

Elearning: Bringing Reflective Practice and Self-Development Learning Activities Online

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Development Learning Activities Online.

ABSTRACT

Reflective practice is in vogue as a tool in many parts of the educational economy, though the efforts to support its development often lag behind the promotion of the practice itself. Some of the issues relating to the development of this competency, and barriers to the same, are covered in my Teaching and Learning Optional Paper ‘Teaching and Supporting the Development of Reflective Practice’. As momentum builds for the introduction of reflective practice, the educational and management worlds need to look to ways to enhance this capacity quickly, and to do this at an economic price. This paper addresses these twin issues. It achieves that purpose through examining a number of historical case studies, then moves onto a description of a number of contemporary experiments, reflecting upon the lessons learned from these experiments, and the implications of those lessons for future practice.

KEY WORDS: Reflective practice; elearning; enhancing capacity; Management learning.

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Elearning assignment: Bringing Reflective Practice and Self Development Learning Activities Online.

Introduction

Reflective practice is in vogue as a tool in many parts of the educational economy, though the efforts to support its development often lag behind the promotion of the practice itself. Some of the issues relating to the development of this competency, and barriers to the same, are covered in my Teaching and Learning Optional Paper ‘Teaching and Supporting the Development of Reflective Practice’. As momentum builds for the introduction of reflective practice, the educational and management worlds need to look to ways to enhance this capacity quickly, and to do this at an economic price. This paper addresses these twin issues. It achieves that purpose through examining a number of historical case studies, then moves onto a description of a number of contemporary experiments, reflecting upon the lessons learned from these experiments, and the implications of those lessons for future practice.

A significant part of my professional practice has been devoted to development of reflective practice, my own and that of others. Over the last twenty years my work in this area of developing reflective practice skills had had two principal foci. The first has been for the purpose of growing a learner’s competency in reflecting on their life’s course, often with a view to re-aligning their careers, and through that re-alignment enhancing their contribution to their organisation. The second focus has been working with individuals in this area to refine and improve their professional practice. This aspect of improving professional practice through reflective practice has proved particularly relevant when working with engineers and scientific managers. A common issue that has pervaded this development work has been that while reflective practice, especially through ‘writing-as-inquiry’ (see my optional module paper on ‘developing reflective practice’) has flourished under class room conditions, there is evidence that the practice deteriorates strongly when the classroom conditions are removed.

It is at this point, out of the classroom, that the reflective practitioner needs to provide their own motivation, processes and structures to progress the development of this reflective capability. This diminution of motivation can be defended against somewhat by the deployment of a formal mentor or coach, who encourages reflection, and the keeping of a reflective diary; but again the evidence is that when the mentor is removed, or does not have sufficient mentoring competence, then the practice derogates. Another way to defend against derogation is through the development of institutional processes to support reflective practice, but there is also strong supporting evidence that when the external processes and structures slacken, the motivation to persevere is damaged also. The conclusion would be that it takes a highly committed reflective practitioner to persist without group, mentor, and/ or institutional support.

An associated issue relating to classroom based skills development in reflective practice is that while evidence suggests that this tutor intensive approach is effective, a limitation to this approach is that it can only occur in small group sizes, and is therefore financially expensive. Indeed it is sometimes, in the perception of those who hold the educational purse strings, an decide on priorities, prohibitively expensive, in particular when assessed through a financial screen such as ‘full economic costing.’ (a tool which, for obvious reasons, has high popularity in a School such as mine, Economics Finance and Management, which invented this system). Thus, while we know that small group learning works as a way of ‘kick-starting’ reflective practice, it is tempting to explore less labour intensive approaches to skilling, approaches which would defend against those approaches becoming massified, commoditized and de-personalised. Clearly one approach which would leverage less labour intensive approaches would be to ‘elearning’, either in stand alone or blended format.

This paper is a reflective account of a number of four interrelated case studies / experiments in transitioning classroom and analogue, paper based self-development and reflective practice activities onto a digital platform, and learning and conclusions to be derived from the same. All of these experiments involve a blended approach to learning.

Some take this skills development further to experiment with online mentoring, while others do not.

These case studies take us through

- A simple historical example of taking a manualised structured approach, and placing this on a digital platform. This study explores this naturalistic evolution towards digitalization, and points up the limitations of this incrementalism.
- Taking a largely unstructured, classroom based approach, and extending this activity via online learning resource Blackboard. This activity is designed, and operationalised once; then re-designed, in the light of learnings from the first unsuccessful pilot.
- Building upon the learning from above, initiating an online self development, mentor supported activity for the same population of post-experience postgraduates, utilizing a previously commercially formatted elearning product.
- Designing a parallel activity utilizing the same commercial platform, but for Engineering undergraduates.

Case study # 1: Exxon Corporation, 1979 – 2006. Putting Manager Self Development tools and practices on an elearning platform.

I share this case study to familiarize the reader with naturalistic evolution of a digitalized self-development process, indicating some of the benefits and also the limitations of following this naturalistic route. Along the way, I describe the origins of this self-development practice. In the late 1970's, Boydell, Pedler and Burgoyne unleashed something of a revolution in Management Development practice by suggesting that management development did not necessarily need to be confined to the classrooms of business schools, or to executive training rooms. Instead, they suggested that there was much managers could do to support their own learning, by reflecting on their performance on the job. They also recognized that self development was unlikely to

occur without structure and support. To this end, in 1979 they published their book, 'The Managers Guide to Self Development' (2001 Pedler edition), which was aimed to provide series of progressive exercises through which managers could work in their own time. This self development was planned to occur with support from a variety of sources, including line manager, formal or informal mentor, peers and colleagues, or learning support specialist, whether they be in-company or external sourced. Pedler pointed out, in conversation, that a paradox of this approach is that 'you cannot do self-development alone, it needs support.'

At the time that these ideas were in development, Mike Pedler was my professional studies supervisor, and through this association I developed an appetite for experimentation with this self-development approach. I had the opportunity to apply this enthusiasm when working as a consultant for Exxon Corporation. A large part of the inspiration was gained through working together with an internal HR advisor who was passionately committed to utilizing this approach in the development of company managers. He adapted the Pedler approach to fit in with the career development processes of his company, and encouraged managers to experiment with the use of what became his 'Self Development Toolkit'. The introduction the use of this Toolkit was through a 'volunteers' workshop, where participants experimented with the various tools, with peer and tutor support. While there was great enthusiasm for these workshops, the use of the toolkit by managers deteriorated markedly post the workshop experience. Analysis of the reasons for this revealed that the causes were two fold. One was that the company processes did not motivate the managers to continue. There were no extrinsic motivators, solely intrinsic ones. (Hertzberg 1995, Deci & Ryan 1985) In addition, there were problems experienced in sustaining the practice away from the direct support that the classroom group provided. One feature which caused the activity to sustain was the momentum generated by the volunteers who remained enthusiastic, continuing to practice and proselytize around the company.

Later in the 1980's, I had the opportunity to experiment – once more with Exxon - with a more structured approach which I hoped would counteract some of the obstacle

encountered during the first application. This self development activity, which was styled the Personal Development Program (PDP) was geared around Exxon institutional processes of appraisal and staff development. This PDP design incorporated the Dalton Thompson (1997) Career Stages model and Brook Derr Career Success model (1985 Novations), both of which seemed highly amenable to translation onto an elearning base. (see also my Teaching and Learning optional paper on mentoring, for details on these models.) Within this design we decided once more to use a workshop to kick start the process, with the onus on individual managers and their mentors to complete the process once they had the workshop immersion experience. The results from this initiative were hit and miss. Given the somewhat tentative nature of the institutional framework the key variables for success proved to be the motivation of the individual to pursue the process, and the commitment and the ability of their mentor to see it through. For those that were uncommitted, there was a tendency towards ‘institutional minimalism’, where the outputs reflected the requirements of the bureaucracy, but had little of substance behind them, in terms of the manager engaging in meaningful reflective practice that would have a tangible translation in the development of their careers or their competencies. Again, it was evident that the people who were volunteers ‘in spirit’ – who were committed enthusiasts - were able and enthusiastic to keep this process alive.

In fact, some of these ‘early adopters’ were so enthusiastic that, 10 years later, long after the formal process had decayed, they identified a need for a PDP approach for the Exxon world wide IT group. This IT division, which had been one of my original experimental groups in 1989, was facing conditions where labour turnover was unacceptably high, and where there was a belief that a renewal of the psychological contract (Schein 1985) through the use of a revived PDP was the way forward. I was engaged as a consultant for the re launch. Given that the client was the IT Division, and that technology had moved on by 1998, the PDP system was put on a digital platform.

An important observation would be that, even though the process was digitalized, the participants seemed to trust the paper-based format over the digitalized. (I would imagine that situation may be different now, given the organization’s increased

familiarity with on screen processing). What was noticeable was that the digital system was an exact replica of the paper based system. No allowances or adjustments had been made for placing this on an elearning platform. This meant that the digital and the analogue systems were interchangeable. This choice in turn meant the environment was a mix of both also, which in my view weakened the impact of digitalization. This may have been illustrative of the phenomenon of ‘equivalence’, where choice does not necessarily assist focus and functionality. The potential benefits of PDP efficiencies across geographies were so profound that the company might have done what they did with the introduction of email many years before, and eliminated inter-company snail mail processes, and trained up everyone in the company. This meant that staff had no option but to transfer to the electronic platform. On the other hand, an indirect consequence of allowing the paper form to remain is that for those disinclined to mail the paper work great distances, the mentor and the mentee made sure that they met face to face to complete the paper work, which in turn meant that there was a greater possibility of them taking the development process seriously.

What worked well here was that the timing was right, and that people could see something in it for themselves. The systems alignment was good, as was the mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The intrinsic motivators came from the realization that engagement in the PDP process would yield reflective insights into an individuals career direction regardless of whether they wished to remain or advance in the company or not. The extrinsic motivators were that participation would mean that your goals and aspirations were formally registered within the appraisal and development systems, alongside an articulation of the individuals development needs.

With regard to language – no little consideration in a company spanning the globe, and a multiplicity of languages – the decision was finally taken to require that the final paper work be completed in English, while acknowledging that many of the working documents and conversations would occur in people’s native tongues. As we correlated the successful adoption of the PDP system with language, it appeared that the geographical affiliates that showed most commitment were those where English was the

most familiar. This included all of the northern European and North American affiliates, notably Norway, who as a geographically distant affiliate saw great benefits of them being brought within the corporate HR mainstream. Southern Europeans witnessed the lowest rates of adoption, the reasons for this being cited as language, but more powerfully behind the language narrative lay reasons relating to power distance (Hofstede 2002) and to distaste for formulaic and meritocratic tools in societies where paternalistic systems had held sway since the inception of those affiliates.

A summary on the success of this case study would be that the initial take-off had been good. This success would be ascribed to the fact that the timing was right for this division, where readiness for PDP was high in terms of recognition of its problems adjusting to the new realities of a dispersed labour market, and of the workforce seeing the advantages of their having a voice in a new styled 'psychological contract'. Evidence on the longer term sustainability of this project would suggest that longer term take up has been patchy. The stickiness occurred where there was high affiliate wide commitment, and where individual champions, operating out of a volunteer mentality, continued to drive the process deep into the culture of the organisation. Where there was a strong element of the 'not invented here' syndrome, and strong cultural resistances, then the internalization and adoption of the process was the weakest.

When I reflect on the question of whether putting this on an electronic platform helped, I would say that a weakness was that this did little more than replicate the analogue paper based system, which had already proven successful, under favourable conditions. It failed to capitalize upon ways in which more interactive digital applications could have further engaged participants. There is strong evidence that it allowed much greater efficiencies across geographies, and released more 'time on task.' Against this, there was evidence that where institutional minimalism prevailed, the digital platform reinforced this de-personalization of the system.

Case study # 2: University of Bristol, Putting MDOC Unit ‘Developing Reflective Practice’ (DRP) learning activities on an Elearning platform.

This activity, DRP, which includes both classroom, mentor supported and individual development work for post experience managers and specialists in management learning and development (MDOC unit) is described in a number of my Teaching and Learning core modules, including in my Portfolio, the Small Group Learning methods and in the Unit and Programme Design core modules. This DRP is also referenced in this suite of optional modules; in the open module on ‘Teaching and Supporting the Development of Reflective Practice’, and in the optional module on Mentoring. It is not my intention to rehearse the details of this unit in this paper.

The challenge in DRP was to perpetuate the reflective practice begun in class through the medium of ‘writing-as-inquiry’ beyond the classroom. The classroom experience, which was worked in a small group, intensive tutor support learning environment, yielded remarkable results, yet the application – as far as we could tell – remained largely trapped within the class room. There was evidence of some of the individual participants taking this practice a step further and including it within their Masters dissertations, but for others there was little persistence beyond the classroom. For these other participants, we felt frustration as we were not clear what support to offer them. For this reason, and motivated by this frustration, I elected to attend the Teaching and Learning Elearning optional module, to explore how elearning applications might assist in this regard.

This experience of the elearning module encouraged me to experiment in the use of Blackboard to continue to engage students beyond the classroom in DRP either on their own, or with peer and mentor assistance. The plan for the activity was devised using the elearning workplan 7, which proved a useful framework for organizing and planning the design. This design also aspired to lean heavily on the principles of learning laid down by Chitterling and Earling (1996).

The design considerations for this activity refracted through the Chitterling and Earling principles.

- **Encourage contact between students and lecturers.** This remains a vital goal for this learning activity. These students are busy people, being part-time post experience and remotely located. Once they have left the classroom they are difficult to get hold of. They seldom write to lecturers beyond the occasional email – though this does seem to be improving with the current cohort, perhaps because we the tutors have been pushing the need for developing this habit earlier. Thus a primary aim of such a design must be to promote this contact.
- **Developing reciprocity among students.** These students have - despite evidence of great social reciprocity and support in the classroom, in their action learning sets (Revans 1973), and in various hostelries around the town - been surprisingly reticent around sharing work. This reticence begins with assessed work, and extends elsewhere, to drafts of rough ideas or to reflective journals. We the tutors had become increasingly aware that there has been an unspoken ‘elephant in the room’, that of the tensions between competition and cooperation. All in the classroom would say that they valued cooperation, but it would seem that the ‘theory-in-use’ was stronger than the ‘espoused theory’ (Argyris 1976) when it came to sharing work developed outside of class. It may well have been that in class the momentum and motivation to be gained from sharing work directly were immediately apparent to all. The three principles of ‘encouraging individual creative insight’, ‘receptiveness to one and another’, and the ‘avoidance of imposing dogmatic judgments’ of Carl Rogers, adapted by Zimmer & Alexander (2000) have been strong drivers within the classroom and Action Learning Set learning cultures. The challenge is one of how to stimulate and maintain this remotely.
- **Encouraging active learning.** This is a slight problem, as, in contrast to the PDP activity, most of the ‘content’ comes from the students, so the content and the structure that is necessary to contain this content needs to be generated by the

students. The tutors can make encouraging noises, but it is difficult to imagine how this might extend beyond that vocal support.

- **Prompt feedback.** Everything we have learned from the classroom suggests that prompt feedback is essential for the creation of a virtuous confidence building cycle. Prompt feedback from everyone has not been easy under the hit and miss email regime, yet it remains crucial to our endeavours. We were highly hopeful that Blackboard, together with prompt feedback, would encourage ‘time on task’.
- **Diversity.** In DRP we encourage individual expression and sometimes transgressive expression, so diversity of expression does rather matter. We are very clearly not looking for convergence among the written offerings of the students. Diversity, then should guide our design, to ensure that we defend against tendencies towards homogeneity and convergence which can tend to occur when students feel uncertain, anxious and as result play it safe, producing low risk offerings. It would follow that diversity of didactic method should support this though it is difficult to get beyond text on page when using writing-as-inquiry as a principal method.

Over and above these principles – all of which were most relevant to our design – was our intended learning outcome for our students to pull off the trick of achieving self sufficiency, while at the same time being encouraged to share their work with each other. One criticism of Creative Writing classes, by way of comparison, has been that while these classes encourage writing greatly, the activity can get to the point where students feel that they cannot write unless they have an audience in the room to hear and critique their work, which rather defeats the object of developing writing self-sufficiency, which is a key aim of DRP. (Byatt 2003)

Operationalising the first elearning DRP design.

This first design was a fairly simple translation of the classroom writing process described in my DRP module, transferred to an elearning base, utilizing Blackboard technology to encourage the sharing of both reflective scripts, and of discussion of the creation of the same, as well as content, through Discussion Board dialogue. To kick start this process, we the tutors posted our latest reflective contributions, together with the beginnings of a reflective conversation thread.

The results of this experiment.

Despite high expectations, and a promise from students that they would participate, the depressing result was one of no participation at all. Some of the students had visited Blackboard to read our materials, but none had actively engaged with the process. When we inquired as to why this had occurred, we learned from our students – once they worked through their guilt, and found a non defensive space – a variety of reasons for the no show. Among these were a degree of technophobia; shyness to commit to paper, intensified by a resistance to surrendering their intimate thoughts to a cold impersonal media that they were not familiar with, and trusted the confidentiality of little; lack of structure; and of course competition from other priorities.

An important piece of feedback we received, which contained important clues, related to the fact that despite the Programme Director encouraging the students to communicate via Blackboard early in the Programme, there had been no take up of this. One mitigating factor in this was that Blackboard can only accommodate university email addresses. This may seem a triviality, but few of these part time students had transferred their UoB email accounts over to their regular email addresses, and as a result effectively disenfranchised themselves from Blackboard. Once this disenfranchisement became institutionalized, Blackboard stood little chance of taking root as a pedagogic- or rather andragogic (Knowles 1980) – habit, as by that time group emails had become the

preferred communications medium, which was ‘clunky’, but probably adequate enough not to motivate for a more refined communications support solution.

The problem here was that we had not so much failed the Chickering and Ehrmanns’ (1996) principles, but that we had never made the starting gate. This was a chastening experience, and caused us to ponder hard as to how we might better prepare the ground next time around, with the next cohort, to give our design some chance of being tested.

Re-design elearning DRP for MDOC 2006/ 2008 cohort.

Determined to do this differently next time around, we decided that, even though the DRP learning activity is not a main unit on the degree – yet! – the introduction of the 2006/ 2008 cohort to Blackboard early would habituate them to elearning, which should make its use for DRP purposes far smoother. We were helped in this regard by the fact that the early learning activities of the degree focus the creation of reflective accounts of their learning in and out of class. This creation of reflective accounts is not far away from the full blown DRP activity; therefore we speculated that success and perceived added value from learning in this arena would transfer to DRP at a somewhat later stage in the degree.

You may remember that one significant problem that we had encountered in previous cohorts, regardless of whether they were elearning supported or not, was that while high ‘cooperation’ behaviours were evident in class and in Action Learning Sets, there was strong evidence of ‘competition’ behaviours when it came to the creation of written work, to the point where students did not share this work, despite their avowals to do the same. We felt that this needed to be addressed early on, as a means of removing that source of resistance to sharing. To that end, at the 2006/ 2008 cohort induction event, we asked the students in ‘buzz groups’ to consider the extent to which ‘competition’ plays out in their learning behaviour, and to identify ways in which competitive behaviours might inhibit group learning, and the creation of a ‘learning community’. (Pedler, Burgoyne, Boydell 1991). The student response to this request was one of affront. The students expressed a

degree of offence that we should even consider such a notion, when of course they had not a competitive bone in their collective bodies when it came to learning. While acknowledging that this might well be true, we persisted in pressing them to complete the task, if for no other reason than to satisfy me that this would not be an issue as we matured as a learning community. The resulting initially tentative discussion became lengthy, and rich in surprising content. Each of the ‘buzz groups’ were well able to identify competitive behaviours which inhibited learning. These disclosures became more confessional as the session proceeded, with students ‘owning up’ to previous behaviours such as withholding books from ‘competitors’; holding back on snippets that they picked up from other sources outside of the classroom that would be very useful to another student but not to them; even giving false information about assignments. These confessions were leavened, of course, by counter-balancing evidence of cooperative learning habits. This exercise proved fascinating for the group, not least in revealing how the ‘defensive routine’ (Argyris 1985) of denying that there was an incipient problem around competition had nearly caused the group not to attend to this important – though uncomfortable – inquiry.

An outcome from this activity was that the community drew up some ground rules that would govern collaborative and supportive learning behaviours, and would defend against the worst impacts of competition. Interestingly, competition was not censored completely. It was recognized that, in the right circumstances, and in the right climate and ethos, that competition can provide a powerful motivational spur to collective learning excellence.

At a more practical level, we strongly encouraged that students transferred their email addresses, to ensure that Blackboard generated communications reached them quickly and surely.

The other decision we made to ensure that early engagement occurred in a committed - rather than a ritualized, ‘going through the motions’ fashion - was to convene an ‘Introduction to Blackboard’ session early in the first year. The purpose of this session –

which is to happen shortly – will be to introduce them not only to the mechanics of Blackboard, but also to the learning theory behind this. Our anticipation is that this will be of high interest to a cohort of students who are studying ‘Management Learning’, and that they will see themselves as active participants in an experiment to test out the robustness of Chickerling and Ehermans’ (1996) principles in real time, with a view to introducing such learning practices in their home organizations. The structure of this session will be to demonstrate the use of Blackboard in class, using the online resource on screen, showing in real time what is on the MDOC Masters domain, and how it can be accessed. We would encourage one or two students to come to the front and play with the online learning system, adding dialogue to a discussion board, sending an email to colleagues, and such like.

This technical introduction would be supported by an introduction to the Chickerling and Ehrmann principles, the Rogerian support principles, and the Mayes Conceptualisation cycle (1994). These thinking tools would be used to promote discussion and engagement.

We would then plan to ask that, within the next week or so, each of the students paste material up on Blackboard, to familiarize themselves with the technology and the process. This would then allow us to have an online conversation as to whether we were achieving our learning objectives through this process. It will be most interesting to witness the results that flow from this highly intentional process, as opposed to the rather cursory approach we adopted first time around.

Other elearning experiments that I am considering engaging in would include use of Wiki, which promises to be less clunky, more intuitive than Blackboard. There may be some possibility for e-assessment, although in an application such as DRP I would see the main – and very powerful – advantage lying in formative rather than summative assessment. With regard to assessment, in an area with no right answers, summative tools in my view would not work.

Should Discussion Boards take off, then I would see great potential here for reflecting on reflections, probably to a greater, or at least different degree than we do in the classroom. The possibilities for high quality ‘dialogue’ (Laurillard 2002), the highest level of learning, are enticing. Zimmer and Alexander (2000 p2) talk of the possibilities for ‘weaving’, as opposed to summarizing. Weaving is where the three Rogerian principles are woven together in any combination, to suit the inquiry under scrutiny at that time.

Case study # 3: Experimentation with a structured approach to life goal clarification through reflective practice, with online mentoring support.

As this more robust design was being conceived, chance – or synchronicity – had it that, at the same time, through my door walked a Bristol based coaching professional who had spent the last two years developing an online life goal clarification programme. This offering is a structured approach to reflective practice, and offers online mentoring as an intrinsic part of its andragogy. His invitation to me was to be involved in the validation of this tool, and also to offer it to me if I wished to pilot it with any student populations. He indicated that he was already piloting the tool with part time Management Masters Students at Exeter University.

After some negotiations, I have now agreed to pilot this tool with both volunteers from our MDOC population, and fulltime students from the engineering design and management programme. My interest in piloting this programme is to test whether a degree of structure will enhance the quality of the reflective practice, and also to test out online mentoring, which is programmed into this learning activity at various key stages.

By way of an early validation, I tested the process out for myself, but without the mentoring at this stage. My immediate verdict is that I was not the best subject to test out this programme. I was highly familiar with the instruments included in the instrumented approach, many of which also featured in the Pedler book, and in PDP. These were all didactically reliable, and the process of following the structured sequence of activities was logical and enjoyable. However, I am familiar with reflective practice, and it is

difficult if not impossible for me to judge how a student who is new to reflective practice might respond. No doubt I will discover more about that during the piloting and evaluation process. My anticipation is that it will prove helpful to the MDOC volunteers, and supplement the reflective practice that they are already engaged with. They might find the 'boxes' restrictive, given that they are experimenting with more free form reflective writing, or they might welcome the paradoxical freedom that structure can sometimes bring.

It will be fascinating to contrast the MDOC students' response to this programme, and that of the 'conscripted' engineering students. I find that I can make no reliable assumptions as to how they will receive this, and look forward to exploring our research findings. I will be most interested to see how students with relatively little life experience respond to a life planning exercise. It will also be most interesting to see how the e-mentoring activity works out. My working assumption is that this will pale in comparison to face to face mentoring, but I will not pre-judge this issue. It will also be interesting to note how ethical issues work through for this e-mentoring activity, with regard to disclosure and management of the more sensitive and intimate aspects of the students 'whole life' planning activities. I do not know that in my trial of the process, there were aspects of my reflection that I would not wish to be 'required' to share with anyone!

This activity requires relatively little design as it comes pre packaged. Attention must be given to its positioning, however, especially with the younger Engineering students. I would anticipate that, if the evaluation goes well, then such an approach to DRP could be engineered into the syllabus. Watch this space. This structured approach will also provide a useful comparison with the more free form exercise that we are pioneering in Blackboard.

Conclusions

The original purpose of these experiments was to test whether DRP could be placed on a elearning platform. The reason for this was that while elearning has many benefits, it is highly labour intensive, and costly. The inquiry was about persistence of learning outside of the classroom, with elearning support, and also to look at ways of minimizing classroom and tutor time.

In reviewing the transition of self-development and DRP learning activities to a Elearning platform, a generalization would be that elearning applications have crept in incremental steps, more often than not replicating as far as possible classroom or lone activities as the technology has increasingly allowed this replication to occur. This is true for the sophisticated customized offering as much as it is true for more amateurish improvised creations. This incrementalism has not always been satisfactory in terms of technical result, nor has the elearning solution always been adopted by adults who have had a choice in the matter. The challenge may now be to define the DRP learning goals then look to see if technology would allow a creative low labour intensive solution, with necessarily shadowing an analogue andragogic antecedent.

What was learned from Pedler was that support was needed for self-development, and that a degree of structure helps. What was learned from Exxon was that the existence of passionate volunteers was necessary especially at the early stages. We learnt that PDP is not for everyone and that structure works for some, but not for others. This seemed regardless of whether it was on an electronic basis or not. A wider learning from Exxon was that if elearning is to be part of a wider change programme, the introduction and adoption of it has many parallels to any significant change project. If readiness is assessed correctly, and if the change management is done well, then the change will be embedded by well designed, supportive elearning technology. Poor change management, on the other hand will engulf any benefits flowing from elearning, no matter how sophisticated the technology.

What we have learned from the DRP Blackboard experiments is that a learning organisation needs to create the conditions for take off. Elearning will not occur spontaneously happen from a cold start. We also learned that we need to work ‘soft’ issues such as competition and cooperation; and ‘hard’ issues such as ease of access and habituation, to ensure time on task.

So now we await the results of these various designs and trials, to learn what falls out. I do not believe there is much more we can do technologically for the writing-as-inquiry approach technologically speaking, as I believe that too much structure would constrain. On the other hand, it will be fascinating to see what eventuates from the comparison experiments with the structured approach with the two comparison populations.

A generalized learning is that for DRP and self development to occur, socialization plays a most important part of the development of this competence, as does a premium on ‘dialogue’. (Salmon 2002, Laurillard 2002). I would conclude that, for those reasons, there are distinct limits on the extent to which DRP could be conducted by elearning alone. I visualize great potential for it as a part of a blended learning solution, but do not see it is a stand alone solution to rapidly increasing the trajectory of DRP adoption.

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