USE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN TEACHING TWO ONLINE DOCTORAL RESEARCH COURSES

Cristie McClendon, Grand Canyon University
Jodee Jacobs, Grand Canyon University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to explore the use of reflective practice in teaching in two online doctoral research courses. Gibbs' model was used as a framework for reflection. The steps from this model are centered on description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusions, and action plans to enrich one's practice. Two faculty members collaborated to discuss concerns related to doctoral learners' struggles with being able to identify and evaluate key components of research studies. Results from reflections indicated the faculty identified that students held some responsibility for self-direction and completing their assignments. However, faculty identified that three areas could be improved upon in future courses. Assignment instructions need to be further clarified. Scaffolding strategies such as classroom assessment techniques, exemplar papers, Zoom conferences and clarifying questions are necessary to facilitate student success. Finally, more focused feedback specific to the assignments for students to use on future work is necessary. Recommendations for future research include a study of learners' perspectives of how they use feedback to learn how to identify research study components, chow use of classroom assessment techniques can be used to scaffold instruction in online courses where the materials are preloaded, and differences between individual and team reflective practices.

Keywords: Reflective practice, Gibbs Model, Feedback, Scaffolding, Assignments

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The process of reflection encompasses several critical components and has been viewed in different frames by many noted scholars. As early as 1933, John Dewey defined reflection as an active, continuous, deliberate set of processes one engages in when examining beliefs and knowledge relative to certain events. Dewey (1933) differentiated reflection from "every day" thinking in that reflection not impulsive; rather, it is purposeful, systematic, and logical. However, the things one reflects on are usually every day events that cause disquiet or confusion. Educators experience concern and perplexity each day in the classroom, (both online and traditional) as they attempt to teach students. These events and lessons offer plenty of room for reflection.

Brookfield (1995) defined reflection in educational settings as events that cause us to identify and scrutinize the assumptions that undergird our work as educators. Teachers reflect on things when they notice a problem or have difficulty with students mastering or understanding lesson, a particular concept, or question feedback on their work. This is important for all teachers to do as it helps to ensure that students understand the

concepts being taught but also serves as an action of self-reflective teaching accountability.

Reflections and questions on feedback in two online courses at a university sparked the reason for this reflective activity. We experienced unexpected events in research courses that caused us to question our approach to facilitating online courses, specifically, with regard to learners being able to deconstruct research studies in preparation for conducting their own independent research study. Thus, we chose to engage in a reflective activity to determine causes for students' lack of success on assignments, to identify actions that could have impacted student success and to develop an action plan should this event occur in future sessions.

While there are myriad approaches or frameworks to guide reflective practice, we decided to follow Gibbs' (1988) steps. In brief, these include describing the event that caused unease, exploring feelings during the event, evaluating what was good or bad about the experience, and making sense of the experience in light of academic literature. The process ends with a conclusion and action plan one could use if the situation or event were to happen in the future. The intended outcome for engaging in this reflective process was for us to identify ways to a) help students identify how to pinpoint essential components of research studies and b) discover ways to scaffold instruction and provide specific feedback in the online classroom to show students what they were doing wrong and how they could meet with success on these assignments.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

We have been teaching at the same university for quite a few years; both of us have doctorates and are trained as educators, each with over 20 years of experience. Therefore, we have extensive pedagogical knowledge and are most often confident in our teaching ability. However, like others, we find teaching in the online environment offers unique challenges. Online courses do not allow us the opportunity to observe body language and non-verbal cues to gauge student understanding of a concept being taught (Ladyshewsky, 2013). Feedback that might easily be delivered in the traditional classroom can become difficult in the online classroom as communication is often asynchronous and lacks in non-verbal richness (Ladyshewsky, 2013).

The event that prompted this inquiry was that both of us were teaching research courses at two different points in the doctoral curriculum, but experienced feedback challenges with similar assignments. The challenge was two-fold. First, doctoral learners did not seem to grasp the ability to identify key points in research studies and justify the researcher's rationale in making method, design, instrument and data collection/analysis strategies. Mastering this skill is imperative during the doctoral program, as learners prepare to develop, conduct and defend their own independent research project. Secondly, we each independently encountered unexpected results with regard to feedback and communication.

We have taught research class several times before, with success on this assignment, but the situation in the classes underway, left us questioning why our instruction and feedback strategies did not work this time. This lack of student success in a routine teaching event caused both of us disquiet and confusion. In turn, as Brookfield (1995) noted, we began to question prior assumptions about feedback, when these unexpected situations arose.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

The Event

The event under reflection includes assignments in research courses, which represent new learning for many doctoral students. These two courses have a particularly rigorous assignment in which learners have to extract components from dissertations including problem, purpose, research questions, method, design, sample, data collection tools, data analysis and results. In one class, learners extract key components from a dissertation to construct a set of 10 key points, which is similar to the first GCU dissertation artifact: their own original 10 key strategic points. In the second research class, learners extract research points from a dissertation to create a model prospectus, which is similar to the second GCU dissertation artifact: the prospectus. In essence, the two assignments are very much the same. The goal is to prepare learners to identify the core components of research studies in preparation for writing their dissertation and conducting their own research. In the latter class, as learners develop the model prospectus, they have to provide a rationale as to why they think the

authors chose these research design elements. After reading the submissions of these assignments, we realized students did not understand how to extract and evaluate components from a dissertation to "deconstruct" a research study and identify its component parts. We also realized students did not understand how to analyze the rationale for each section. Additionally, several students mentioned they did not understand the assignment and did not address several parts of the assignment. However, none asked for help before the assignment was due, in either class.

PROPOSED REASONS

Thoughts, Feelings, and Evaluation of the Event

Very particular thoughts stood out as we examined our feelings regarding this event. Learners in class struggled with the concepts of identifying the key points in dissertations and research studies. Jodee felt she had done her part in preventing student failure:

> *At the time, my thought process was in believing I had done my due diligence in filing early alerts (where a notification about the student gets sent directly to his/her counselor alerting them about concerns) and sending written notification to the learner regarding poor quality of work and asking the learner to contact me should any questions come up or if I could offer further explanation. I thought by putting some of the responsibility onto the learner, it would be a sense of ownership in wanting to learn the objectives and concepts to the assignments. For the last assignment, the leaners were to take the feedback received from week 6 and apply the changes to week 8. Suffice to say the learner did not do well and did not take the low score received well. I honestly felt I had not only failed myself, but failed learners as I was trying to figure out what I could have done differently. The positive aspect of this experience was in reflecting on the situation in its entirety and realizing what I should have done differently. At the time however, I had wracked my brain to figure out where I went wrong and why.*

Cristie took a more global approach to reflection, wondering why after teaching the same multiple times, things went awry in the current session:

> *I had two initial thoughts as I read the assignments. First, I was wondering how learners could not understand the components of a research study. During this particular class, learners have had two residencies that focus on research studies. They have also experienced the integrated curriculum and should understand the research study components. My second thought was why learners in this class did not understand the assignment and do well when my learners in prior sessions of this class did well. My feedback was the same, so I was not sure the disconnect was in feedback. I realized that the students did not understand the template/worksheet part of the assignment, or else chose to not do the rationales. I think my thoughts could have impacted the event negatively because I made assumptions about learners' motivation and ability, rather than thinking about what I could have done differently as their instructor to clarify the instructions up front to increase success. My initial thought was negative in that the learners did not understand how to develop the rationales, left these sections of the assignment incomplete, instead of choosing to contact me before the assignment was due. Instead they waited until after the assignment was due to ask questions. Initially, these emotions left me frustrated, but then I started to reflect on how my actions might have changed the situation. I really struggled to determine what was good about the event, when so many students did not do well. I provided detailed feedback and even highlighted sections of the template in yellow to show learners where to put their answers. I reassigned several assignments, asking students to revise and resubmit. I even scheduled a webinar to go over the assignment. One student out of the entire class responded that they would come. I met with her on the phone and then cancelled the webinar. This was very discouraging to me as the instructor. Several learners posted in their individual forum that they*

did not understand the assignment, but yet none signed up for the webinar. I guess the good out of the situation was that I noticed the learners in this particular section of the research class did not understand the assignment, so I made the decision to make some interim, or formative changes, to scaffold their learning.

In reviewing this part of our reflective process, we surmised that as instructors, we had done our part of the teaching-learning process. We had facilitated the course with the materials provided, had provided feedback according to university policy and best practices, and had also used resources such as the early alert, making phone calls and scheduling webinars to help learners meet the requirements of the assignments. Our emotions to the situation were mixed, given the things we had done to meet our learners' needs. However, we did not necessarily view the situation from the learners' perspective to determine their reasons for not meeting the requirements of the assignments.

EVALUATION OF PROPOSED REASONS

Analysis of the Situation and Conclusion

In analyzing the situation, we realized three things that could have changed the event outcome. First, assignment instructions could have been further clarified. Scaffolding needed to take place to allow learners to have some academic support with the assignment. Additionally, feedback could have been more targeted.

In general, we both realized that in this particular situation we could have reached out to the learners who did not do well on the assignment; they could have been intimidated asking questions. With regard to communication, Farcan (2015) noted that much learning and teaching occurs in *out of class* communication, but often requires the teacher to initiate the first call. We may have needed to reach out to some students early on in class to see what supports we could offer. One of us recorded:

Regarding what I could have done differently, I realized that I should have made a more concerted effort in reaching out to this learner to see what I could help with. Being in the online forum is difficult. Sometimes the reflective practice piece is in going that extra mile for students instead of taking on good faith effort that they will read my comments and process the feedback to a level of understanding. Had we done this, the outcome may have been different. This should have been done after the first assignment as we noticed a pattern early on. Had that first call been made on the part of the teacher after the first assignment was graded, the outcome may have been different.

We also realized that the instructions for the assignments may have needed to be further clarified. Students need clear expectations for assignments, including how to complete those assignments and how much time needs to be spent on their work. Additionally, providing models or exemplar assignments helps clarify what a successful effort entails (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013). Posting an example assignment may have given students a "picture" of what we expected. In the online forum, one way to ensure that students are looking at the exemplar assignment is to have them acknowledge within the discussion forum that they have read and reviewed the exemplar assignment prior to completing the first task.

Scaffolding

During reflection, we also quickly realized we had the opportunity to make some adjustments to scaffold learning for students. Many times, faculty members assume learners coming into a class know how to do something, when in fact, they do not. In an online class, where the curriculum, assignments, discussion questions and syllabus are already done, instructors are often left wondering how to provide extra support to learners outside of these components.

In this situation, we could have used Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently and what he or she can accomplish with the help of a more knowledgeable other. This process requires scaffolding, which, according to Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), is a process wherein a more knowledgeable other controls the harder parts of the task while allowing the novice or doctoral learner in this case to work within his or her range of competence and gradually grasps the more difficult components. In reviewing these concepts, we decided to consult the literature on

feedback to determine how we might be able to incorporate new ideas into this course to foster learner success.

Feedback

One of the first things that came to our minds as we graded these assignments, was questioning the effectiveness of our feedback. Being educators, we initially felt our performance in this area was on target. The courses had rubrics, which were used. Additionally, we provided embedded comments and a narrative summary on assignments. How, then, could students be missing the mark? Knowing that feedback is essential for students to learn, we again consulted the literature on feedback to validate or review our instructional assumptions.

Student View

First, we reviewed what aspects of feedback students felt were beneficial to their success in class, particularly given the earlier stated challenges of the online setting, where non-verbal communication is limited. According to a survey administered by Noel-Levitz in 2013, students identified timely feedback as a top challenge in their online classes. Many students view feedback in terms of being given a number or letter grade, along with some comments for their performance on an assignment. However, feedback, in a student's eyes is much more. Feedback needs to be a two-way process involving the instructor and student. It should also be positive and constructive, building confidence. Students prefer explicit expectations and gentle guidance. Finally, they want feedback to be timely and useful in the future (Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche & Edwards, 2009). In sum, students want feedback that tells them if they are on target and that will show them how to improve their performance (Jones & Blankenship, 2014). We decided to further reflect on this aspect of our event.

Effective Feedback

Of course, a natural component of our reflection was again, to question the quality and effectiveness of our feedback. Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett and Norman (2010) provided some guidelines for effective feedback. First, feedback needs to focus on the key knowledge and skills learners should acquire as a result of engaging in a learning episode and assignment. Feedback should be timely and provided frequently enough so that learners will be likely to use it. Finally, feedback should be linked to future practice opportunities. When reflecting on these guidelines, we felt we met the last two criteria. Learners get many opportunities to practice deconstructing research studies over the course of all doctoral programs. Additionally, in both of the research courses discussed in this paper, learners get subsequent opportunities to practice and refine their skills in subsequent assignments in the class. However, clear feedback that focused on the key knowledge and skills learners need to acquire needed to be a focus for future assignments.

We also reviewed other strategies for providing effective feedback. Macquire and Gilbert (2013) mentioned the idea of giving examples or anchor assignments, which was discussed earlier in our paper. We also read about other ideas:

- Show learners what you do not want (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013).
- Look for patterns of errors in student work (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013).
- Prioritize feedback by thinking about what information will be of most use to students at this one particular point in time (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013).
- Raise awareness of how feedback will change over a course (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013).
- Be conscious of how feedback is given. Balance comments between strengths and weaknesses (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013; Rosa & Santos 2016). Positive feedback is delivered in a constructive manner and encourages learning, whereas negative feedback is not constructive, may shame and blame and may make the learner feel inadequate or undervalued (Rosa & Santos, 2016)
- Ask students to show how they used feedback in future assignments. Have students go into their comments and prioritize comments or make a feedback action list in order of priority (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013).

In sum, we realized that effective feedback encompasses three general ideas. It shows students what they are or are not understanding, where their performance is going well or poorly, and how they

Table 1. Specific Feedback

Identified Action	Action Steps
Provide additional instructions for assignments in addition to those posted in the course.	1. Clarify the assignments in the class up front. Discuss via announcements and in weekly introductions what the assignments are for, what their purpose is, how much time it will take and what to prepare for. 2. Go over the rubrics for the assignment via video or Zoom. 3. Ask the students to review the assignments and ask questions. 4. Have students acknowledge they have reviewed the rubrics and exemplar assignments the week prior to the assignment being due.
Scaffolding techniques	1. Provide exemplar papers. 2. Hold a Zoom webinar to go over the dissertation and highlight what the parts are for the first assignment. 3. Ask students to pose questions before the assignments are due; offer to review assignments for accuracy before grading.
Feedback	1. Focus on different aspects of the 10 key points in each assignment submission. Look at the big-ticket items first (problem, purpose, method, design, research questions) 2. For online classes, post specific questions or resources in the discussion forum based on the 10 key points. 3. Focus on sections from past classes that students have struggled on the most. Move to sample, data collection, and analysis next. Move to discussion of results in the last and consider gap, literature review and others later on. 4. After the first submission of a study extraction, ask students to show how they used feedback in future assignments (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013). Have students go into their comments and prioritize comments or make a feedback action list in order of priority) 5. Ask students how they are doing and how you are doing (Classroom Assessment Technique (CAT). 6. Continue to ask clarifying questions throughout the week to ensure students are grasping the assignment concepts and objectives. 7. For those students who are not participating during the week on assignment clarifications, these may be the students that teachers will want to reach out to via phone.

need to direct subsequent efforts. What we needed to do now was build an action plan on how to incorporate these ideas into our practice.

RESULTS

Based on our description of the event, our feelings during the event and evaluation of proposed reasons for the unexpected outcome, our next step was to combine our experiences with review of the supporting literature to formulate an action plan. We want to be prepared in case this happens again. Certainly, doctoral learners have always struggled with reading and comprehending research studies, so we anticipate this situation will arise in the future.

Action Plan

Based on our reflective critique, we identified the probable causes of our unexpected teaching event. We decided to build our action plan on providing clear instructions, in addition to those provided in the course to help learners understand the assignment requirements. We also determined that scaffolding and formative assessment needed to take place in order to bridge the gap between where students entered the course and what was required

of them. Finally, we decided to determine how we could make feedback more specific. (See Table 1).

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Jodee: I realize in going forward that it is essential to hold frequent web-based meetings with students and do a video lesson of sorts, so they have a firm understanding of what the expectations are for this class and how they can improve for the future. I also realize that teaching is individual and has to be tailored to what best suites the individual needs of the students. Some may need more intensive 1:1 instruction, whereas others are able to readily grasp the concepts. Looking at past classes and reflecting on what students struggled with also helps to prepare for more successful student outcomes. I also realize that many of these issues are across the curriculum in some instances, and this is where as teachers, we need to be forthright and proactive in helping those struggling students as best we can. As previously mentioned, using strategies to combat potential issues, and being proactive instead of reactive will also assist with successful teaching outcomes. In the online platform, only so much can be done and there are those instances where students will not be actively engaged. As teachers, it is our job to ensure that we are doing what we can to guarantee that all students understand the objectives in being able to dissect the important aspects of what the assignment is asking them to do. I also realize there is no one right way to be a teacher, nor is there a learning manual on teaching. Part of our practice is to ensure that we self-reflect and make the necessary changes in order for our students to have a successful outcome.

Cristie: While I have been designing and teaching online courses for several years, this experience has caused me to re-evaluate my assumptions about myself and learners. Honestly, I felt that the learners did not adopt self-directed behaviors in this class, based on the number of individuals who did not reach out for help and chose not to attend the webinar on the prospectus extraction assignment. At the time of this writing, we are in Week 7 of class. I decided to post a discussion question in the main forum to ask learners what their concerns about the assignment were, so we could tackle those together. No one has responded.

I have no doubt this problem will continue to occur as I have taught learners across the continuum of the doctoral programs, from the first course to graduation. Overwhelmingly, they struggle at different points with understanding the structure and nature of research studies. This is a skill that is critical for success in justifying the need and results of their own research study. Collaborating with Jodee on this project has renewed my desire to continue to better focus my feedback on chunks of information, on specific goals for specific assignments and with examples to show learners how they need to move forward. Of particular importance, or what stood out (resonated with me) when reading the research related to feedback, was the need to show learners how they have progressed toward desired goals. I think this will help us all during the dissertation journey, realizing that we do make strides forward in the iterative process. The other key learning I will take forward is to have learners show how they used feedback in future assignments. I will have learners take my embedded comments and prioritize comments or make a feedback action list in order of priority (Macquire & Gilbert, 2013). This will help them identify small steps that they can use to move forward in their pursuit of understanding the structure and nature of research.

In considering areas for future research, I would recommend:

1. Reviewing how use of targeted feedback such as included in this paper would help learners with the research skills.
2. Consider a study of learners' perspectives of why they are not successful on these assignments.
3. Consider how use of classroom assessment techniques can be used to scaffold instruction in online courses where the materials are preloaded.

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