

Chapter 12

Collaborative Reflection in Globally Distributed Inter- Cultural Course Teams

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter looks at processes for conducting collaborative reflection in action and collaborative reflection on action. The authors examine this in the context of globally distributed inter-cultural course teams. From a review of the literature, they identify the significance of openness, structure and dialogue as factors that support collaborative reflection. The authors consider these factors in our own experience of global online teaching. They explore and focus upon one technique used in our collaborative inter-cultural reflective practice. This technique involves having one tutor maintain and share an online journal with the other tutors in the course team. This process combined reflective writing and discussion in action. The authors suggest that having one tutor author and share a learning journal may provide facilitation and structure that supports reflective dialogue in inter-cultural globally distributed teams. They consider the influence of cultural pedagogy on inter-cultural reflection. The authors' technique is culturally sensitive in that it respects the right of others to read the journal and to comment only if they wish. Finally, the authors close with a look at instrumentalist versus developmental collaborative reflective practice.

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BACKGROUND

“As we move beyond the individual towards the social context then..... [w]e need to find ways of rehabilitating some key aspects of reflection that have been eroded through unthinking use while moving further to deal with these new issues. This is the challenge from professional practice that confronts us” (Boud, 2006).

Our own experiences as online tutors show us that collaborative reflection is helpful to develop and understand our practice(s). However, we also note a trend to working in an increasingly distributed manner. New processes are required to support collaborative reflection in globally distributed course teams. This chapter looks at the use of a learning journal, maintained by one tutor and shared online with the team, as a focus for collaborative reflection in action. This journal was shared in a group of six tutors working as one online team. The tutor team was distributed across China and across the United Kingdom (UK). The team used a tutor forum in a Moodle Virtual Learning Environment to support each other. To set this in a wider context, we begin with a view of the literature that relates to collaborative reflection.

David Boud (2006) has highlighted the need for tutors to reflect on their practice in teams. In the past, teachers typically worked alone. Today there is a greater emphasis on team teaching and working within team structures. This is particularly true in distance and e-learning contexts but finding a process for collaborative reflection is problematic. Finding a process for doing so in globally distributed inter-cultural online course teams is exponentially more difficult. This chapter reviews one experience that resulted in one particular approach to collaborative reflection. We speculate that such a process may have value both locally and globally.

Boud (2001) builds on the work of Schon (1983) articulating a reflective practice that includes reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action involves thinking about events as they unfold relating them to existing knowledge and earlier experiences. Reflection-on-action looks back at completed events and draws upon available data in a dialogue with that experience. Collaborative reflection adds to this discussion with others. The authors of this chapter acknowledge that research into collaborative reflection in online course teams is becoming ever more urgent in local practices and innovative processes are required as new global inter-cultural pedagogical practices emerge.

Osguthorpe (1999) defines collaborative reflection as “prolonged joint work on the continual process of improving one’s practice and the commitment to help others improve theirs.” Castle et al (1995) believe that reflection involves a change in the whole person. They suggest that it is “complex and demanding”, and that “it is not likely to occur in any depth unless those involved are willing to reflect on themselves and their practice and to set this reflection in a collaborative context.”

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