

Stories, Toys and Music: Influences on a Student Engagement Metaphor

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This paper explores how a metaphor was developed into a visual tool used for teaching self reflection. The paper documents how we three academics embarked upon a series of action learning sets to discuss how we can help students develop their capacity for reflexivity through doing so ourselves. In undertaking the action learning sets, we developed the idea of a visual metaphor to explain how learning reflexivity is a continually moving forwards process. We designed and developed a metaphor for self reflection into a visual moving object termed a 'mandala'. This, we argue, can aid in teaching self reflection by reminding the viewer that the process of reflection is a continuous one. This paper weaves many facets representing self reflection, visual metaphors and student engagement. Using a simple image to illustrate the process of self reflection, we argue, can help academics teach a nebulous subject and students understand a cerebral process.

Keywords: mandala, praxis, reflection, critical reflexivity, action learning

INTRODUCTION

Teaching critical reflective skills is increasingly seen as a valued addition to postgraduate programmes and is often highlighted as marking the distinction from UG to PG level (Rüütmann, 2019). We are three academics based in a Management School teaching on UG, PG and online PG courses. We have a number of 'study skills' themed modules with one in particular which uses action learning sets to develop students skills of critical reflection and reflexivity.

This paper broadly focuses on our experiences in supporting those PGT students to become critically reflexive practitioners in the developing skills module for M level study. We took the view that in order to teach a skill, we as academics needed to be well versed in it ourselves. In this case, we ought to practise being critically reflexive in our own development in order to properly teach that skill to our students. As part of an exercise we embarked upon examining our own reflective practice by forming a small action learning set to discuss our modules, our practice and our reflexivity. Through conversations in this action learning set, we eventually developed a visual metaphor that charts our journey to reflexivity which then

places us in a better position to help our students achieve more refined levels (and the capacity for) of reflection and criticality.

This paper explores how this metaphor was developed. It details the first stage in our research and focuses on the design and implementation of a Mandala as a metaphorical tool developed through our action learning sets. We document this process and explore how illustrating an abstract concept, like reflexivity, can facilitate the learning process for students through staff praxis.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

Academics in the social sciences tend to practice reflection to a greater or lesser extent. Academics tend to muse over abstract concepts, consider a variety of lenses and (often) adopt a ‘middle of the fence’ approach to analysing social phenomena. Moreover, the idea that we can improve something through thinking about it is appealing. Clearly, as Kolb (1984) emphasised, the importance of reflection, particularly learning from our experiences, is a tried and tested method. We are immediately reminded of the part in the first Jurassic Park film where the velociraptors systematically test the electric fence for weaknesses. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the process of reflection, be it our own or depicted in popular culture, takes a considerable amount of time. When something goes wrong, it is whilst at the reflective stage in our learning we perhaps ask ourselves what happened, what went wrong (usually) and what could we have done to change the outcome. It is only when we reflect on our experience - whether in action or on action (Schon, 1983, 1987) - that we start to question ourselves about what happened, why that happened, prompting us to consider what we can do to change the outcomes next time. This subtle shift from what to why plays a key role in achieving reflexivity and opens up a variety of new possibilities.

In exploring the concept of reflection more widely we were drawn to the work of Reynolds (1998, 1999, 2011) and Cunliffe (2002, 2004, 2016), who provide guidance, definition and deliberations about the relevance of critical reflection and critical reflexivity to management education and praxis. Adopting Schon’s (1983, 1987) approach - that in order to develop reflective skills we need to practice reflection in action as well as reflection on action - we challenged each other through dialogue, in turn developing our sense making in accordance with Raelin (2001) and adhered to some of Bohm’s (2006) principles, acknowledging the need to suspend judgement when working collectively with our reflections.

Reynolds talks about reflection involving “thinking about our past or ongoing experiences of events, situations or actions so as to make sense of them” (2011, 5). As management educators this involves reflecting on our pedagogy and praxis, challenging our “taken for granted”(p 8), particularly in respect of the way we do things and how we address issues around power relations in the classroom when teaching predominantly international PGT students.

Moreover, Cunliffe (2004) suggests we need to support students to develop as critically reflexive practitioners. This requires us to reconsider our traditional ways of teaching, drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, (1972), in developing an approach that brings together critical thinking and dialogue as a way of transforming student thinking and views on reality, so helping individuals to become more conscious of the impact of the self on their ability to learn (Cunliffe, 2016).

It is in Cunliffe’s description of reflection as “a systematic thought process concerned with simplifying experience by searching for patterns, logic and order” (2004, 38) that we situate our approach to critical reflexivity which we have located in our Mandala metaphor.

From this position, Cunliffe (2016) suggests that we also become more intersubjective, recognising that we are never wholly separate from the ‘other’ - that we are who we are because of our living and lived relationship(s). She demonstrates the point through drawing on her work with management students. Embracing intersubjectivity, relationality and reflexivity brings a moral responsibility to think about ‘we’ not ‘I’ and for the world around us. This involves recognition of the uniqueness of others and suggests the question: ‘for what and to whom are we accountable?’

It is through this process of individual and collective reflection that we are attempting to be accountable to our students in helping them to grasp concepts that have taken many years of individual and collective reflection for us to understand.

WHAT WE DID AND WHY?

Reflection occurs in many forms, including conversations with others. We have all mulled over something, talked it through and pondered the ‘whys and wherefores’. And this is what we did. We stripped bare the process and we started from scratch. We asked ourselves why do our PG students struggle to learn the practice of reflection? Do they even know what it is? How do we explain it to them? Is it a sign of weakness for them? How do we do it? We do it, don't we? Inspired by health professionals who routinely undergo counselling and previous experiences with action learning sets as safe spaces (Neal-Smith et al., 2013), we decided to try this for ourselves.

Through an approach based on a blend of living theory, sense-making and action learning we participated in a collective process of reflection over a period of 6-12 months with the aims of

- 1) Revisiting our own learning journeys, particularly in terms of critical thinking and reflexivity, in the process looking at the fragments that constitute our experiences;
- 2) Exploring, understanding and developing our capacities for critical reflection; and
- 3) Developing methods for student learning, particularly in relation to one of our action-learning-based PG modules.

We formed a small action learning set to discuss the key issues across postgraduate teaching and learning with particular focus on academic skills. This was an important aspect for all of us but from different perspectives. Through our discussions and our attempts at sensemaking (Weick: 1979, 1988, 1993, 1995), we discussed our stories of how we met and how we became interested in reflection, what it was that led us to our belief in the important links between reflection and learning, practising engaging in a dialogical process which we felt allowed us to learn about ourselves from the “inside-out” (Cunliffe, 2004 p 417) .

We reflected individually within our group meetings on how we developed these critical skills and (and are still developing these skills). We empathise with the struggles our students face, particularly international PG students, when entering a UK HEI to start their Masters programme and we feel empathy with students that struggle with the concepts of critical thinking, critical evaluation and critical analysis. This can be thwarted by some of their feedback comments including ‘ this is too descriptive, at PG level you need to be more critical’. We discussed what this means and how academics can help students overcome this challenge?

As part of our discussion we talked about our own experiences or our own stories, how we came to being an academic, what our backgrounds were like. This came, in part, from sharing so much with one another and thinking about a PG module where we wanted to achieve this level of trust in one another for our students. In order to explain concepts or experiences, we quite often relied upon a visual description or likened ideas to paintings, experiences and listening to music. We found that we shared between us many visual representations of our thoughts and feelings.

This dialogue became analogous to several tangible objects. We imagined a jigsaw, then many jigsaws in a muddle and finally a kaleidoscope. As children of the latter part of the previous century, we remembered playing with a toy kaleidoscope and watching the fragments shift into patterns that didn't last but they could be built upon.

In the kaleidoscope we built beautiful patterns and then twisted it until we built a new beautiful pattern. The kaleidoscope did not reverse, one more twist and the beautiful pattern was lost forever, never to be recreated and that, to us, seemed to symbolise our work now and our work moving forward.

The experience of watching falling fragments of coloured glass shifting into patterns that lasted seconds and couldn't be recreated became a visual metaphor for our sense of learning from one another, layering the knowledge and experiences upon each other (like the falling beads of glass in a random pattern), reflecting on that and reimagining the kaleidoscope image in another frame representative of our own practice. This visual metaphor seemed appropriate for our research and depiction of what is happening in the sector, particularly in university management schools.

The kaleidoscope morphed into a Mandala, the Sanskrit word for "Circle" which is a spiritual symbol representing all aspects of life. Each Mandala has its own unique story and meaning, based on each

individual's journey. This made such perfect sense to us. Those colourful fragments represented our own stories, our thoughts and our inspirations. Each one became a visual representation of feelings, moods, experiences inspired by creative influences such as toys, books, film, music and art. Mandalas are often utilised in meditation. Described as a visual metaphor for wholeness and balance (Palmer et al. 2013), Mandalas have also been used in Jungian therapy (Slegelis, 1987) and holistic well being (Potash et al., 2015).

We created several Mandalas through computer software, mostly so we could visually demonstrate this metaphor. The temporality associated with one became more pronounced when we realised that just as one had been created, another could replace this and the Mandala could change even more. The creative process of adding in colours and shapes, whilst seemingly random, actually became associated with our thoughts and experiences. We likened colours to feelings - sometimes in creating a new mandala - we could use greys, blues and darker hues. Colours began to represent specific periods and particular influences. This process also occurred with music and we began to take notes on specific songs or genres that represented elements of a Mandala.

LEARNING FROM OUR STORIES

Becoming critically reflexive takes time and requires context. As three experienced teachers and practitioners we aim to draw upon a broad range of career and life experiences to inform and support this process and these are predominantly visual pieces of our own mandalas. We collected data on this process in the form of reflections on our stories through an auto-ethnographic account (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015), whereby we analysed the data to reveal themes using open manual coding to create links between the three individual reflections.

The themes reveal a commonality in our backgrounds and experiences in relation to being non-traditional learners. It was apparent that we each shared elements of imposter syndrome at stages in our lives and through the action learning set we were able to develop a safe space which gave us the confidence that negated our desire to belong (Bravata et al., 2020). In sharing our experiences and utilising a thematic approach (Easterby-Smith et al 2015) to the data we were able to understand the temporal nature of our personal and professional development. These themes are even more powerful when they are visually displayed; morphing in and out in the continuous circular cycle of a Mandala. The movement and fluidity of the shapes - the fragments of colours that represent individual aspects of our lives and careers - which sometimes become larger and brighter and sometimes not - spoke volumes about how we as academics deal with the themes that we identified through our self reflection in the action learning set.

The themes will now be discussed with examples of how we constructed them in the stories that we shared.

Theme 1: Our Backgrounds and Feelings of Imposter Syndrome

We established commonality in our backgrounds and feelings associated with not belonging or being different. This we related to our access routes to HE i.e. coming from a non-traditional background to undertake postgraduate level study. From telling our stories it was clear that we had common features in our views of self, often feeling we were different from others because of our background and prior life experiences and expectations. These are detailed below:

“As a non-traditional learner I sometimes feel less worthy because I never did a first degree. The council sponsored me to continue my education by doing a BTEC in Public Administration and a specialist Professional Qualification alongside full time work. On moving into Higher Education, the university sector supported completion of a specialist MSc in Research and the PhD alongside working as a Senior and Principal Lecturer” (A1)

“I wasn't particularly encouraged at school, I had to fight to be heard - typical 1970s/80s schooling, I am a girl, girls didn't do science etc. My parents were mostly bothered that I

didn't get pregnant because the neighbours would have had something to say about that and I grew up determined that I wouldn't apologise or explain nor be driven by what someone else thought" (A2)

"I have always been a second class/second best academic, not an academic at all really. despite being considered something of a genius as a young child. My entry into the academic world through an FE college 'access' course and a Polytechnic degree assured my 'second class' status"(A3)

Theme 2: Pedagogy for Supporting Development of Reflection

We discussed how we had discovered the benefits of reflection for our learning and particularly in relation to our views on pedagogy and praxis.

"I was first introduced to reflective practice when studying for my PGCE in 2001. However it was not until later in around 2007/8 when I moved into the Higher Education sector that I really started to think about what reflection was and more importantly how reflection could help me"

"I have to say teaching reflective practice to full time and part time students became a most uncomfortable and distressing experience prompting me to challenge all I had learnt about teaching adults over the last 20 years. (A1)

My approach now, as a teacher, is to see that those learners for whom I am responsible are nurtured, encouraged and set free in their thinking through being given permission to daydream, wonder, question and explore" (A3)

"As part of collecting data for my PhD I asked students to help me with my research. One student who I thought was not engaging in classroom taught sessions on reflective practice agreed to come along to the focus group meetings. And through the focus group meetings and being questioned and challenged he started to understand what was required of him in the classes..... I have to say listening to and observing this student develop reflective skills at the focus group meetings was a revelation, both to him and to me ... In one of the meetings he made reference to the work of Collins and Karsenti (2011), this was in relation to Collins and Karsenti's work on reflection and the importance of having dialogue with self and with others. He stated the need to talk to self and talk to others was what helped him learn to reflect and learn from his experiences. After sharing this experience the student became one of my most engaged students, joining in lessons and supporting other students who didn't quite get 'it'." (A1)

And through sharing our stories we discussed our experiences of working with students exploring learning processes and how learning from our stories has helped us examine the need for new pedagogical tools that support students in analysing the different facets of their lives that make up who they are and who they want to be, hence the mandala.

Collectively learning from sharing our stories supported deeper insight into who we are and why we work in the way we do, some of this we believe relates to areas of commonality established from having completed a non-traditional doctoral journey. A route into higher education significantly different from many of our academic peers, particularly in relation to academics in Russell Group universities travelling a traditional academic route - first degree, doctoral study and progressing to Lecturer, Reader, Professor. Our route into academia was more diverse, sharing our stories revealed we all had experiences working in the 'real world', ie. outside of academia and combining full time work with part time study. Working in our action learning set gave us the opportunity to explore areas of commonality that helped support deeper

insight and understanding of ourselves and established a strong bond and trust in our relationships with each other. This we wish to replicate with our students as part of developing the skills of reflection and reflexivity.

The key learning point for us in this period was - just like the childhood kaleidoscope - once a pattern is created that reflects your being, it only ever moves forward. You can't reverse a kaleidoscope and revisit an image. That is the past. And like us, once we learned to reflect on our practice, we could never undo that process. Nor did we want to.

We felt this sharing of our stories enabled us to understand our abilities to be critically reflexive. Storytelling in the context of an action learning set demonstrates our engagement "through the interactive process of giving, sharing, listening, asking questions, and comparing one's own and others' stories that we gain new insights" (Friend and Thompson, 2003, 25). Furthermore engaging in the process of action learning and storytelling we noted the confidence this gave us in sharing this process was enabled by feeling confident to share personal experiences that led to insight into the influences that had made us who we are today. We attributed this to feelings of safety and security working in our current environment. aspects of our story in a safe environment, our stories helping us understand the influences of how we became who we are today. We noted that working in our current institution, one environment where we feel valued as organisational members. We believe these feelings allowed us the confidence to experiment and follow our instincts and to develop a new conceptual tool as a way of enhancing our pedagogical practice. Storytelling, action learning and using the metaphor of the Mandala are powerful tools for learning about one's self and relationships with others (critical reflexivity) and using a Mandala demonstrates the ever changing nature of our experiences.

CONCLUSION

We are working at a time of fractured teaching and learning processes in Higher Education. This is a time to reflect, critically, on the meaning, purpose and delivery of learning in a new 'blended' environment. As learning practitioners, both in terms of our own learning and encouraging the learning of others, we feel that we need to explore this shift in terms of a 'Mandala', where disintegration and reintegration of practices are possible, towards a more informed method.

It is important that we plan to put our learning into practice and to evaluate its outcomes, to continue creating mandalas. As such, this paper is developmental and presents the first steps on our journey, which will necessarily evolve through our collective learning and the experiences, feedback and contributions of others. This will lead us towards a reintegration of a wide range of learning fragments which we hope will provide a more deeply layered and textured - vibrant - approach to teaching and learning in HE.

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