

DISTINGUISHED EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Category: Professional Practice Innovation Award

Title: Exploration of effective reflective practice amongst PGCE students

Paul McFlynn

Summary: The case study focuses on the planning, implementation and review of reflective practice approaches with PGCE students. Students engaged with a range of reflective practice approaches as well as different modes of capturing their reflections. These approaches were shared with other PGCE staff. Student feedback was central to informing and shaping future work in this area.

Keywords: Reflection, Innovation, Improvement

What was done?

Students had the opportunity to write reflections, audio record reflections and video record reflections. Students also engaged in peer review whereby they observed each other on school experience and then reflected on these experiences, in the absence of University staff, aiming to provide students with more ownership of this process. Student feedback was provided in the form of an anonymous survey, thus allowing me to evaluate and reflect on my approach in this area. The student feedback informed and shaped the ongoing learning and teaching in this area. This case study aligns closely with the five and fifty strategy, where the focus is on developing and delivering 'innovative curricula using contemporary methods of pedagogy' and supporting and developing 'staff to develop excellence in teaching and learning'. This is novel and innovative since reflective practice is an element that has received much criticism in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), often described as rigid and structured. This study shows that reflective practice is much more complex and that the utilisation of different approaches provided students with enhanced learning opportunities.

Motivation and aims

Prior to this case study, External Examiner reports highlighted that the course team should focus on developing students' Reflective Practice skills. In response to these comments, I selected a random sample of student reflections from across our eight PGCE subjects and assessed them using Larrivee's (2000) framework. 85% of these reflections were graded pre-reflective (level 1) with the remaining 15% graded as surface (level 2), meaning none of the reflections were graded as pedagogical (level 3) or critical (level 4). It is important to note that it is common for pre-service teachers to produce low level reflections (Akbari, 2007). The purpose of this case study was therefore to improve the reflective practice of our PGCE students. Central to this was providing opportunities for students to explore various approaches and then select approaches that suited them as an individual. Improving their reflective skills should help to improve their teaching and ultimately, enhance pupil learning.

Implementation

During school experience one, students completed written reflections which were shared with their subject group and tutor via an online discussion area, allowing students to collaborate and engage in professional dialogue. Towards the end of this placement, audio recorded reflections and video recorded reflections were introduced. The decision to introduce audio recorded and video recorded reflections was based on feedback from students during their review day (they returned to University for a one-day review of school experience in early December) where they felt that speaking their reflective thoughts was easier than formally writing their thoughts. Students could use Gibbs' (1998) framework to help support their reflective thoughts or they were free to design their own reflective format. During school experience 2 (SE2), students engaged with the process of peer review. The peer review process involved students travelling to each other's school to observe their partner teaching. Following the observation, the reviewer would provide feedback to the individual who taught the lesson and this feedback was used to help shape and inform the post lesson reflection. At the end of SE2, the students provided feedback on their reflective practice work, which I used to inform my approach during the next academic year. All post-primary PGCE students (84) were involved in this process.

Successes and lessons learnt

Introducing students to a range of reflective approaches and different ways of capturing their reflections improved students' motivation to engage with reflective practice and positively impacted their teaching and pupil learning. In response to 'Did reflection help improve your approach to teaching and learning?', 72 students stated that it did help, with just 3 stating that it did not help. The following student comment highlights the effectiveness of the reflective practice work, 'reflection was absolutely key to my growth as a teacher... it allowed me to evaluate my performance and the students' learning, analyse why things went well or poorly with an objective eye, keep my distance from taking things personally, but also to learn and adapt my teaching to better support my students'. Only a small number of students preferred video recorded reflection with the majority preferring to audio record their reflections. The use of an anonymous survey allowed students to respond openly and the inclusion of qualitative responses provided me with in-depth information that allowed me to understand the impact of these reflective practice approaches and thus help shape and inform future practice in this area. Students reported that they liked discussing their practice with school staff or peers and that such discussions generated rich learning opportunities. In response to this, the incoming PGCE cohort will have the opportunity to engage in weekly online reflective collaborative discussions in groups of 3 – 6. It is important to note that during school experience 2 (March – May), many students began to reflect at a pedagogical level (level 3), indicating that the new approach was benefitting students' reflective skills.

Transferability

As a result of this study, the primary course director and all eight post-primary course directors have embedded these reflective practice approaches within their courses, with audio recorded reflections being the most utilised approach across the PGCE courses. The most recent EE report provides evidence of colleagues implementing these approaches, where it states, 'there was also a marked improvement in students' reflective practice, both in terms of students' perceptions of it and the

quality of their outcomes.... the course director has been leading in this aspect of the programme for a few years now so I would like to commend him particularly, but also the whole programme team for a concerted and united approach here' (Viv John, 2021). The Course Director for PGCE PE at Chester University (where I am EE) has adopted the use of audio recorded reflections and peer review with his students.

Further information

McFlynn, P. (2019) Supporting beginning physical education teachers to become reflective practitioners. In: Capel, S.; and Lawrence, J. (Eds) *A practical guide: Mentoring Physical Education Teachers in the Secondary School*, Routledge.