

The Process of Integrating Experience with Learning of First Year Social Work Students

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Abstract

The student's experience plays an important part in his or her learning, particularly in the subject of social work. This is because many of the social work concepts and knowledge are closely related to human experience. Based on Kolb's experiential theory, the authors held a study to examine the use of small group teaching in facilitating reflective learning of students on own experience. The data was collected through small group sharing, focused individual interviews and a structured questionnaire. This paper reports part of the results found in the study. It will outline the process of reflective thinking of students in a selected module of our social work training programme. Based on the analysis of the data, the pattern, sequence and preferred venue of practising reflective learning, the influence of personal characteristics and teaching on practising reflective learning will be discussed. The paper will further suggest means to facilitate students to shape reflective learning as a conscious and continuing practice.

Significance of Life Experience in Learning

It has long been advocated that experience provides the basis for learning (Osterman, 1990; Boud, 1993; Grimmet, 1990). Dewey (1933) and Kolb's (1975) experiential theory has proposed that reflection is a critical step in the learning process. It is through reflection that new meaning and significance are attached to past experience, leading to a reconstruction of knowledge and integration of knowledge with experience. Hart (1990) echoes that reflection raises to a conscious level the unconscious thoughts, assumptions and patterns that guide actions, thus making change possible. Reflection is here defined as the 'self-critical and analytic process to examine the assumptions underlying one's behaviors and its implication'.

Stemming from this concept of experiential learning, many of our teaching methods accord great importance to the provision of structured experience to students in the forms of role plays, experiential games and field practicum. Boud (1993), however, addresses the significance of our day to day life experience as an important input in learning, although it is rarely recognised as such. This is particularly true in the field of social work. In social work education, there are far much literature and research on reflective practice, especially in fieldwork. Seldom are there any systematic investigations on the utilisation of students' life experience to enhance classroom learning. Furthermore, many of the social work concepts and knowledge are closely related to human experience, such as interpersonal relationship, small group experience, etc. If students can be sensitised to reflect from daily life experience, it will be a valuable source and tool of learning.

Experience, however, does not automatically lead to reflection. Smith and McCormick (1992) point out that learners either are not aware of the relationship between learning and experience, or tend to undervalue the intrinsic value of their own experience and the learning derives from them. Berkey et al. (1990) proposed that to achieve learning, reflection should be done on a voluntary basis. Moreover, the repertoire that a learner brings with him/her, and his/her ability to draw on a level of reflection are important factors in reflective learning (Osterman, 1990; Grimmet, 1990).

Environment helps or hinders the students' reflective process. Wildman et al. (1990) and Berkey et al. (1990) highlight the availability of time as an important factor. The administrative climate in school (Wildman et al., 1990) as well as the learning culture may also affect the process.

Methodology

As there are few studies on the utilisation of life experience to enhance classroom learning in the local scene, our research attempted to explore the students' process of integrating classroom knowledge with life experience through reflection (hereafter termed as the reflective learning method). We also tried to identify the factors that may affect the students' learning, hoping that these findings will shed light on our teaching.

The target of our research was 160 first year students in our Diploma in Social Work course. An introductory module named Social Work Practice was chosen for experimentation. This module was a year long module with weekly mass lectures complemented by bi-weekly small group tutorials. In the lectures, important concepts and principles of social work were introduced, while the tutorials were utilised as the venue for students to practice reflection. The tutorials were in the form of small group teaching with a tutor-student ratio of 1:10. This allowed more time for mutual exchange and sharing among tutor-students and the students themselves. The themes of the tutorials corresponded to those of the lectures taught in that week or so. It was designed, as far as possible, to give the students chances to relate their experience with the theme of the tutorials. The students were expected to recall their experience before each tutorial, to reflect on them, then to share and process this experience in the tutorials. An example of the tutorial discussion guideline is illustrated below :

Theme of tutorial: Giving and seeking help

Discussion Guidelines:

- 1 Lead students to share their experiences of seeking/giving help in the past. At that time, what were:
 - their feelings/emotions prior to the act of help-seeking/giving
 - their impressions of the helper/helpee
 - their feelings during the help-seeking/giving process
 - their expectations of the helper/helpee, e.g., the role each party played, the kinds of assistance needed.
- 2 After the sharing, further discuss with the students on:
 - if there are any similarities/differences in their experiences
 - do they know why there are such similarities and differences
 - what they expect a social work helping will be, will it be different from lay-helping.

The tutors were involved in designing and evaluating the progress of the reflective learning process. The students were alerted of the essence of reflective learning at the beginning of the semester in order to heighten their awareness of the relationship between learning and experience.

Data was collected through structured questionnaires, individual interviews and group sharing. Students were asked to fill in a checklist twice every semester which gives quantitative data regarding students' stage of reflective learning, their feelings towards it as well as perception of lecturers' attitudes and behaviors helpful to their reflective learning. Focused interviews were conducted once every semester to collect more in-depth information from students concerning their

reflective process, their feelings and factors that affect their learning. Totally, forty-eight students were interviewed.

Findings

Usefulness of Reflective Learning

Responses towards reflective learning were favorable. Over 80% of the students in their checklists, and all students in the interviews had positive attitudes toward reflective learning. They found it useful to their learning. Many expressed that it helped to deepen their understanding as well as memory of classroom teaching. For example, one student said, 'I no longer relied on rote memorisation. I really could grasp what the words in the books meant when I did my reflection.' Other citations included: 'I will say it is not really learning, it works like a mirror, helping me to experience my day-to-day experience.'; 'In the past, you just heard (what the lecturer said), you felt so detached, but now when I talk about my own experience, I really get the feel.'

Reflective Learning Process

The students' reports of their own experience with this reflective learning method were analysed to give a picture of their reflective process. The contents of reflection was first discussed, followed by their sequence and patterns of reflection:

Contents of Reflection

The contents of reflection which the students cited in the interviews were mostly related to social work. For the interviews in Semester A, experience in groups was the major topic reported, while casework concepts, such as termination in casework relationship were mostly mentioned in Semester B. This was quite natural as it corresponded to the sequence of the Social Work Practice module contents. Some of them expressed that it was easier to reflect on social work concepts because social work was related to life experiences, while some said it was more concrete. Nonetheless, some students reported their experience in other modules as well, including psychology (e.g., personality, reinforcement) and sociology (e.g., culture, norms) modules. This indicates that there is a high transferability of this learning method.

As for the types of experience, more than half of the students drew on daily life experience for reflection. For example, one used his knowledge from the psychology module to analyse the different personality of his family members. Another student quoted, 'Once my friend talked to me about her problems, while I am listening to her, I began to think of the concept of empathy.' The rest would reflect on their experience in previous work experience, such as their experience in running groups. When asked whether they thought work experience was an important factor in enhancing reflection, a majority thought those with work experience would find it easier to practise.

Patterns of Reflection

Kotkamp (1990) suggested that there is a 'temporal' dimension to learning from experience. He distinguishes between 'reflection-on-action' (reflection on a past event) and reflection-in-action (reflection in the midst of an ongoing action). He argues that the latter one is more difficult to achieve, but in fact is a more powerful tool for learning because it very much depends on the sensitivity of learners. This argument was supported by our findings in the interviews. A great majority of the students expressed that it was easier for them to reflect on experience than reflect in experience. Indeed, most of them reported their experience in reflection based on past events. One student

said, 'Once you learn a theory, you search your mind to find a corresponding experience, it is easier this way.' Another expressed, 'It's difficult to think of the theory while you are experiencing.'

Concerning the depth of our students' reflection, Kolb's model of experiential learning (1933) was used as a reference. It views learning as a four stage cycle. Immediate concrete experience forms the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a theory from which new implications for action can be deduced and these implications will lead to further experience. Half of the students were just at the early level of reflection. They were able to associate a concept with experience, or vice versa. A few could go further, as they evaluated their own action in that particular experience and asked questions such as 'how' he/she could handle that situation better. They could be described as 'practice-oriented'. What was lacking, however, were the 'why' questions such as 'Why is it so?' or 'Can there be anything wrong with the concepts itself?' One explanation may be that as students have different interpretations of reflective learning, they thought they had already gone through the learning process and that was what it should be. Or, it has something to do with their ability to go further. Concerning the lack of 'why' questions, it may be typical of the Chinese culture that one seldom challenges, especially those in authority. Students may feel that what is written in the books or taught by the lecturers should be right, so they think that they themselves do not understand the material being taught.

Most literature supports that reflection should be a 'conscious and systematic method' (Osterman, 1992; Wildman, 1996). This seems not to be the case with our students. Though all students viewed the reflective learning method positively, findings from both checklists and interviews revealed that their motivation for practicing it was not high. Over 60% of the students described the process as a spontaneous one in the checklist. Only around 25% did it deliberately. Similar responses were found in the interviews, particularly the ones in Semester A. A few students even remarked, 'It will indeed be painful and stressful if I have to do it (reflection) deliberately.' A few admitted that the reflective process was 'fragmented'. One described the reflection as just a flash crossing the mind. Another said the thought came suddenly: 'If it comes, let it come', but she would not think deeply into this thought. Therefore, it seemed that their process was rather unstructured and unsystematic.

In short, though students were rather positive about this reflective learning method, their reflections were not thorough enough, and more efforts needed to be put to enhance their learning.

Factors Affecting the Reflective Learning Process

These factors can broadly be classified into two levels: one level concerns the personal factors of the learner, including the students' repertoire of experience and learning patterns. Another deals with the learning environment, such as the workload, teaching skills and institutional setting.

Personal Factors of the Learner

Repertoire of Experience

Half of the students in the interviews felt that they were handicapped by an inadequate repertoire of experience. One third said it would be easier if they had experience related to what had been taught in class. 'I have participated in groups before, therefore, it is easier for me (to do reflection).' Some students lamented, 'It is so difficult if one does not have that kind of experience.' 'I have a poor memory, I hardly remember anything relevant.' Several thought it really made a difference if they had work experience in the social work field. However, we have pointed out earlier that social work is a profession that deals with people. Everyday, we are immersed in the flux of human encounters, therefore, we should be rich in interpersonal experience. What matters more may be our recognition of the value of this experience, our sensitivity to these daily human encounters and our ability for imagination to link up this experience.

Learning Patterns

It seems that the ability for reflection was closely related to the learning pattern of students. Around one fifth of the students in the interviews expressed that they had been practicing reflective learning. Only then they learnt that it could be termed as reflective learning. They, therefore, had no difficulty in doing reflection. Another one fifth of the students, however, stated that they did have difficulties in using this method since they were trained to memorise texts in their previous schooling. A few sadly admitted that they were weak in critical thinking: 'I am a person who did not like to think.' Therefore, our students varied in their learning pattern. This might affect their motivation and ability for reflection. As teachers, one should take note of these individual differences.

Environmental Factors

Time

Almost half of the students regarded time as an important factor. Many said they were so busy that they could hardly find time for reflection. Some examples of the student feedback included: 'Average speaking, we have one assignment from each module, which we have to complete within three months, not mentioning the time needed to prepare for the examination. Time is really tight.' 'I only have time for reflection when I am on my way to and from school only.' Practicing reflection takes time, particularly in the beginning stage. The classes of our social work students are long in duration and their assignment load is heavy. Moreover, many of them worked part-time, so they complain about the workload, saying that they did not have time to think.

Classmates

Around 40% of students indicated in the checklist that they reflected more during discussions with friends and classmates, either informally or during tutorials. When we explored in the interviews the usefulness of tutorial, our students in general showed positive attitudes. Some of the benefits of the tutorials that they quoted were: 'It helps to widen my thinking. If I am on my own, my thoughts tend to be simple and direct.' 'It allows me space to think. I have never thought of the things which some of my classmates said in the tutorials. It surely gives me stimulation.' The relaxing atmosphere in the tutorials and intimate relationship among group members were also viewed by some students as positive factors contributing to their reflection.

Teachers

Data from both checklists and interviews suggested that most students expected more direction from teachers, which would range from teachers' requiring the students to recall their experience during class, helping them to link their experience with classroom learning, directly asking students questions about their own experience and teachers' self-disclosure of their own experience. This expectation was clearly raised by one student who said in the interview, 'It would be much better if we have guidance from teachers. I cannot possibly do it on my own. I need the lecturer's stimulation, it deepens my impression.' Another student expressed, 'I depend on the lecturer to instruct me on how to think. It helps.'

These responses run contrary to our expectation that a reflective learner should be quite independent and self-directive. The explanation might be that the reflective learning method was new to most of the students and that they had not fully grasped the skills in reflection. As some students wished that the lecturer would 'self-disclose his/her experience', which came third on the list of expectations in the checklist, this possibly fulfilled the need of the students for a model in the reflective process. In addition, culture may also be an important factor, as Chinese are more inclined to depend on an authority figure to tell them what to do. The students were fearful or not confident enough to venture into the reflective process by themselves. They needed someone of author-

ity to tell them whether they were on the right track or not. This was particularly obvious in the first semester when nearly one half of the students interviewed said they did not know or were not sure whether they had been practicing reflective learning.

Apart from the leading role, the facilitating role of a lecturer (though to a lesser extent) was also recognised by the students as useful. The patience, friendliness and warmth of the lecturers were regarded as important attributes. The students expected the lecturers to listen attentively, give support, encouragement and some hints to facilitate their thinking. When comparing the checklists in Semester A and B, there was a decline on the usefulness of the leading roles of lecturers, and a corresponding recognition for the facilitating roles. This was an indication that the students were gradually less dependent on the lecturers for direction.

Implications for Social Work Teaching

Students welcomed the reflective learning method and found it useful. Therefore, it is worth promoting it in social work training. In response to the factors discussed above which affect the reflective process of students, the following recommendations are proposed:

Students' Understanding of Reflective Learning

Some of the students were not certain whether they were practicing reflective learning, especially at the beginning of the semester. This induced some sense of uncertainty which needed to be alleviated. Otherwise, it will impede the reflective process. Moreover, more effort needs to be made to help students recognise the intrinsic value of their own life experience as a rich source of learning. Therefore, more systematic ways of training students on reflective thinking are necessary. There are various means to attain this goal: (1) The essence and significance of reflective learning needs to be clarified by detailed briefing sessions. This is to help students to acknowledge their own role and strengths in learning, hence to raise their motivation for reflection. (2) Workshops can be arranged to promote students' understanding and acquisition of the necessary skills. (3) The use of tools such as diaries, logs to help the students to develop a habit in reflection as well as increase their sensitivity to their own experience, no matter it is a past or ongoing experience.

Teachers' Role

The fact that students do look up to the lecturers for guidance and models, teachers' need to be reflective themselves, and share with the students their own reflection. Teachers can take a more active role in promoting reflective learning through person-to-person contacts and encouraging sharing among students/teachers.

Concerning the roles of teachers, they need to take up both leading and facilitating roles in helping the students to process their experience, though the latter is more important in the long run. The facilitating role helps encourage the students to try, to endorse the value of students' own experience and to promote a sense of self-direction among students. At the beginning, when the students are still not used to this learning method, a more directive role is required. The lecturers can gradually relinquish their leading role once the students understand what reflective learning is and have acquired the learning pattern.

Institutional Support

Most important of all are the supports of the school in terms of the design of curriculum, teaching methods, assignments, etc. These include: (1) The early introduction of this reflective learning method to the students so they can develop the pattern as soon as possible. (2) The reduction in the number of assignments to allow the students more time for reflection. (3) The design of the course

contents and assignments to incorporate the students' daily experience. (4) The promotion of a learning culture, so that students can freely share their ideas in groups. The use of small group learning such as tutorials where students can have more chances for interaction and participation is a good starting point. (5) Provision of informal opportunities for students to enrich their life experience and exposure to various social issues and problems. In fact, the whole spirit and philosophy of the social work programme and the implementation should all aim to promote reflective culture among the students, both formally and informally.

In examining the reflective process of the students, it seems that the students have the sense of 'lack of experience' rather than real. Reflective practice is itself a socialisation process. Students need to be stimulated in a safe environment and be encouraged to try.