

REFLECTIONS ON PERFORMANCE: USING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AT WORK

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Abstract

Managing performance is a key feature of modern employment practices. Whether we measure how someone works or their productivity, generally the aim of managing performance is to both measure and drive performance at work. However, invariably most performance management systems are limited in their ability to actively engage with the employee. This paper, using research from a study assessing physiotherapy students' practice will state a case for the usefulness of using reflective practice as part of the performance management process. The critical point of difference between current performance management systems and reflective practice is that it is the individual themselves that reflects on their own work and practice, rather than the assessment of their work being driven by the business, the company or the organisation. Reflective practice has been used as a performance assessment tool in both the health professional and education industries, because the benefit associated with its use in learning from experience. Reflective practice or the idea of reflecting-on-action as described by Kolb (1984) can potentially be used successfully to help employees to improve their work practice, and aid in their development at work to enhance career practice.

Introduction

The requirement to continue learning in the workplace after initially qualifying is a well recognised characteristic in New Zealand workplaces. This expectation is variously described as professional development, training, personal development and career development. However it is described, it helps maintain knowledge, expertise and competence in the workplace. On-going learning in the workplace is in the interests of the employer, the employee, the profession/career and the public. The purpose of a performance review is to discuss how well an employee has managed the key outcomes or goals in their job over a specified period of time (usually a quarter, half or a full year). This may be linked to a salary increase, a bonus or to discuss where their strengths and opportunities lie and setting goals for the next quarter, half or full year. At the large corporate level, there are more complex systems with weightings and rankings used to ensure the same standards are applied over thousands of employees (Atkins, 2009).

In contrast, the focus of this paper is the use of reflection as part of the professional development process, as it was experienced by a cohort of physiotherapists¹ in the final year of the clinical education program in Wellington. The assessment of their workplace performance was driven themselves as they populated their own clinical assessments. The importance of reflecting on what you are doing as part of any learning process is well documented in medical and teaching literature (Watson, 1992, Boud et al, 1998, Higgs & Hunt, 1999), and more literature is emerging in workplace learning literature (Herzberg et al, 1993, Smith, 2000). Reflective practice has also been defined in terms of action research (Hopkins and Antes, 1990). Reflection can be described as a thinking process with either a purpose or an outcome or both, that is applied in situations at work where

¹ Research conducted as part of the requirements for Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Teaching 2000

there could be a number of choices about how to complete a task and where there is no obvious solution (Moon, 2005).

Background

Most of the physiotherapy program in the final year is spent on location, that is working in hospitals, clinics and private practice to make sure the theory and practice all comes together to treat patients competently. Patient treatment in physiotherapy involves assessing, diagnosing, and treating the patient. The assessment is subjective (asking the patient how the problem is impacting on them), and objective (the physiotherapist conducts a clinical examination). The physiotherapist then summarises the findings (a diagnosis) and applies an appropriate treatment. In teaching physiotherapy, this is the role of the clinical educator. Each component part of the physiotherapy session is observed and the student assessed. The only problem with this approach to assessment was the ratio of clinical educators to students [3:43], and the distances between locations [from Napier to Danniverke to Palmerston North to Blenheim]. The students are familiar with the concept of reflective practice in the clinical setting (Schon, 1996; Brockbank & McGill, 1998), and use it with patients to write about a patient treatment session. A sample reflective practice sheet is shown in Figure 1.

Figure1: Sample physiotherapy student reflective practice sheets

What was the problem with the patient	What did I do
What went really well	What didn't go so well
What I learned today	What I will do next time

Research methods

My research challenge was to determine if reflection could be used for self assessment on a broader scale. To understand if the use of reflection about patient treatments was successful, I need to show that reflection on professional performance also helps students to assess themselves in distance² (away from Wellington) placements for six week blocks. In line with the research question and

² Roe-Shaw (2005) *From a distance: the challenges of clinical education*

approach, data collection was by clinical assessment analysis, and interviews. An example of the clinical assessment sheet, designed for this purpose is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Clinical Assessment

<p>Overall my best area this week was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment • Diagnosis • Treatment • Follow up treatment • Advice or exercises for the patient 	<p>Describe why this was your best area</p>
<p>Overall my weakest area this week was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment • Diagnosis • Treatment • Follow up treatment • Advice or exercises for the patient 	<p>Describe why this was your weakest area</p>
<p>What grade would you give yourself this week?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A • B • C or less <p>Why? What do you need to add to your knowledge base?</p>	<p>If 10 is fully competent and ready to practice, what number do you think you are this week?</p> <p>10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3</p> <p>What is your action plan from this week?</p>

The participant group were final year student physiotherapists, in clinical placements in Napier, Hastings, Danniverke, Blenheim, Palmerston North and Levin. Selection of participants in this group involved purposive, maximum variation sampling to reflect the diversity of locations. There were 22 participants in this study, and from the six week placement there were 132 clinical assessment sheets available for analysis (six sheets per participant). My research question was *what was it like to use reflection on your practice in your workplace?*

This study adopted a qualitative research design within the interpretive paradigm, utilising the research approach of phenomenology of practice as informed by the work of van Manen (2002). The use of an interpretive approach allowed orientation to exploration, discovery and inductive logic, which allowed the study of influential workplace experiences and workplace factors³ to occur with contextual integrity. This paradigm enabled me to develop a narrative model of the use of reflection as a self assessment tool, portrayed through the actual experiences of this cohort of physiotherapy students through the depth and richness of the data collected from all participants. The purpose and process of reflection can be explored through the goals of acculturation⁴ (Chun et al, 2003), in the narrative model. The purpose of the narrative model is to represent the range of

³ The 'workplaces of this cohort were in hospitals, community centres and private practices in New Zealand

⁴ Acculturation is an important and dynamic phenomenon which describes the influences and social and environmental changes on an individual's values, beliefs, behaviours and affect

contexts and experiences of the participants and illuminate them through the use of reflection. It also illuminates the participants' lived experiences of reflection, their volitional⁵ thoughts and actions to remediate reflection.

Results

What emerged strongly from the data were four context themes that contributed to the use of reflection on clinical assessment. These context themes are derived from the data, and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Context themes in the narrative model

Narrative context theme 1	Professional development opportunities
Narrative context theme 2	Preparation for the workplace
Narrative context theme 3	Career options
Narrative context theme 4	Self supporting resource

NCT1 Professional development opportunities

The participants described a range of ways of using reflection on their clinical assessments as professional development opportunities. For example, *"I didn't expect that writing down things about my patient treatments would make much difference, but once I got into it and looked back at what I had learned during the placement I can see how much I have grown as a physio"* (P019), and *"I reckon this is a good way to see just how much better I am getting at making exercise programs for patients, and seeing the different ways of drawing them"*. (P07)

NCT2 Preparation for the workplace

The participants described the use of reflection on their clinical assessments as a good tool for use after graduation. For example *"I thought that whole idea was stupid until I started to write my CV, and realised I had already changed the way I was thinking forward to my first job"*. (P02)

NCT3 Career options

Career options were mentioned by most of the participants. For example *"I didn't know where I was headed to be honest, but now I can see looking back on my last away placement that I am strong in the musculoskeletal side of things, and want to go to work in a private practice. Yeah this is really good"* (P6) and *"I can see looking back that thing I enjoy most is working on the exercise side of things, so it makes it clearer that I need to look into sports medicine. Yeah, and maybe do a post-graduate course"*. (P014)

NCT4 Self supporting resource

The participants described a variety of dimensions that influenced this, including the confidence to apply for a remote placement. For example *"I was worried before I started writing this stuff down about going back to the West Coast to work, because I know there isn't much support or resources*

⁵ Keilhofner (2003) describes the core of volition as the thoughts and experiences which are believed to be shaped by previous experience, interpretation of that experience and anticipation of other experiences.

over there. But now I can just write things down that I need to do and learn and go back and see if I'm on track". (P09)

Experience themes in the narrative model

What also emerged from the data were three themes of the experience of using reflection on clinical assessment. Each of these themes relate to how the participants were experiencing the use of reflection. These themes often overlapped, as multiple realities cannot be completely disengaged from one another. In the data analysis I was looking for words, sentences and phrases that gave me a sense of the vocative, the *vocatio*⁶ of what the participants had experienced. These experience themes are derived from the data, and are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Experience themes in the narrative model

Narrative experience theme 1	Experiencing a sense of direction and identity
Narrative experience theme 2	Experiencing an ability to cope with role dissonance
Narrative experience theme 3	Experiencing career and job satisfaction

NET1 Experiencing a sense of direction and identity

Experiencing a sense of direction and identity was described and experienced several ways by the participants within their placements. For example "*I understand now what people mean when they talk about lifelong learning because I can read back [clinical assessment sheets] and see what I don't know and still need to learn*". (P017)

NET2 Experiencing an ability to cope with role dissonance

This refers to the way the students felt about their career choice, and learning to cope on their own without supervision. For example "*I really didn't like having to do these reflective sheets until everyone went off with the flu and I had the whole ward to do by myself. I was so stressed until I realised that what I had written for the week showed that I could do it, and I managed even though I was doing new stuff. And nobody died.*" (P012)

NET3 Experiencing career and job satisfaction

This was a common trend in the data. The generalised satisfaction stemmed mostly from system and organisational satisfaction in the workplace. There were strong experiences in realising that through the week they had been able to help people, make people better and improve patients' quality of life. For example, "*I just thought of myself as a student until I started to read my stuff I wrote while I was in Danniverke. And I can see now that I was really effective in the Department, and people were coming back and saying I had fixed them. I really feel cool about that.*" (P021)

Discussion

Reflective writing is creative, because it is about telling a story, and that's something we all like to do. Reflective practice is learning and developing through examining what we thought happened on an occasion. The participants feedback that made me realise there was a link between the students

⁶ The aim of vocation is to let things speak or be heard by bringing them into nearness through the vocative power of language

self assessment of *performance*, and the reality of their *practice*. This link was between the self allocated clinical assessment grade, and the examination clinical assessment grade. I believe that making the connection between the use of reflection in physiotherapy and using it in performance reviews as a part of career practice is possible.

If we consider performance management systems: performance reviews or appraisals then there are several formats in use depending often on the size of the organisation. Comparing the physiotherapy students' performance reflections to a performance review demonstrates that there is a similarity in the processes. See Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Performance reviews vs. Performance reflection

Performance reviews	Performance reflections
Key responsibilities- employees comment on which areas of their job description they thought they had done well, and which areas they could improve	Students used the clinical assessment sheets to comment on what they had done well, and the areas they could improve, and what they needed to learn
Overall questions- what biggest achievement was, what they enjoyed about their job, what frustrations or issues they had, and their overall comments	Clinical assessment: Overall grading for their clinical competence and why
Skills- what were their strengths, and were there any areas to improve?	Clinical assessment: Strengths- the areas they were competent and the areas they needed to improve
Training and development plan	Looking ahead to career options

Summary

Although this research focuses on physiotherapy students' experiences of learning self assessment in their workplaces, it demonstrates that self assessment works. If the student gave themselves a grade of 7 for their competency on their clinical assessment sheet, then they would certainly achieve a 7 in a clinical examination. They were accurate, and had a sense of how well they were doing. New employees, particularly new graduates, have an expectation of on-going feedback and reviews of their workplace performance. This can be time consuming and difficult to manage, so an alternative is to design performance reflection plans for specific job descriptions, and encourage employees to reflect on their performance at work.

The benefit associated with reflective practice is learning from experience. The art of reflection is a way of promoting autonomy and self drive through self assessment. It can stimulate personal and work growth, and closes the gap between theory and practice. Used as part of a performance management system, reflective practice can both drive and measure performance.

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