

Editors' introduction: the importance of reflective practice

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In this issue of *LTHE* we highlight the importance of *reflection* in understanding and developing learning and teaching in universities and colleges. Reflection has been described as “an active process of exploration and discovery which often leads to very unexpected outcomes” (Boud *et al*, 1985, p. 7). While everyone may agree that experience is an important part of an educator’s developmental journey, the ability to reflect on that experience is a vital element of being able to learn from it.

In 2005, *LTHE* published a paper on Reflection in Teaching by Ghassoub Mustafa, in which, the author states that:

The educator has often been viewed as a technician, a disseminator of curriculum and knowledge. But increasingly we are concerned with exploring the thoughtful, insightful, and professional capabilities of the educator.

The author suggests that there is an increasing demand for reflective practice in countries where education systems are developing and the professionalization of teaching practice is being seen as key to a successful learning environment. Better teaching “is not just learning better teaching techniques. It is undergoing a fundamental change in one’s attitude, perceptions, beliefs, abilities and behaviours” (Baird 1992, cited in Mustafa 2005).

Hall (1997) proposes three broad levels of reflection. Level one is described as “everyday or random reflection”, often when one is alone and perhaps happening only as a fleeting thought or memory. Level two is “deliberate reflection” which:

...involves one in reviewing and developing one's practice in any of a number of deliberate ways which can be solitary or collaborative... Reflection within this level is reflection on or about action, and it may or may not directly contribute to development in practice

This deliberate reflection can be captured for example in a journal or blog, through talking with colleagues or mentors, or through participating in networks or special interest groups. Level three is “deliberate and systematic reflection” which normally takes place within relatively substantial review and development programs, for example through action research project groups or discipline specific program reviews.

One of the aims of this journal is to offer a forum for refereed publication in order to support and promote the kinds of deliberate and systematic reflection described by Hall (1997). Reflections are published in *LTHE* as a way of sharing the lived experiences of tertiary educators in the region and their understandings of this experience, with a view to triggering readers’ insights into their own work. A key strength of a Reflection in this journal is that it engages with specific experiences to which readers can relate, as well as with innovative methods or perspectives which may be unfamiliar to them. As well as

having content that is clearly presented and relevant to teaching and learning, there is a particular focus in Reflection papers on evidence-based implementation of teaching approaches or methods. Authors are also encouraged to reflect on personal and professional relevance which may be of interest to readers.

This issue features a Reflection paper by Lucia Pappalardo and Cindy Gunn at the American University of Sharjah on the utilization of active learning strategies to enhance learning in first year University Chemistry courses. The study considers the impact of using a variety of techniques such as group discussions, problem solving activities and student demonstrations to enhance students' understanding and interest in the subject. The authors reflect on the results of the student evaluations as well as their own impressions in order to analyze the impact of introducing active learning strategies. The sharing of experiences such as this one can be seen as contributing to the establishment of a community of reflective practice (Schon, 1983; Fischer, 2005). We welcome readers' comments on this and other papers, and hope that readers will be encouraged to submit a Reflection of their own on what they learned from a course or other experience.

Other papers in this issue add to *LTHE's* record of research-based articles from a range of geographical locations and disciplines in the Gulf region. ALAlami *et al.*'s paper presents physiological data to highlight the stress which can be generated in our students when they are exposed to teaching approaches which do not match their learning preferences. Prescott *et al.* describe a group project to investigate the uses which faculty make (or do not make) of a course management system which has been promoted by their institution; they show that despite training, faculty may limit themselves to a particular subset of the features offered by such a system. Souleles' and Jawarneh's papers focus on the links between university/college studies and the experience of those entering this setting or working in their chosen field. Souleles presents data from Emirati university students who reflect on their learning in secondary school and at university; the paper argues for a greater emphasis on critical thinking and active learning. Jawarneh's paper discusses the training needs of teachers of the new school subject Life Skills, with a focus on implications for higher education. Finally, Turlik's paper tackles a topic which affects all faculty teaching in the Gulf region: the development of students' academic vocabulary. He discusses key issues which are crucial to students' learning but which often go unaddressed, and he analyzes how actual students' written vocabulary develops over a period of two and a half years.

We would like to thank our recent peer reviewers, who include Rahma Al-Mahrooqi, M. Ali Ayari, Abdulaziz Ayoub, Brian Bennison, Leon Chew, Robert Craig, Robin Dada, Gilles Doiron, Marion Engin, Christina Gitsaki, Amanda Howard, Henk Huijser, Amir Kaviani, Mick King, Josephine O'Brien, Janet Olearski, Kevin Schoepp, Ilango Sivaraman, Jerry Spring, Justin Thomas, Muhammad Abdulwahid Usmani, Sally Ward, Margaret Wood and Saziye Yaman. Their critical reading and constructive feedback has helped the journal to select and develop papers with a local focus for a readership which extends around the world.

In April 2013 the second learning and teaching research symposium linked to *LTHE* will bring together researchers and teachers from the region and beyond to share the latest findings on **mobile learning** in the Gulf. With the support of Zayed University's Center for Educational Innovation and Office of Research, selected work from the symposium will be compiled in a special issue of *LTHE* to be published in August 2013. It is therefore timely that mobile access to *LTHE* has now become much easier with apps [for iPhone/iPad](#) and [for Android](#): we hope that this will bring the journal to a wider readership, and that readers will take this new opportunity to interact with the journal via comments and discussions on our website.

We look forward to receiving submissions of Research Articles or Reflections for LTHE at any time via our website (<http://lthe.zu.ac.ae>). Submissions are welcome at all times; following the special issue on mobile learning the next general issue of *LTHE* will be published in February 2014.

References

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