

Teachers' Conception of Reflection in Service-Learning

Sarah C.Y. Chung, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

1. ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS

In service-learning pedagogy, reflection is important in enhancing students' learning and attaining some expected learning outcomes. Different studies highlight that teachers have a critical role to facilitate students to have their reflection in their service-learning courses. Yet, scarce studies investigate how teachers understand reflection in terms of its meaning and roles in service-learning. This study examined teachers' conception of reflection in service-learning by adopting a qualitative approach and employing semi-structured interviews with 24 teachers who developed service-learning subjects and/or have been teaching service-learning subjects in one of the large public universities in Hong Kong. The findings supported that teachers shared the similar concepts of reflections in service-learning literatures, while it showed some emerging insights on how teachers perceived reflection. It also suggested that some teachers have relatively narrow understanding of reflection based on their teaching experiences and professional expertise. Implication of the findings for teachers' practices of reflection in service-learning and future research directions were also discussed.

Keywords: Teachers' conception, Reflection, Service-learning

2. INTRODUCTION

Reflection is one of the key components in service-learning pedagogy. Many studies have emphasized the role of reflection in enhancing students' learning. It is known that if reflection is to be effective, teachers need to create a trusting learning environment for students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Past research also suggests that designing effective reflection activities is a crucial element for quality service-learning programs (Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004). Obviously, how teachers understand reflection would affect how they integrate reflection into their teaching. Yet, studies about teachers' conception of reflection in education are relatively scant (Çimer & Paliç, 2012; Laverick, 2017). This study aims to bridge the gap by investigating teachers' conception of the meaning and role of reflection in service-learning.

Sarah C.Y. Chung, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Email: sarah.cy.chung@polyu.edu.hk.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Reflection and reflective thinking

Dewey (1933) defines reflective thinking as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the groups that support it and the future conclusions to which it tends [that] constitutes reflective thought” (p. 9), and casts it as an educational goal. Schön (1983) further practice as a dialogue between thinking and doing, through which individuals can more critically review their experiences / actions, which can further stimulate their academic growth. Boud et al. (1985) defined reflection as “an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (p. 19), which could lead to new understandings or appreciations to the learners.

Though these major theoretical approaches suggest different ways of conceptualizing reflection, they share some common elements in their definitions of reflection (Rogers, 2001). Reflection serves as a cognitive and affective process or activity of individuals, through which they reflect on their unexpected situation or experience by exploring and re-examining their responses, underlying beliefs, and premises, and eventually integrate the new understanding into their experience so as to take better choices/actions in the future.

3.2 Reflection in service-learning

Service-learning researchers and practitioners emphasize that reflection serves as an important link between community experience and academic learning. Eyler (2001) stated that “reflection is the hyphen in service-learning” (p. 35). Reflection serves as the process to help students make a connection with what they experience in the community with their academic study. Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah (2004) further summarize the commonality between different service-learning scholars’ conception of reflection to illustrate the role of reflection in service-learning:

“When reflection activities engage the learner in examining and analyzing the relationship between relevant, meaningful service and the interpretative template of a discipline, there is enormous potential for learning to broaden and deepen along academic, social, moral, personal, civic dimensions.” (p. 39)

3.3 Teacher’ understanding of reflection in education

There are limited studies examining teachers’ understanding of reflection in literature. Çimer and Paliç (2012) investigated teachers’ perceptions and practice of reflection by interviewing 7 secondary school teachers and assessing their weekly guided journal entries. Their study suggested that the teachers had inadequate understanding of reflection and relatively low level of reflectivity. Laverick (2017) showed that teachers mainly defined reflection as a merely meaning-making process which students create meaning out of experiences by connecting one experience to another, but they neglected other elements of reflection, such as reflective as a rigorous way of thinking, reflection on community and reflection as a set of attitudes. These studies have some interesting research implications, but they share some common limitations. First,

their relatively small number of teachers selected from one single school makes their findings less generalizable. Besides, they both focus on the understanding of reflection among secondary school teachers in an American context. On the contrast, studies examining teachers' understanding of reflection in higher education and in other cultural contexts can barely be found in the literature.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in one large public university in Hong Kong by using a qualitative approach and semi-structured individual interviews. The target participants were teachers involved in the development of service-learning subjects/projects and/or had taught a credit-bearing service-learning subject for at least one semester during 2012/13 and 2016/17 academic years. This study employs a purposive sampling design. Out of a total of 65 service-learning teachers, 24 were randomly selected based on their academic discipline and experience in teaching service-learning. The selected teachers were invited to attend a face-to-face semi-structured individual interview by an invitation email. Non-respondents were followed up twice by reminder emails and phone calls.

Altogether 24 teachers were interviewed. In the interviews, teachers were asked to describe their understanding of reflection and the role of reflection in service-learning. With the teachers' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese for data analysis. The data from the interviews were coded, categorized and analyzed by using the grounded theory approach.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data analysis, two main themes of teachers' conception of reflection were identified: *Tool for students' learning* and *Tool for teachers* (See Figure 1).

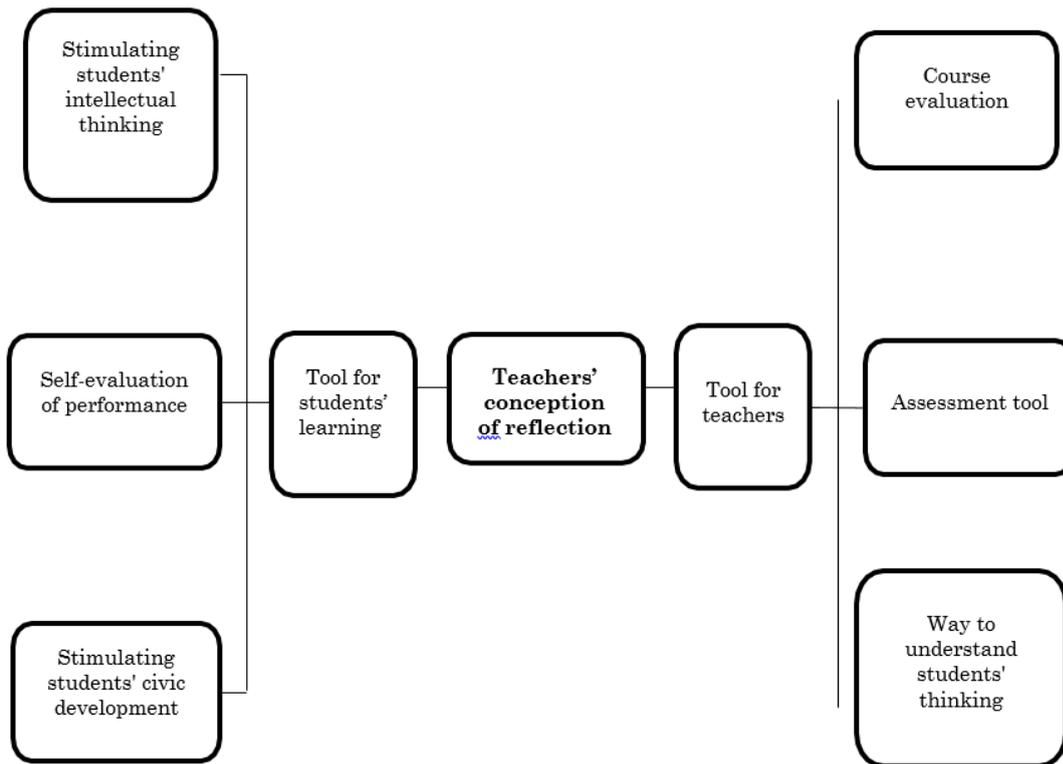


Figure 1: Themes of teachers' conception of reflection in service-learning

5.1 Tool for students' learning

Many teachers regarded reflection as a tool for stimulating students' learning. They saw reflection as aiding in three dimensions of student learning, albeit with varying degrees of perceived importance.

Stimulating students' intellectual thinking

Many teachers emphasized the role of reflection to stimulate students' intellectual thinking. The perceived benefit of reflection to students was thus in the sense that reflection can stimulate students' critical thinking and develop their meta-cognitive skills. Teachers also agreed that reflection facilitated students to re-examine their existing values, beliefs, and practices, generate new understanding and transform their perspectives.

Self-evaluation of performance

Some teachers viewed reflection as more of a vehicle for students to self-evaluate their performance in the service-learning subjects. Through evaluating their own performance, students can learn where they have done well and identify their areas of improvement. Students can also realize the need for self-growth by recognizing their strengths, weaknesses and potentials, through reviewing and consolidating their experiences.

Stimulating students' civic development

Developing students' civic thinking through reflection was more emphasized by some teachers. They expected students to think beyond the classroom and develop a sense of commitment to the society through deeper reflection on

community needs and their own contribution to the community after taking their service-learning subjects.

5.2 Tool for teachers

Instead of recognizing reflection as a tool for students' learning, some teachers also highlighted the role of reflection as a tool for teachers. Three different dimensions were mentioned.

Course evaluation

Some teachers viewed students' reflection as more a means of evaluating their service-learning subjects. For example, students' perceived learning gains mentioned in their reflections can provide insights into the academic input and service arrangement. This can lead to improvements in the subject design for maximizing the learning outcomes.

Assessment tool

The role of reflection as an assessment tool was mentioned by some teachers. They viewed reflection as a kind of assessment that can be used to grade students in a credit-bearing service-learning subject. They also stated that using reflection to assess students' learning gains in service-learning was suitable.

Way to understand students' thinking

Some teachers feel that they are better able to gain an insight into underlying insights/thoughts about students' learning experiences through reflection. Through reading their reflection, teachers can understand more about students' thinking and have the chance to respond to these ideas/thoughts.

This study finds that teachers have the views similar to conventional views of reflection from service-learning literature while it also offers an emerging insight into how some teachers perceive reflection – not so much as a tool for *learning*, but as a tool for *teaching*. More importantly, our findings show that teachers have varying degrees of emphasis on how they perceive reflection under the two identified themes. For example, many teachers viewed reflection as a tool for learning, but they usually emphasized one dimension only. Some mainly emphasize the role in stimulating students' intellectual thinking while some mainly focus more on self-evaluation of performance or stimulating students' civic development.

Our findings suggest that teachers possess different insights into the rationale underpinning the integration of reflection into academic service-learning, which have some implications for teachers' practices of reflection in service-learning. Previous work suggests that how teachers understand reflection has a critical impact on their practices of reflection. Beveridge et al. (2014) found that student misconception about the purpose of using reflection in a course, together with instructors' limited guidance, would prompt students to use reflection for merely self-assessment. Cheng and Wong (2017) suggest that teachers with higher levels of reflectivity are more motivated to explore emerging teaching practices, not only where students' learning is concerned, but also with respect to society outside the classroom. Our findings suggest that teachers have different concepts of

reflection, and this may well lead to different motivations for using reflection in the service-learning subjects. This motivation, in turn, will inevitably influence the design and focus of the reflection activities, and how teachers prompt students what to reflect, which may adversely influence students' learning outcomes.

Besides, our findings show that some teachers have relatively narrow understanding of reflection based on their teaching experiences and professional expertise. They mainly emphasize one dimension for students' learning, which will influence them to prompt students to reflect their service-learning experiences in a single perspective. This will certainly narrow the scope of students' reflection resulting in weakening the benefits that students can gain from reflection. We suggest that teachers should be more aware of different notions of reflection so that they can prompt students to reflect on their service-learning experiences from different dimensions.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

This study presents an understanding into teachers' conceptions of reflection in academic service-learning. We show that while teachers often share the same concepts of reflections as in previous work, there are some emerging findings that have not previously been discussed. This suggests further investigation on how teachers' understanding of reflection affect their practices of reflection. Yet, this study has its limitations. Firstly, though this study involved more participants than previous similar studies, it was conducted in one single university only. Besides, the study was conducted in Hong Kong, which is an Asian context. The findings are not always generalizable to other cultural contexts. More comprehensive and in-depth studies involving more institutions with cross-cultural context can provide a more holistic picture about teachers' understanding of the meaning and role of reflection in service-learning.

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