Critical Reflection and Student Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper looks at an alternative teaching and learning approach in an adult education course and examines the ways of developing student autonomy by fully engaging them in critical reflection. If we believe that knowledge is the result of knowing and that learning is the business of extending the breadth of knowing, then education is a way to help students extend their experience of knowing and to gain a better understanding of learning. This article, drawing from a participatory action research project, discusses the role of critical reflection which warrants this kind of learning. This paper will show that during the process of critical reflection, while students recapture their experience, think about it and evaluate it, new experience becomes meaningful and thus new knowledge is made. It will also show how students gain a better understanding of self and become active learners.

Keywords: Education – Critical – Reflection – Student - Autonomy.

Introduction

It is believed that knowledge is the result of knowing and that learning is the business of extending the breadth of knowing. It is also believed that one of the aims of formal education is to help students extend their experience of knowing and to gain a better understanding of learning. In other words, education is to help students understand that to learn is to make meaning from experience. Critical reflection as an important human activity warrants this kind of learning. When people recapture their experience, think about it and evaluate it, meaning of the experience is then made and opportunities for new learning are created.

This article examines the role of critical reflection in student learning as the major outcome of a participatory action research project and discusses how a group of students were fully engaged in critical reflection during the course they were undertaking. This article will demonstrate that, when students are engaged in critical self-reflection, facts and skills are learned more effectively, and that students are more motivated in skill development and personal transformation, which in turn will empower students to become active and autonomous learners.

The context of the study

The study was done within Batchelor Institute with a group of Indigenous students undertaking a Graduate Diploma course in Adult Education. Batchelor Institute, located in the Northern Territory Australia, is a tertiary institution for Indigenous adults only. The majority of students come from Indigenous communities within the Northern Territory, but in recent years, the institute has

attracted more and more Indigenous students from other parts of Australia such as Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia.

When discussing issues of Indigenous education in Australia, a common concern is the quality of education. Probably due to the political nature of Indigenous Education, in some tertiary courses, Indigenous students "are not required to perform at the same academic level as non-Aboriginal students studying towards the same award or same level of award" (McDaniel & Flowers, 1995, p.238). Such dilemma was noted a decade ago, and still exists today. As part of the consequence, it is observed, the Indigenous students graduated from those courses do not have the necessary skills to cope with the requirement of workplace or they do not have the necessary skills to cope with the requirement of academic life (McDaniel & Flowers, 1995). The majority of the students enrolled in the graduate diploma courses at Batchelor Institute were products of that kind of education.

Graduate Diploma in Adult Education was one of the few post graduate courses offered by the institute in 2002. As it was a new course, some units of the course only had a small number of students which allowed a flexible teaching mode. The unit "Investigative Project" was one of those units. This unit requires students to undertake an individual research project in education using qualitative approaches and to write up a research report at the end of the course. It is a practical unit to develop students' critical thinking skills and analytical skills. The participatory action research took place in this unit.

The students enrolled in this research unit "Investigative Project" came from different organizations such as Aboriginal Community Clinic, Regional Land Council, etc. Most of them were graduates from universities other than Batchelor Institute.

What became apparent while teaching those students at the beginning of the course was that not only lacking necessary critical thinking and reflection skills to assess their own learning, most students had poor literacy skills and inadequate reading comprehension ability. It also became apparent that most students in that group had developed, from their previous studies, a habit of depending on ITAS[i] tutors for their written assignments. Now in this research unit, they found it difficult to line up with a tutor in conducting a research project because the research required some hand-on activities which could not be done by others except the researchers themselves. Apart from that there were not many tutors who had much understanding in educational research. So the challenge facing the students was that they had to rely on themselves to learn to do educational research. However, their lack of critical thinking skills and handicapped study skills would not give them enough power in making decisions and managing learning activities during the course. All the tasks incorporated in an independent research project seemed daunting to them. They were concerned that they might not be able to complete the course. Yet, at the same time, they expressed strong desire of learning some "concrete knowledge and skills of doing a proper research project" (class discussion, 2002).

[i] ITAS – stands for Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme. This program provides free tutorials to Indigenous students after class to help them improve the presentation of their written assignments or to help them improve reading comprehension skills.

Recognizing their difficulties and problems at the beginning stage of the course, the students and the lecturer decided to do a radical change to the teaching and learning approach. In order to increase their capacity of autonomy, it is crucial to have awareness of learning and establishing the high level of mental activity in learners. In other words, the students need to develop their meta-cognitive skills (Little, 1999), such as power of reflection, skills for decision-making and ability to undertake independent action. Thus participatory action research was identified as appropriate for the group to start their new learning journey together. The participatory action research aimed to build up student capacity so that they can control their own learning during the course of study. As a group, the students decided to do a participatory action research project on the first year learners in the higher education courses at Batchelor Institute to find out "What stops students from succeeding in their courses?" The topic came out of a common concern of the attrition rate of students at Batchelor Institute, and the research project generated a number of learning tasks for the students.

The method and the process

Participatory action research, also termed as participatory action learning in the more recent literature, builds on the critical pedagogy as a response to the traditional formal models of education where the teacher stands at the front and imparts information to the students. Participatory action research here is presented as a method and process and as a goal to help the students improve meta-cognitive awareness as well as their performance as learners. It locates the students at the center as learning agents. Instead of waiting for the lecturers to transmit knowledge to them, the students in the project were placed in a position to learn to control their own learning by actively planning, implementing, and monitoring their learning activities to achieve a set of goals. The lecturer's role was a resource person to guide and facilitate student learning. As the research project involved utilizing a systematic cyclical method of planning, taking action, evaluating and critical reflecting (O'Btien, 2001, McNiff, 2002) prior to planning the next learning cycle, the process of this participatory action research was a continuous action learning cycle for the students and all students were required to continuously reflect on their learning from the actions and proceed to initiate new actions on the spot.

The participatory action research was also used as a collaborative method to help the students make meaning of their learning experience and learn to implement independent and informed actions so that student capacity was built up to survive the course.

The key method adopted in this project was problem based learning approach. The problem based learning approach has its origins in Health science, but is now widely used in many professional training courses. The problem based learning approach is the key to link up all the learning cycles in the participatory action research project.

At every cyclical stage of the research project, the students' learning was self-assessed, and their difficulties and problems were identified and matched against the requirement of the course, then new learning tasks were discussed and designed as well as a time frame being set to implement each learning task to

solve the identified problem. In other words, each learning stage had a problem based action learning plan for the students. In this way, the students had a control of their own learning and were constantly engaged in critical reflection during the whole process of the research project.

The project consisted of two major action learning plans for the group. Each action learning plan had a set of goals of addressing identified problems of the group which incorporated the requirement of the course and generated several learning activities. Each learning activity developed by the group had a clear goal of solving the identified problem such as "what do we know about educational research methodology", or "what are the major steps in developing a research plan".

The major requirements of the course were covered over those two action learning plans. The knowledge of research methodology and skills of planning a research project were included in the first action learning plan which prepared them for conducting a research project. The knowledge and skills of collecting data, analyzing data and writing up a report became the major activities in the second action learning plan. It was indeed a journey of learning how to do research by doing a research project together.

When there was a gap between the group activity and individual knowledge, individual students were required to develop individual learning contracts to catch up with knowledge and skills lacked, including their literacy skills.

In general, the students' learning tasks included two modes of activities: group and individual. Group tasks involved differentiating qualitative research from quantitative research, discussing popular methods in educational research and issues related to educational research, especially in the area of Aboriginal education. Group tasks also included identifying appropriate methods and techniques for their proposed research project. These were mainly realized through lectures, group reading activities and class discussions.

Individual tasks involved activities to improve English literacy skills and reading comprehension ability, broaden knowledge of research planning and interviewing techniques. Individual students who had a weak knowledge base were required to negotiate individual learning contracts with the lecturer according to their needs. Most individual learning contracts contained some simple questions against their problems and specific learning activities.

Although there were a number of learning tasks on their action list, the students didn't feel threatened as most actions were to be carried out as a team effort with close supervision from the lecturer and all individual activities had clear instructions and learning steps to achieve specific purposes.

Whether identifying learning needs or developing action learning plans, the students were constantly engaged in critical reflection on their learning journey. To ensure the implementation of individual learning contracts, the students were also required to develop an individual progress file to be evaluated at the end of the course. The progress files contained individual's personal records of learning and achievement such as learning activities planned, self-assessment of the

learning activities carried out, and future plans for personal and professional development.

The learning curves during the learning process

The initial analysis of the course requirement and the students' existing skills and knowledge put the students onto the action learning journey to learn to plan and manage their own learning activities, as well as learning to plan and conduct an educational research project.

There were two parallel lines of the project developed hand in hand. While broaden their skills and knowledge of educational research in the group, the students were also developing self-directed learning skills and critical thinking skills through completing individual learning activities.

The emergent process of the action learning in this study worked effectively to link participation, individual transformation and knowledge generation. It worked well as a means and an end in the development of personal capacity in coping with academic requirement.

There were two major learning curves during the whole learning journey that I want to emphasize here, because these two learning curves demonstrated transformative learning through critical reflection. They also showed the development of self-directed learning skills which increased the student autonomy.

The first learning curve appeared at the stage of data collection and the development of practical research skills, especially in terms of questioning techniques and seeking information from the existing literature. Arguments on what questions should be asked and how to tease out more information from potential participants sometimes became quite heated. After more reading activities on articles about ways of accessing information and interviewing techniques, the students completed a list of open-ending questions for the interviewees, and started their first interview as a trial of questions and as a test of their interviewing skills. Then they were asked to critically reflect on what they learned through the first interview.

While reflecting and evaluating their first interview experience, students all realized that not only some questions were ambiguous, their lack of questioning techniques and lack of self-confidence also created problems when interviewing others. Some of them came back from interviews with little information. It was the students' common feeling that, in order to ask the questions well and to be able to get more information from the interviewees, the students themselves as researchers had to fully understand the purpose of their research project. The awareness of their own problems engaged them in more reading activities and discussions on the problems and concerns in Aboriginal education and educational research which in turn made them fine tune the purpose of the project.

This first critical reflection on their new experience resulted in a new list of revised questions which were clearer and more specific. Those who asked for

ITAS tutors at the beginning of the course made no such request because they had realized that it was their own problem so that they had to learn to solve it themselves. This indicated that the students started to gain the ownership of their problems as well as their own learning. As the interviews proceeded, the students' self-confidence and questioning techniques developed hand in hand.

By the end of the data collection stage, all students had developed questioning skills. They learned to use alternative questions to "pull the interviewee back onto track" or "ask alternative questions for more information on the same topic". Their confidence in questioning technique also indicated that the student had gained a better understanding of the research project.

The second learning curve involved several arguments when the group came together for data analysis. One dilemma we all have is habits of mind which shape and delimit and sometimes distort the way we see things and feel things. Yet, we take that for granted. And those habits tend to limit the way we see the world, the way we feel and think about other people and ourselves. The influence of their habits of mind was reflected in the students' attitude to different opinions when analyzing data. While trying to identify common themes from the data collected, it was not surprising to hear, among the heated discussions, angry exchanges such as *"you're biased', "you only see your community"*. There were too many themes emerged from the investigation. The students' opinions were, at a time, so diverse that the group could not see, or did not want to see the common themes.

However, those problems also became stimuli for more learning. I engaged them in more critical reflection to challenge their own assumptions, which opened up an alternative way to negotiate their values, feelings and meanings but not simply act their lives out on the basis of those they have been taking for granted. I raised more questions such as 'what makes a good learner'; 'what is the background of this argument'. I also made them do more readings to find out what professionals had discovered on the similar issues. This pushed them a bit further in their reading activities followed by a critical self-reflection on their own listening skills and tolerance for differences. It turned out to be very dynamic and active learning which was leading to individual transformation. Finally, three common themes related to the first year learners' study difficulties were pulled out of the data. The students stated after that that they understood better what learning meant to them.

Critical reflection and student autonomy

Knowledge exists within context and within relationships between all entities. To move towards this understanding there is a need to bring meaning to experience at hand. The participatory action research project put the students in the context to negotiate the meaning of their learning experience. The students not only gained a better understanding of the connectedness between things from engaging themselves within curriculum at the level of content, process and practice. They also gained a much better understanding of themselves. Through out the course, critical reflection, which entails critical thinking about one's own learning, was integral to the whole learning process. The critical reflection was

used as a tool to make the experience meaningful and to make learning conscious which maximized their outcomes in learning.

One of the significant learning outcomes of the project is the increased student autonomy. Student autonomy is broadly defined as the capacity to take control of one's own learning (Jing, 2006). To be able to control their own learning, students need self-directed learning skills which include 'acquiring skills in learning how to learn, skills in locating and evaluating resources, competence in applying the knowledge to professional problems and skills in self-evaluation' (Bridges & Hallinger, 1998, p.7-8).

It became apparent that during the learning process, all students learned to make choices and take responsibility in the learning process. Through actively engaging themselves in critical reflection during the analytical action learning journey, the students understood better 'what', 'why', 'how' and 'with what degree of success' they are learning.

The two learning curves mentioned above are good demonstrations of the students' self-control and self-assessment of learning which lead to the development of analysis and evaluation skills (Little, 1999). They have also showed that the students become more mindfulness. "Mindfulness is a state of alertness in which the mind does not get caught up in thoughts but lets them come and go. It is a means to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration and insight" (Dumas, 2007, p.53). The mindfulness gave the students power to challenge their habits of mind and to notice unexpected insights by tolerating differences, which in turn increased their critical awareness of self-responsibility as learners. All those skills were realized and further developed through engaging themselves in critical reflection and all those skills made the students more autonomous in learning.

Conclusion

The changes in the students' actions during the action learning process benefit them in their personal capacity building. The understanding of research knowledge and skills that they obtained through the research project benefit them in academic capacity building. In an essense, engaging students in critical reflection in their enquiry of learning resulted in learning for capability rather than learning for the sake of acquiring knowledge. While saying this, traditional content should not be overlooked, but it must be remembered that no course can hope to cover all of the knowledge required within an academic discipline. It may be argued that I did not completely follow what was set in the curriculum, however, through collaboration with their peers, the students refined and enlarged their knowledge in long-term memory.

The knowledge they gained through the alternative way of learning is deep, as they constructed it actively through developing arguments, using disciplined inquiry to construct meaning, make distinctions, and solve problems. It is evident that only when the students brought their ideas or problems to their consciousness could they evaluate them and begin to make choices about what

they would and would not do. They used critical reflection as a form of response (Boud et al, 1985) to their new experience, thus making their new experience meaningful as well as maintaining control of their own learning.

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