one of the many methods available and that they should be open to alternatives. Being open to perspectives different from our own can be extremely difficult in that students may articulate their assumptions and reflect on them but shut down when faced with accepting alternatives (Cranton 2000). According to Parson and Stephenson (2005) reflective practitioners should be able to identify problems in their own practice. This might be recognition that, although something is being achieved in a satisfactory manner, it could still be changed or improved. No matter how well you teach there is always room for improvement Killen (2007). However, teachers just beginning their careers can be daunted by the complex process of reflection and therefore cannot look back at their work with a critical eye. The results showed the students' blog entries to be descriptive and haphazard. There is no evidence that students' use of the blog facility had enhanced their reflections on their practice. The results are also in line with the results of the study conducted by Killeavy and Moloney (2010) among primary school teachers in Ireland – that students used the blog as a diary rather than as a reflective tool. Students simply describe what happens in their classrooms and do not attach any meaning to those happenings. Although there was interaction among the students in the study, there was little indication that they understood reflective practice.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that there is a need to teach student- teachers to reflect on their practice. It should not be taken for granted that they will automatically reflect on their practice and learn from their mistakes. It takes a trained and experienced teacher to critically examine his/her teaching. New technologies such as blogs make new demands on students who thus require support as they learn reflective practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For students to begin using blogs to enhance their reflective practice during teaching practice, the following recommendations are made:

a. While blog usage for educational purpose is still a new phenomenon, it offers great promise for students to interact with many other students, especially in distance education context. The flexible nature of blogs tempts students to deviate from the task and, therefore, strict instructions should be given to students in this regard. In addition, props can used to direct or channel students' postings on the available blog.

b. Students need to be given support and opportunities should be provided for them to reflect on their practice. This can be done through regular posting of tasks that require students to reflect

c. Reflection practice need to be integrated into the curriculum and students should be taught explicitly how to reflect.

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