Reflective and Collaborative Teaching Practice: working towards quality student learning outcomes

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ABSTRACT  A cycle of reflection and revision can be used to involve students and teaching staff in the development of curriculum and teaching methods, with a resultant increase in quality learning outcomes. The paper describes the process used in an undergraduate management ethics course, which resulted in an increased emphasis on collaborative teaching and the introduction of integrated communication skills. Qualitative analysis (student evaluation of teaching, student e-mail communication and feedback) and quantitative data (grade comparisons) are used to show the learning outcomes.

Introduction

Adaptations to the curriculum and teaching methods employed in any tertiary course are often made in response to external events. Changes in student numbers, new accreditation rules, availability of new technology, student complaints, evaluation reports or a change of teaching staff can all lead to a modification in the course as taught. The change process may also be approached as an opportunity to enhance the transformation of students. A process of reflection can be a staff development activity as well as a means of enhancing student outcomes. This paper provides an introduction to the use of reflection as a means of curriculum development and evaluation. It then describes the process as it applied to the international management ethics and values course at the University of South Australia. The effectiveness of the method in delivering quality learning outcomes is then demonstrated using qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Reflective Practice to Transform Curriculum and Learning Outcomes

Dadds (1998, p. 41) says that:

... practitioner research [refers] to forms of enquiry which people undertake in their own working contexts and, usually, on their professional work, in whatever sphere they practice. The main purpose of the enquiry is to shed light on aspects of that work with a view to bringing about some benevolent change.

Fraser (1997, p. 169) argues ‘action research can be the most appropriate, most effective and least threatening strategy when evaluating curriculum innovations’. Furthermore, Møller (1998, p. 71) suggests that genuine action research breaks down the binary between
research and practice, and that useful action research is documented, published and scrutinised by peers.

The Revision Process

The process of reflection and revision that characterises this intervention, which has run for over three years, may be said to be a form of ‘practitioner research’ (often referred to as ‘action research’). Continuous improvement has been conducted as an activity to bring the course closer to achieving its aims and to enhance the transformation of students, rather than as a correction-centred activity, designed to remove student complaints. The reflection process has involved all teaching staff, with sessions at the end of teaching and before the new semester begins. Student evaluations of the course, assessment summaries, the course aims, and the university’s graduate qualities are all considered.

The use of reflection as a method of revision is particularly apposite in this case, because the course under revision deals with international management ethics and values and has as an aim the enhancement of reflective skills. Five elements of the course that have been revised through the reflective process are the topicality of the case material, the debate, English language skills, online resources and moral imagination. Each of these topics is considered in a later section.

There is also a further factor that supports the use of this method. The University of South Australia has adopted a formal statement of the seven qualities that it seeks to develop in graduates, and these guide course development. Three graduate qualities that have particularly shaped the development of the course, and which are consistent with a process of reflection, are:

1. the student is committed to ethical action and social responsibility;
2. the student demonstrates international perspectives;
3. the student communicates effectively (Feast, 2001).

The International Management Ethics and Values Course

International management ethics and values (IMEV) is a second-stage subject in the bachelor of management degree. This degree is one of the University of South Australia’s largest programmes, with an enrolment of 847 and an annual intake of over 300. The ethics course is compulsory for most management majors, the double degrees in engineering and management, and the degree in justice administration, and is an elective for other students. First taught in 1999 with an enrolment of 160, by 2001 the enrolment had risen to 231 students, including 80 international students, mostly from South-East Asian countries.

The course sets out to acquaint students with significant examples of issues and dilemmas in business ethics and values, together with their theoretical context, their international dimensions and possible ways of dealing with them. By its end, students are expected to be able to: show understanding of theoretical approaches that assist thought about these kinds of issues; show an ability to reflect on and discuss the issues; demonstrate how values influence a wide range of decisions in business, government and international commerce.

The course structure demonstrates the importance of the five elements that were changed in the cycle of reflection and revision. A significant element is a focus on communicative competence, in both writing and speaking. Case studies in the first seven weeks provide examples of the various approaches to ethical decision-making and moral
development. Students are continually invited to ‘describe, explain and justify’ as they analyse ethical issues in the case studies. The cases provide practice in the application of the theoretical frameworks covered in each week’s topic and students must prepare short written analyses for three cases in the first five weeks of the course.

The course consists of 13 topics, corresponding to the 13 weeks in the semester. Each topic is a unit, made up of a case study, a lecture in which the topic is linked to the overall course, and an activity.

The course is international, not just in dealing with cross-border transactions and international codes but also in providing sources outside the Western canon and in examining the impact of different national value systems and religious traditions on business practices. The course places less emphasis on dilemma resolution and more on ethical awareness and overcoming the difficulties of compliance that are significant for practising managers (Harris, 1999).

Assessment includes case study analyses, a debate, an essay, an optional reflective journal, and an examination comprising a case study, short answer questions and an opportunity for students to display their ability to put a convincing case on an ethical issue. The course has undergone continual revision from its inception in 1999, and now uses a collaborative teaching approach that aims to be responsive to students’ needs.

Reflection and Revision

Although the reflection and revision process has been applied to the whole course, it is most apparent in five specific elements: the topicality of the case material, the debate, English language skills, online resources and moral imagination. Each of these topics is considered below.

Encouraging Student Engagement: contemporary case studies

At the end of the first year, some students commented that many cases related to events more than a decade old. Classic business ethics cases, such as Challenger, Ford Pinto and Lockheed, had been chosen for their suitability as examples and for the accessibility of balanced case statements, and for some students the use of real-life cases was better than the ‘same old boring made-up examples’ found in some subjects.

As the dated material reduced the ease with which students could engage with the issues, the relevance of the cases was accentuated by the inclusion in case preparation guides of questions that asked students to identify relevant contemporary examples, and one of the classic cases was replaced by a topical case.

Developing Oral Communication Skills: introduction of a debate

A further modification was the introduction of a debate based on a contemporary topic. This provided an opportunity for students to improve comprehension and articulation of key issues using another technique. Students now had the opportunity to describe, explain and justify their ethical decisions in tutorial discussion, written presentations, and debate.

The 20 members of each tutorial group participate in the debates, working in teams of five. The format includes tasks for the observers, focusing on the development of strong cases in support of a particular ethical position. In 2001 the debate format was changed to encourage the rebuttal and challenge of ideas. This followed the comment that ‘the debate would have been a little more challenging had an actual debate occurred rather than a
group presentation’. Satisfaction with the value and relevance of class discussion increased from 75% in 2000 to 83% in 2001.

Acknowledging the Need for Fluent Written English: inter-disciplinary collaboration

Given the complexity of the material, and the numerous assessment tasks, the course requires students to be able to express themselves effectively in written English. International students comprise over one third of the overall student population in this course, and many students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) require learning support if they are to realise their potential in a language-rich course such as IMEV (Bretag, 2001). Developing communication skills integrated with the course content requires inter-disciplinary collaboration (Benesch, 1988; Pantelides, 1999) and a strong commitment from all members of staff to quality learning outcomes. Change in this area has come in two stages as staff and students reflected on the learning process and student outcomes.

It was apparent during the first weeks of the course that some students found the requirement to write convincing prose a more demanding task than purely descriptive work. Tutors also were unsure how to grade work which seemed to have the right words but not necessarily a coherent argument. The early responses included making use of the language support service available to students through the university’s learning connection service. A student adviser was designated to work with students referred from the course, and staff were briefed about the referral procedures and depth of assistance available to students. The aim was to enhance student capability, not just to pass IMEV but also to gain a lifetime skill.

This arrangement has continued. Some NESB students have difficulty understanding lecture and tutorial material, tend to be quiet in class, and seldom ask questions of the instructor. Several researchers, including Ballard and Clanchy (1997), Stoynoff (1997), and Chapple (1998), have tried to ascertain the most effective ways to support NESB student learning, although the results have been inconclusive.

However, Beasley and Pearson (1999) have reported a 7-year study of a team-teaching approach, where a content specialist and a language specialist provide support tutorials to NESB students in a business subject. The authors compared student grades from 1992–1997 and showed that there had been an improvement from a 13% failure rate in 1992 to a 1.5% failure rate in 1997. It seemed evident that a support tutorial, along the lines of the Pearson and Beasley model, was a high priority for the NESB students in the course. In addition, Ingleton and Wake (1997) have suggested that ‘integrated communication skills’ are vital for all undergraduate students, regardless of language background.

With this in mind, the second major change was made and writing workshops taught by a language specialist were introduced in 2001. Students who have achieved the lowest passing grade (P2) or a failing grade in the early case studies are invited to attend the non-compulsory sessions, and other students are also made welcome. As the examination for the subject includes a case study, in the same form as the in-class cases, the writing workshops are overwhelmingly popular, and a large number of students of all competencies attend.

Using New Technologies to Enhance Learning: online facilities

Researchers have explored the potential of new technologies for educational delivery (for example, Häkkinen, 2002). Online facilities were available in 1999 but did not work well. Improvements followed from the introduction of the University of South Australia’s
UniSAnet platform in 2000. The new platform brought tutorials for teaching staff, self-help manuals, and a user-friendly interface. Students have access to a range of resources, the opportunity to participate in discussion groups and an online debate. The 2001 evaluation in the 60-strong external student group found that 85% were satisfied with their ability to access and use relevant information from the online resource and none who responded was dissatisfied. Many online resources, including a weekly learning guide, current issues, extra advice, and copies of lecture overheads, were made available to internal students, with 63% of on-campus students rating the online resources favourably.

Encouraging Reflective and Critical Thinking: the reflective journal

The development of students’ ability to see, in their imagination, the potential moral consequences of particular actions was, from the outset, an aim of the course (Williams, 1997). For 2001, moral imagination was given added prominence throughout the course. Students were advised to keep a reflective journal to facilitate this process (Riley-Doucet & Wilson, 1997). Based on anecdotal information and student evaluations, it seems that few students did. For 2002, students were given additional encouragement to keep a journal by the inclusion of a non-compulsory reflective writing workshop and the opportunity to gain additional marks if a journal was kept and submitted for marking. (In the event, 25 journals were received.) Having decided on the value of a reflective journal, and largely as a result of writing this paper, teaching staff also committed to keeping a journal of teaching and learning issues in 2002.

These revisions have been based on the evaluations, reflected upon in the light of the course objectives, and made to encourage the transformation of students, staff, and results. The outcomes are discussed in the next section.

Student Evaluations

Formal student evaluations have been conducted each year, with separate evaluation instruments for internal and external (online) students from 2001. Almost one quarter of the students responded to a formal student evaluation, with similar response rates being achieved for both the electronic instruments introduced in 2000 and for the paper-based survey used in 1999. The evaluation included questions on course quality, feedback, development of writing skills and the effectiveness of the course in helping students to understand concepts. Students were asked whether or not they agreed with various statements, using a five-point scale—strongly agree through to strongly disagree. Among the statements were:

- Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course.
- I have received feedback that is constructive and helpful.
- The course helped me to develop my ability to write in ways appropriate to my discipline.
- The course developed my understanding of concepts and principles.

There has been an increase from year to year in the proportion of students who were satisfied with the overall quality of the course, who received constructive feedback and who reported that the course had developed their writing skills (Table 1).

The value of the writing workshops can be seen from the following comments made by students in the 2001 evaluations:
Not many people had a clear idea of how to do them [the case study tutorials] until the writing workshop was conducted.

I was particularly pleased with the running of the writing workshops to enable students to improve their marks for the case studies. While I did well in the first case study (a credit) I found the workshop more than beneficial and was able to lift my performance to a distinction level. It was good to see a course coordinator that did everything possible to ensure that all students received a fair go.

### Table 1. Student evaluation of the course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Writing skills</th>
<th>Conceptual development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001 external</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 internal</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>not included</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>not included</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Student achievement measured by final grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Failing grades</th>
<th>Passing grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Quantitative Analysis: grade comparisons**

The success of the activities undertaken to improve the quality of the learning experiences in the course can also be seen from the movement in student grades (Table 2). Those with marks just short of a pass fell from 6% in 1999 to 0% in 2001. Detailed examination shows that although the average mark achieved in the first case study remained much the same in all years, in 2000 and 2001 the improvement in marks from case to case was greater than in 1999, with students in the latter years achieving, by the second assessment, a level achieved only in the final assessment in 1999. The response to the question about conceptual development showed a decline. This has been the subject of further discussion with both students and staff in an effort to determine the meaning and possible causes.

**Conclusion**

The International Management Ethics and Values course was established to acquaint students with significant ethical issues, dilemmas, and values that they might encounter in their management careers. In developing the teaching framework for the course, staff at the University of South Australia have engaged in an on-going process of reflection and revision which has ultimately resulted in an enhanced curriculum, new modes of delivery, and higher quality learning outcomes for students. The authors foresee further course
developments in the future, and look forward to being part of an evolving and exciting process of teaching and learning.

References


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