

TITLE: Taking a risk to develop reflective skills in business practitioners

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Taking a risk to develop reflective skills in business practitioners

Abstract

Critical reflection can support alternative decision-making in business practice. This paper examines the effectiveness of a risk-based pedagogy to engage practitioners in reflective thinking. Educators adopting a radical pedagogy in professionally accredited programmes face multiple challenges: learners often resist the process of self-reflection, and stakeholders expect instrumental outcomes. A longitudinal study of human resource practitioners uses an interpretivist methodology to examine reflection through student-led learning and experiential activity. Findings show that a pedagogical method that overturns learner expectations stimulates dynamic discussion and reflection on experience. Implications are that effective risk-based teaching relies on establishing two conditions: 1) a scaffold structure which supports learner improvisation and 2) a lecturer willingness to continually orchestrate chance elements to maximise learning. This study contributes a practice-based understanding of the theoretical development of risk-pedagogy, and adds new insights on the process of facilitating reflective skills to enable business practitioners to confront unpredictable work situations.

Keywords: pedagogy of risk, experiential learning, critical reflection, practitioner skills

Introduction

Reflective practice can help managers seek understanding of the cultural and political environment in which actions take place, and therefore guide decision making in adapting behaviours and actions (Roessger 2013). This paper offers a response to Roessger's call (2013) to clarify the impact of reflective practice by exploring the theoretical basis and practical results of adopting a pedagogy of risk (Barnett 2007) to facilitate practitioners' reflective skills. A longitudinal research study focuses on a purposive sample of working practitioners studying part-time in a UK business school. The aim of the study is to investigate the challenges of using a risk-based approach in an educational setting by using activities that stimulate practitioners to reflect on work experience, knowledge, attitudes and values. The contribution of this paper is to expand theoretical understanding of risk-based pedagogy and add practice-based insights of the process of balancing risks to animate reflection on experience. Developing practitioners' ability to consider assumptions and question practice can enhance organisational improvements (Roessger 2013; Gray 2007; Lassnigg 2012).

Contemporary business organisations need employees who can deal with the inherent risk of fluctuating economic environments. Rhee (2010) asserts an absolutist 'one size fits all' response to situations may limit business performance. Therefore practitioners need the ability to cope with uncertainty, potential threats and reflect on alternative strategies (Weick and Sutcliffe 2006; Shotter 2006). Reflective practice is seen as an important aspect of business education in expanding the ability to challenge assumptions (Rigg and Trehan 2008; Holden and Griggs 2011) and examine practice variation. Critical reflection can enhance self-

awareness, adjust perspective and support new decision-making frameworks (Moore 2011; Cunliffe 2004). The development of reflective skills (Raelin 2001) encourages investigation of action outcomes (*content reflection*), the process of achieving outcomes (*process reflection*), and the underpinning beliefs and values of organisational strategy (*premise reflection*). To attain this level of critical thinking, Raelin (2001, 19) argues practitioners need to develop reflective skills: ‘practitioners reinvest in learning by participating in continuing education... [to] continually expand their solution database’. According to Billett (2008) supporting individuals’ ability to continue to learn throughout their working lives is an important educational goal.

Consequently, higher education plays an important role in developing reflection and enhancing practitioners’ ability to learn from work experience. To do so, Barnett (2007) advances a new pedagogy for teaching, learning and assessment that can facilitate learners’ development. Barnett (2007) terms this approach a *pedagogy of risk*:

‘the educator, as an experienced pedagogue, may displace himself into the pedagogical background and so orchestrate the students’ experiences that they are left much more to their own devices and so take responsibility for their own learning’ (2007,119).

In short, the lecturer opens up the pedagogical space to student direction and invites anarchic elements of risk and unpredictability. Our aim in this research paper is to examine the use of a risk-based approach to teaching. We chose a pedagogy of risk to encourage practitioners to challenge organisational mantras, and stimulate critical reflection on theoretical knowledge and workplace practice. However, adopting a new, radical approach presents challenges for lecturers and often frustrates learners (Mackay and Tymon 2013). De Rue and Ashford (2012) observe reflection is not a favourite activity for time-pressed managers as organisations favour action. Critics also question the vogue for reflection in business education (Holden and Griggs 2011; Gray 2007; Rigg and Trehan 2008; Fenwick 2001) as the impact remains elusive. Further, Roessger (2013, 16) asserts that reflective practice needs rigorous scrutiny:

‘researchers need to clarify and confirm reflective practice’s consistent impact on learning outcomes in instrumental learning contexts, as well as the degree to which reflective practice activities accomplish what they are intended to accomplish’

This study offers a response in illustrating the impact of reflective practice by drawing on Barnett’s (2007) theoretical concept of risk-pedagogy, and evaluating the effectiveness of this radical teaching approach in practice.

We begin by first, discussing the value of critical reflection for business practitioners; second, outlining a rationale for using risk pedagogy in education; and third, exploring the challenges of student-directed activities that strive to balance risk and predictability. In an educational context the use of a risk-based pedagogy is a commitment to work with the apparent contradiction of structured spontaneity. Next we discuss the methodology, and present our findings. Finally, we discuss the theoretical development of risk pedagogy and share practice implications for educators and stakeholders in effectively triggering critical reflection that can shape future workplace action.

The value of critical reflection to practitioners

The value of critical reflection is to enable practitioners to adjust to unexpected situations, explore new possibilities and test out suitable options in untried contexts (Weick and Sutcliffe 2006; Shotter 2006). Cazan (2013) observes that educators can help students become self-regulating learners to improve their performance by engaging in meta-cognitive activities such as reflection. So, how lecturers engage practitioners in business education that connects their learning capability with working experience is a pertinent issue. Developing the practice of critical reflection needs to actively involve learners as agents of their education; thus the curriculum design respects Knowles' principles of androgogy (1980) inviting connections with business students' pre-existing tacit knowledge. Billett (2008, 56), for example, argues for this explicit acknowledgement of work experience in teaching and learning:

‘To place individuals and their construction and sense-making, and ultimately their subjective experience not only as a component of pedagogy and curriculum practice, but also as an inevitable outcome.’

To develop learning agility practitioners can take risks with experiential activities and navigate guided learning of critical reflection to integrate academic theory, technical knowledge and practical application (Beard and Wilson 2007; Holden and Griggs 2011). However, developing reflective skills is not a natural process in learning and requires energetic facilitation and communicative learning. Raelin (2001, 12) recognises that reflective skills and reflexivity require effort and development: ‘adults need to engage, to evoke their reflective consciousness in order to learn at this level’. This involves dynamic interactions through collaborative discussions, dialogic interpretations, shared group and individual self-reflections to facilitate professional learning. For example, Roessger (2013, 5) states:

‘Through communicative processes, learners evaluate the subjective experiences of others, as well as interpret how their own frames of reference influence their actions and their perceptions of others.’

An educational setting can provide a supportive space that liberates time to foster the linking of learning to practice, allowing practitioners to contemplate situations and exercise judgement to decide on appropriate courses of action. Business schools can offer experiential learning and spontaneous activity, but educators may feel constrained by stakeholder expectations and instrumental outcomes in taking a risk with pedagogy (Lassnigg 2012; Barnett 2007; Raelin 2001).

Why take a risk-based approach?

Within higher education the literature reveals an extensive debate about the dominance of technical, instrumental learning for business. For example, Ghoshal (2005, 81) champions the case for business relevance restoring to business education ‘*what matters in organisations*’; in essence a business-priority approach. Traditionally higher education provides academic curiosity-driven learning, intended to benefit society by fostering citizenship behaviours (McCowan 2012). However, Betts (2004, 240) asserts that modern universities have increasingly become places of ‘applied learning’ with an instrumental,

vocational focus. Instrumental learning is attractive to employers with a focus on procedural knowledge, concentrating on ‘*how to*’ do in business for improved competency (Roessger 2013). Aspects of procedural knowledge in the educational curriculum are legitimate (Crick and Joldersma 2007; Lassnigg 2012) and can be scaled up to minimise resource input and achieve predictable learning outcomes. Yet these instrumental business priorities, in seeking an ideal technical solution (Rhee 2010), may restrict the exploration of alternative concepts. A business school curriculum needs to grapple with the competing claims of academic research and real-world practice to support practitioners’ sense-making and reveal fresh insights (Rynes 2007; Lassnigg 2012).

We argue that technical, procedural knowledge is not enough to confront the demands of business unpredictability. Barnett (2007) maintains the first task of higher education is to enable students to contemplate, identify and express their individuality on an ever-changing basis. This capacity to critically analyse and interpret business issues may be a skill of increasing value in turbulent contexts where organisations seek employees who can be self-managing in embracing change, innovative in response and are motivated to learn (Bledow and Frese 2009; Hakanen, Perhoniemi and Toppinen-Tanner 2008; Major, Turner and Fletcher 2006). Reflective practice is an active, deliberate, cognitive and emotional process that considers and connects experience to learning (Gray 2007; Lynch 2000; Raelin 2007). The lecturer can facilitate reflective skill development through an interactive teaching approach that resonates with the complexities of academic theory, workplace practice and organisational ambiguity.

Our premise is that risk is an inherent part of learning and teaching in the education system; and is integral to the everyday conditions that enable students ‘to live with their own inner turbulence’ (Barnett 2007, 127) and appreciate the diverse experiences of employment practice. A pedagogy of risk makes use of ‘restrained anarchy’ Barnett (2007, 137) to provoke questions and new thinking; this teaching strategy defies the notion of a single, prescriptive solution and proposes an openness to complexity as a necessary condition to tolerate the ambiguities of work reality. Hence, a risk-based approach moves away from the security of didactic, knowledge transmission, to what McGuire and Gubbins (2010) describe in a nurturing metaphor of ‘sower and seed’; an educational approach that nurtures reflection to shape thinking and inform future action.

The challenges of risk-based pedagogy

Arguably an educational environment has few hazards; a gathering of like-minded adults can safely examine work experience and reflections in an atmosphere of mutual trust (Billett and Ovens 2007; Cranton 2011). Yet educators face competing expectations in professional learning; such as instrumental credentials, organisational knowledge requirements and academic frameworks (McNally and Irving 2010; Lassnigg 2012; Curzon-Hobson 2010). Clinebell and Clinebell (2008) identify conflicting values between higher education’s holistic development and the often short-term goals of business. Thus, as we strive to develop students’ reflective skills, organisations demand short-term, instrumental competence. Moreover, professional qualifications dictate a university framework that specifies a planned curriculum, defined regulations and learning outcomes geared towards instrumental learning

(Lassnigg 2012). Satisfying professional body knowledge requirements may reduce learning to ‘potted’ knowledge codified into bite-size units. This regulation of discipline topics known as ‘unitisation’, may disguise the disorder of political and institutional reality (Gray 2007). Educators may want to encourage a nurturing approach to develop critical reflection but run into an emphasis on instrumental learning that circumscribes the curriculum.

Challenges in risk-based pedagogy for lecturers

Educators adopting a risk-pedagogy invite unpredictable and complex elements into the educational setting. Ideally this improvisational approach sets up a creative space for learning; a forum which is unrehearsed and open to questioning challenge. But this presents three major problems for lecturers: loss of control, threats to credibility and resource intensity.

First, as the lecturer’s role changes from central expert in a didactic mode of teaching to process facilitator and guide in experiential student-led learning, there is the possibility of widespread disorder, as Barnett (2007) predicts. Students lead their own group activities, select research choices and can take random directions which may result in shambolic classroom sessions. Students may be complicit in limiting the potential for different learning approaches, when as consumers they expect a clear product and service (McNally and Irving 2010; Roessger 2013); such as, a recognised qualification for career advancement. For educators a loss of control could undermine the importance of the course content. Further, capturing evidence of student-directed learning is difficult, which is problematic within an increasing regulatory environment of higher education quality assurance (Lassnigg 2012; Curzon-Hobson 2010).

Second, working without a script removes the expected mantle of lecturer as authority figure delivering rehearsed evidence of advanced knowledge and expertise. Suddenly moving from chief protagonist to minor character by following Barnett’s (2007, 119) direction to retreat into the background, can be a disturbing role reversal for the lecturer. In addition, the lecturer may struggle to keep pace with divergent student progress, as individuals head in different directions. This approach can leave the lecturer feeling sidelined, or with credibility under threat.

Third, a risk-pedagogy is resource intensive: demanding skills of seasoned facilitators, and self-discipline to allow students to find their own way, object, criticise and challenge. Vigilant monitoring of learners’ individual and collective needs is required in balancing a frank exploration of insights. But the lecturer also needs to make speedy judgements as to how to respond to emerging group dynamics and respectfully indicate when learners are off track. Such nurturing of reflection requires a lecturer’s emotional investment to develop a relationship of trust with the learners (Curzon-Hobson 2010). These factors demand lecturer commitment, time investment and facilitative skills to achieve a productive learning environment. For the lecturer these multiple factors can make pedagogy of risk appear daunting.

Perceived risks for learners

A risk-based pedagogy can also present learners with two potential threats; these include unpredictable learning sessions which oblige students to embrace ambiguity, and experiential exercises that may undermine a practitioner's self-identity with the risk of social exposure.

First, the nature of the teaching removes a pre-determined sequence of learning topics and obliges learners to engage with a continuously evolving process. For the student this open-ended intellectual space can be troubling. Barnett (2007, 143) notes: 'Space to engage with pedagogical challenges might lead a student lacking in self-confidence to shrink from the challenge'. There is no assurance of comfortably sitting back to passively listen to the sequenced delivery of a public lecture. Many students are baffled by unconventional interactive approaches and question the need to develop reflective skills. Challenging activities create biological increases in adrenaline and dopamine which can energise people and spark curiosity, but excessive tension is debilitating if there is too high a level of uncertainty (Rock 2009; Vygotsky 1978). In professionally accredited programmes an instrumental focus may lead students to resist a curriculum that appears tenuously connected to qualification outcome (Anderson and Gilmore 2010). Reflection and reflexivity are neither natural abilities nor simply acquired (Coulson and Harvey 2013, Raelin 2001) and mature business students, in particular, find this type of learning challenging (Merriam 2004; Stewart et al. 2008). Cullen (2011) reports on studies that conclude students dislike reflective units and often fail to be critically reflective.

Second, this risk-based teaching approach can pose a threat to self-identity as an experienced practitioner. Organisational ways of working and dealing with cases have often a habitual response based on past practice. Critical reflection may challenge students' worldviews and question their experiences or assumptions of 'best' practice (Brooks 2004; Merriam 2004). Meyer and Land (2005) observe the educational process can lead to learner disorientation. These challenges are exacerbated by social group interactions and the interrogation of knowledge. For example, Merriam (2004, 65) points out 'most adults have not developed the theory capacities for criticising the underlying assumptions of their own thinking'. Students are asked to lead the exploration of certain ideas expressing aloud thoughts and opinions which risk sounding foolish or even offend other students (Billett and Ovens 2007; Rigg and Trehan 2008; McCowan 2012). This social embarrassment and discomfort can threaten a student's identity as an expert practitioner.

To summarise, lecturers adopting a risk-pedagogy may face resistant learners, a disinterested institutional context and consequently lose heart. Barnett asserts: 'The presence of risk is a necessary part of genuine higher education. It cannot be risk-audited away. A teacher's professionalism may limit the level of risk, but it cannot be extinguished' (2007, 150). We also need to satisfy the instrumental demands of stakeholders as discussed in Mackay and Tymon (2013). Despite the challenges and potential threats of working with the unexpected, we argue that a risk-based approach can improve learner engagement and animate the relevance of critical reflection to work practice. This research study examines the evidence for developing reflective skills in more depth by expanding learning risks and uncertainties in an educational context.

Methodology

To reiterate the aim of this paper is to explore the effect of using risk pedagogy (Barnett 2007) to promote critical reflection that can inform future action. Risk-pedagogy is designed to encourage practitioners to challenge their assumptions and question institutional understandings; a socially subjective view of practice is therefore compatible with the study's aims. The research study uses an interpretivist methodology to explore interpretations of practice behaviour (Bryman and Bell 2007; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2012). This phenomenological approach is supported by Billet (2008) as a means to discover interpretations of learning from work and practice. Moreover, what Cranton (2011, 84) notes as the potential for action research to challenge 'the underlying assumptions and premises of teaching' corresponds with the underpinning research design to address Roessger's call (2013) to clarify the impact of reflective practice on learning outcomes in instrumental learning contexts. 'Learning is tied to practice' (Raelin 2001, 44) and thus in seeking to connect work and education-based experiences we use a risk-based approach to stimulate analysis and critical reflection on the processes and outcomes of practice. This study is based on a longitudinal, iterative approach to enhancing practitioners' reflective skills within a professionally accredited programme.

The study's educational context

The professional qualification we refer to here is a postgraduate diploma in human resource management accredited by the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). Learners as full-time working practitioners, and part-time students, are predominantly motivated to gain the CIPD professional qualification for career progression. Within this qualification students are required to demonstrate reflective learning which underpins the technical focus of a human resource development (HRD) unit. This longitudinal study started in the academic year 2008/09 with the introduction of experiential learning and student-led sessions. However, this new teaching approach encountered hostile resistance as reported by Anderson and Gilmore (2010). Students were irritated with a lack of explicit direction, and suffered cumulative panic as they perceived little connection between their group-instructed learning and the examination assessment (Anderson and Gilmore 2010). In the face of public criticism, the lecturing team were momentarily tempted to resort to traditional didactic methods to reduce complex learning processes (Biggs and Tang 2007; Lassnigg 2012). But a key component of this research has been the commitment of two pairs of lecturers to espouse theories in practice and continue to re-examine adopted approaches. In short, we ask our students to reflect on work practice and so we did too. We applied the same critical review to our pedagogy in teaching reflection (*Ref removed for blind peer review*), and in expanding our facilitation skills. As Billett and Ovens (2007) report, the facilitative capability of the teacher is important in enabling learning from reflection.

Consequently, after much research, discussion and the use of reflexive self-assessments we determined to test out in practice Barnett's (2007) pedagogy of risk. To do so, we modified our teaching approach in two fundamental ways: a) we provided explicit scaffolding for reflection on HRD, and b) we designed more appropriate assessment artefacts to demonstrate reflective learning. For example, to delineate a supportive framework we provided structural signposts in the form of problem-based material packs. These created multiple starting points and included open-ended questions for students to initiate group

discussion and group-led research. For assessment instead of an examination we focused first, on a student-led session of HRD technical learning and skills development, and secondly, a reflective writing assignment. Learners thus were assessed collectively as groups facilitating the HRD technical knowledge of the peer cohort, and individually through the written reflection on skills development and professional learning.

Data collection

We collected data to examine the effectiveness of adopting a risk-based approach to promote and facilitate reflective skill development. We designed the study to build on previous research (Anderson and Gilmore 2010; *Ref removed for blind peer review*) and collected longitudinal data over two academic years 2011-2012 and 2012-2013. In order to maximise learning, students were expected to model and explain HRD technical practices, such as facilitating a training needs analysis exercise. The sample group on an HRD unit were taught in four different cohorts, and of the 68 postgraduate students, 52 are employed as human resource practitioners in a range of organisations including healthcare, defence industry manufacturers, local government, pharmaceutical services and retail work. The other 16 students have generalist administrative experience, and seek specialist work in human resources by acquiring professional qualification.

The data from multiple reflective tools was collected over two academic years including: self-assessment, reflective essays, feedback reports, ongoing evaluation discussions, and a narrative skills development portfolio of continuous learning over the academic year. Table 1 summarises the data collected in three principal strands in response to a risk-based pedagogy: formal assessed work, student reflections, and lecturer reviews.

| Sources of data | Instrument | Timeline <i>academic year of 30 weeks</i> |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Formal assessed work</i> | Student-led sessions Individual HRD reflective essays Individual continuing professional development portfolios | Weeks 9 &10 Week 15 Week 20 |
| <i>Student reflections</i> | Initial self-assessment and post-event of self-efficacy scale Mid unit review focus groups Individual unit evaluation questionnaires In-class discussion based on unit evaluation feedback report | Weeks 1 & 12 Week 6 Week 12 Week 24 |
| <i>Lecturer reviews</i> | Ongoing informal discussions and observations Mid unit review End of unit review End of year review | Weeks 1 to 24 Week 6 Week 15 Week 30 |

INSERT here Table 1. Data collection

To explain the relevance of these three data strands: the *formal assessed work* includes student-led sessions providing evidence of HRD technical learning, facilitation skills in

action and subsequent reflection via a written essay on collective and individual learning of theory and practice. The individual development portfolios include reflection on broad skills development across the academic year and critical reflection on learning from work experience, and plans for further development.

The *student reflections* include informal rating of knowledge and skills using a self-efficacy scale developed from Holden and Griggs (2011). Students self-rated their technical knowledge, practice skills and confidence against the six learning outcomes of the HRD unit. In mid unit reviews, in line with university quality assurance guidelines (Lassnigg 2012), students were asked to identify what lecturers could stop doing, start doing and continue doing to enhance learning. Similarly, individual unit questionnaires and later in-class discussion asked students to evaluate what they enjoyed or not about the unit; the usefulness of resources, lecturer support, and the effectiveness of teaching and assessment methods. Finally, *the lecturer reviews* recorded ongoing discussions and peer commentary on the success of attempting to embed a pedagogy of risk in order to hone reflective learning skills.

In analysing the data the research team sought evidence of students' technical learning, critical reflection and a student perspective on teaching informed by a pedagogy of risk. As learners in HRD the focus on well-accepted training methods of learning evaluation (e.g., Easterby-Smith 1994; Kirkpatrick 1998; Warr, Bird and Rackam 1970) enabled these same evaluative strands to be applied in the coding process of data analysis. This paper focuses specifically on the longitudinal data that examines a response to education grounded in a theoretical pedagogy of risk to nurture reflective skills.

Findings

In this section we present and discuss our findings. We start with data that illustrate learners' encounters with risks and discuss the scaffolding the lecturing team put in place to mitigate these perceived threats. We discuss data from lecturer reviews, and the implicit need for educators sustained attention, time investment and active facilitation skills in using a risk-based approach. Then we provide indicative evidence of learning by taking risks; in enhanced technical knowledge, reflective skills acquisition, and the impact of reflection on practitioner intention to transfer learning. Finally, we summarise our findings on the effectiveness of using a risk-based approach and the implications of structured improvisation for practitioner development.

Learners encountering risks

Most of the students expressed apprehension and fear in being expected to set out and lead the learning of others in HRD, such as training design and evaluation. For example, one senior executive voiced anxiety about facilitating peer learning; being accountable to the group put her on the spot in trying to interrogate a complex theoretical position of training needs analysis. A third of the students experienced self-doubt and concerns about the unknown subject area that indicates a discomfort with ambiguity. Others were daunted by the task to research, design, develop and facilitate HRD learning in practice; 'the task was scary' and the prospect seemed 'terrifying - in case I am exposed for my total lack of knowledge in this area'. A fear of appearing ignorant in front of other HR practitioners increased

perceptions of threat in this learning approach. The skill of the lecturer facilitating was to judge when to intervene and address these concerns, by highlighting a particular concept for the group. Lecturers tried to balance a level of tension using rhetorical questions to engage learner reflections on work practice without generating too much anxiety (Rock 2009). Table 2 summarises learners’ perceptions of risks and the lecturer use of scaffold techniques to minimise these threats.

| Perceived risks for learners | Scaffold support |
|--|---|
| <p>Undefined intellectual space (Barnett 2007)</p> <p>‘I felt disappointed and frustrated at our inability to learn from the other groups, that we had squandered our advantage in going last. During group activities I failed to interact with others to guide them sufficiently. As we failed to ask questions, our conclusion was vague and lacked input from others.’</p> | <p>Framework theory of HRD</p> <p>Problem-based questions</p> <p>Using rhetorical questions</p> <p>Inviting a questioning approach</p> |
| <p>Vulnerability of social exposure (Raelin 2001)</p> <p>‘This sounds ridiculous but when I was leading [<i>the group</i>] and trying to express what I understood about putting this really into practice my legs were shaking. My words got muddled and I must have seemed an idiot.’</p> | <p>Encouraging dialogue on experience</p> <p>Teaching peers to give and receive specific feedback</p> <p>Lecturer facilitation of collective discussion</p> |
| <p>Difficulty of reflective learning (Gray 2007)</p> <p>‘Reflective writing is a new skill that I have struggled to grasp...I had not reflected on my work in this way; it was time-consuming and a real effort to consider my feelings, challenges and achievements’</p> | <p>Reflective writing practice</p> <p>Impromptu coaching</p> <p>Tools to promote reflection</p> |

INSERT here Table 2. Perceived risks and use of structure to support reflection

The lecturer willingness to actively facilitate a learning process that balances uncertain threats with comforting assurance was key to provoking rich debate. The majority of students identified reflection as a difficult skill which resonates with the literature (Cullen 2011; Merriam 2004; Stewart et al., 2008). Billett and Ovens (2007) reveal students dislike writing down their reflections, and we recognise inherent difficulties in reflective writing (Stewart et al. 2008). Nonetheless, the discipline of writing expands the skills of critical reflection (Cunliffe 2004; Quinton and Smallbone 2010), and the lecturing team view writing as a significant learning tool. Arguably, the nature of assessment may constrain reflection and breadth in learning but we posit that assessment through a reflective essay and skills development portfolio enables the probable application of learning beyond the educational setting. A criticism of this interpretation may be that lecturers’ power governs assessment and demands a confessional turn (Fenwick 2001). Nonetheless, this assessment method of providing tools for reflection and an explicit framework is justified by Coulson and Harvey’s (2013) research that scaffolding can support reflection on action long after the experienced

event. This approach helps learners to embed reflective skills. For example, learners attest to expanding awareness of the range of alternatives in practice situations:

The most meaningful aspect is being able to reflect on the sessions. This has improved my metacognition i.e. thinking about thinking - my thinking process has been transformed

This supports Raelin's view (2001) of the need for metacompetence, a set of principles that encourages skill development and knowledge for trial in practice across unseen work situations. This critical thinking rejects an absolutist stance of one 'best' way in organisational practice.

Students affirmed positive reactions to a risk-based approach and rated student-led sessions consistently as the most energising part of the HRD unit. The improvement in response from the Anderson and Gilmore report (2010) may be due to a move away from an examination assessment. However, we suggest the affect of a more apparent structural scaffold (Coulson and Harvey 2013) enabled us to balance the risks learners experienced. Also the teaching team were committed to reflexive practice (*ref removed for blind peer review*) and through self-assessment continually refined their facilitation methods.

Lecturer reviews of taking risks

The teaching team had to practise self-discipline and selectively choose the emphasis of technical content in order to allow sufficient time for spontaneous discussions and analysis of emerging practice experiences (Ellis, Mendel and Nir 2006; Moon, 2007). A seed approach to teaching (McGuire and Gubbins 2010) invites a less predictable learning format when animated student discussion conducts knowledge discovery. Findings suggest space and time are essential for learners to build trust in peer relationships (Curzon-Hobson 2010) and explore for themselves meaning in HRD theory and practice. Lecturers commented on their need from a 'background' position to sustain vigilance and allow open discussion to flourish risking occasional anarchy:

Yes, there was heated debate...a good session...but then it got really hard trying to contain competing views and different discussions, so it didn't just deteriorate into a free-for-all.

The lecturer needed to modify their approach at key points, intervene to bring the HRD concept back into focus and deter loose digressions. Findings from the lecturer reviews were that scaffold techniques support the delicate balance in student-responsibility for learning; the balance between too much risk causing learner fear and too little risk resulting in passive disinterest. Lecturers found that facilitating this balance is difficult and requires continuous attention. Lecturers invested in facilitative tools for reflection, as shown in Table 2; for example, teaching peers to give and receive specific feedback to inform observations and collective sharing of reflections 'for, in and on' experiential activities (Coulson and Harvey 2013). The reported benefits of lecturers' facilitative efforts were the high levels of learner enthusiasm and engagement with the HRD unit. Additionally, practitioners' advanced business experience contributed to rewarding analysis of current practice for both lecturers and students in educational reciprocity (Cheetham and Chivers 2001; Knowles 1980). In other words, the advantages of actively facilitating student direction was the rich learning, thinking around HRD in practice, and professional development.

Evidence of expansive learning from risk-approach

Despite the challenges of taking a risk-based approach the data suggests learning improvements in technical HRD knowledge and the development of reflective skills.

Technical knowledge

In a self-efficacy rating at the start of the unit, students average score was 3.9 out of ten in assessing their HRD technical knowledge and skills. At the end of HRD unit average scores rose to 7.5 out of ten, revealing a marked increase in self-efficacy rating. This self-perception of HRD technical learning is reinforced by student-led assessments; marks ranged from 59% to 73% with a 64% median score. This compares with a lower average examination mark of 55% in 2008/09. Most students demonstrated some level of in-depth, technical knowledge retention during an in-class evaluation discussion three months after unit completion. For example, they were able to correctly identify alternation between different evaluation models and critique the basis of theories in use by the lecturing team, which implies more than surface learning has occurred (Merriam 2004; Mezirow 1994). This acquisition of technical HRD learning is important to satisfy the instrumental outcomes of students (Crick and Joldersma 2007), their employers and the professional body.

Reflective skills

As working practitioners these students valued the time available to spend on critical reflection, legitimised by the educational context. The action-orientation of many organisations inhibits employees' capacity to reflect and learn from successful events and post-mortems (Roessger 2013; Ellis, Mendel and Nir 2006). The opportunity to review the messiness of organisational practice and think through an alternative course of action was welcomed. For example, one practitioner commented:

I believe the self-reflective process has enabled me to question current HR practices at work and identify ways these could be improved. So, that helps me add value to the organisation... prior to the programme I would have just kept doing what I had always done and not question why

Again this demonstrates that lecturers inviting a questioning approach to promote reflection, and making use of rhetorical questions can connect educational learning to the workplace (Billett 2008). For example, in acquiring reflexive habits a learner notes how he is applying critical reflection to organisational processes:

I am becoming more confident in challenging the norm at work, questioning the why especially with some of the project work I am involved in; e.g. why do we use competency based interviewing

This thinking around practice implies a change of view that can inform future action.

Transfer of reflective skills to workplace practice

We acknowledge that data from an educational setting can suggest good intentions to transfer reflective practice to the workplace which are then difficult to confirm (see Rigg and Trehan 2008; Holden and Griggs 2011). Nonetheless, students report enhanced confidence and specific competence development that affects behaviour on the job. For example:

The Chief Officer has begun to take notice of the increase in my confidence levels and my ability to bring sound arguments to a situation without the emotions. I am now being asked to take the lead on HR matters which are delegated wholeheartedly to me.

Transfer of learning can be seen as evidence of the connection between theory, education and workplace practice. The extent to which educational learning transfers to a work setting is consistently questioned (Blume, Ford, Baldwin and Huang 2010). According to Martin (2010) evidence for transfer of learning from training events to the job context is scant, with estimates between 10%-40% of any transfer impact. However, in this study *near* transfer was displayed by examples of applied technical learning; increased use of training needs analysis and evaluation methods. For example, one practitioner implemented changes to an induction process after appreciating the learning benefits of active involvement:

I am changing the training process for new starters within the company's operations team. I plan to include more hands-on activity with the support of colleagues... the new starter should retain more learning about the role than by just observation

Transfer of learning in the broader use of reflective skills in non HRD contexts, referred to as *far* transfer was also evident in the social learning that enabled individuals to realise others take a different perspective of their behaviour. This insight on group conversations illustrates self-realisation:

My manager suggested I am underselling myself at work by giving an adverse impression. I tend to let off steam in the office after difficult transactions with clients. My class peers tend to be more honest than colleagues....to them some of my behaviours seem negative and reactive...Since this revelation, in meetings I now try to think over my remarks, before saying them aloud, to ensure my comments have the desired effect

These findings illustrate reflective practice but development would need to continue to iteratively connect reflections of work and educational learning.

Limitations

We acknowledge limitations in this study and recognise the possibility that written reflective skills may be interpreted as records simply to satisfy the demands of professional accreditation (Butler and Reddy 2010; Lynch 2000). The implied threat for educators when promoting reflective skills is that learning becomes a mechanistic exercise that imposes a form of self-audit on learners (Fenwick 2001). Contrary findings do indicate some students consider the exercise of reflective practice as a panacea that will provide certainty for a management issue. In adopting a radical pedagogy lecturers overturn practitioner expectations of the learning context, which consequently inhibit student performance. The limitations of a prescriptive, single approach apply to an educational context as equally to business (Rhee 2010). In a commitment to enhancing practitioner learning, we need to strike a balance between the experience of random disorder and the lively stimulation of structured improvisation.

Conclusion

Our aim in this research study was to address Roessger's (2013) call for closer examination of reflective practice. We provide a response drawing on Barnett's (2007) theoretical pedagogy of risk to analyse the effectiveness of this teaching and learning approach in practice. The significance of this study, grounded in longitudinal research, is to illuminate our thinking about conceptual risk in higher education. In building on Barnett's work we add to the theoretical development of the pedagogical method of risk and offer new insights from a practice orientation. The study with a purposive sample of business practitioners' reveals learner engagement in reflection through an interrogation of theoretical concepts tied to work experiences. Empirical data demonstrates increased HRD technical learning, and enhanced self-awareness through reflexive thinking. We recognise the impact of reflective practice (Raelin 2001) on working lives is difficult to confirm. Yet the findings indicate practitioners are animated by student-led discussion which stimulates reflection on work experience. This radical pedagogy invites challenge and spontaneous questions which can strengthen the learning connections between unpredictable work situations and academic investigation.

The contribution of this study adds to theoretical understanding of how risk-based teaching can create friction that stimulates interactive learning. We build on Barnett's theoretical concept and add two significant practice implications. These are: first, the requirement to establish a supportive framework, and second, for lecturers to actively facilitate the effective process of balancing risk and certainty. First, a structural scaffold enables students to direct their own learning and reflect on knowledge and practice application; a reference frame offers learners structure without prescribing micro-content. We commend Coulson and Harvey's model (2010) to scaffold the development of reflective skills; this mitigates students' perceptions of threat and collectively emboldens a necessary relationship of trust. Second, to be effective a risk-based teaching approach relies on lecturers' willingness to actively facilitate peer interactions and promote reflection on work practice. Despite the institutional constraints of a professionally accredited qualification, lecturers can invert the traditional role of the pedagogue by students leading the group learning. The demands on a lecturer are willingness to flexibly orchestrate from a background position student-led debate that inspires knowledge discovery. In an instrumental learning context, a pedagogy that animates the dynamics of professional learning can enrich the development of reflective skills. Finally, based on this research study we assert that a risk-based pedagogical approach encourages learner engagement and animates the business relevance of critical reflection. Taking a risk with pedagogy educators can foster the development of reflective skills to enable practitioners to confront unpredictable practice situations.

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