REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING FOR UNDERGRADUATE CAREER PLANNING IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

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Abstract: This paper looks at reflective practice and personal development planning both from and academic and business point of view. As will be demonstrated, these skills are of fundamental importance to students wishing to pursue a career in the business world in order to properly reflect on their current practice and to further develop their knowledge and skills in a knowledge-economy based environment where human capital can be seen to be their most valuable asset. Firstly, the definition and process of reflective practice will be examined in both the academic and professional world. Personal development planning will then be examined in its relation to reflective practice and how it has already been implemented in the UK. Finally, we will look at how these processes and activities can be integrated into the academic environment.

Key words: reflective practice, reflection, personal development planning, knowledge management, peer assessment, learning logs, portfolios.
JEL: A12, A20, A22

1. Introduction

There are many elements that are included in a student's education at undergraduate level - lectures, seminars, theory, practical work, research, presentations, essays and reports, to name a few. One element, however, that remains to be fully integrated into teaching and learning in higher education institutions in Bulgaria is the art of reflective practice and subsequent personal development planning. The UK has already recognised the importance of this, and its higher education Quality and Assurance Agency (QAA) has clear guidelines on how this should be implemented in the academic environment. The experience gained in the UK could help to create a similar system within universities in this country, albeit in a more voluntary and less formalised manner.

As will be demonstrated in this paper, these skills are of fundamental importance to students wishing to pursue a career in the business world in order to properly reflect on their current practice and to further develop

their knowledge and skills in a knowledge-economy based environment where human capital can be seen to be their most valuable asset.

2. Reflective Practice

Reflection can be seen as a form of mental processing which can aid learning - reflection on something is undertaken in order to consider it in more detail. Usually, there is a purpose for reflecting – a goal to reach - and there is a useful outcome. Normally, things we reflect on are relatively complicated, not routine. We tend to reflect on things for which there is not an apparent or immediate solution.

Reflective practice is generally accepted as the process of learning through and from experience in order to gain better insight into oneself or to obtain an improvement in practice (Boud et al 1985; Boyd and Fales, 1983; Mezirow, 1981, Jarvis, 1992). Usually, this means critiquing assumptions of practice as well as critical self-evaluation, meaning that the reflective practitioner needs some level of self-awareness. The aim is to gain new insight and understanding into past experience and so improve future practice - this can be seen as a process of life-long learning. A more complex definition might be that reflection is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on further processing of the knowledge and understanding that we already possess (Moon, 1999).

Donald Schon is an eminent authority on reflection with regard to professional knowledge and its subsequent further development (1983, 1987). He noted that the relationship between the theoretical and how a professional uses this to inform practice tends to be 'theory-in-use' - future development and improvement in expertise is constructed via reviewing, describing, analysing and evaluating past practice. He identified this as reflection-on-action (after the event). However, he stated that professionals also use a tacit, implicit form of reflection - reflection-in-action (while the event is taking place) – a method where business professionals sometimes cannot explain the basis for their actions, which therefore makes reflection difficult or impossible. He envisioned the role of professional development as making this form of 'reflection-in-action' explicit so that it could then be consciously reflected on and developed, with professionals examining their experiences and responses as they happened. Schon did not see professional practice as being a predictable entity where set rules and procedures can always be applied - professionals have to improvise and innovate in-the-moment and act intuitively and creatively in order to be effective. Therefore, he focused on facilitating the development of reflective practitioners rather than describing the process of reflection.

In the academic environment, Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1997) undertook research on approaches to learning and they related academic success to a 'deep' approach, while those who were less successful academically were found to have a 'surface' approach to learning. A deep approach is where the learner wishes to understand the meaning of the material, to re-explain it in light of their own current understanding, to integrate it into their existing body of knowledge, reconsidering and altering previously held beliefs as necessary. A surface approach, however, is where a learner simply memorises the material 'by rote'. Therefore, reflection has a role in 'deep' approaches to learning, but not in 'surface' approaches to learning. We learn from representing learning to ourselves, for example, by writing an essay, and learn from re-processing and re-explaining the information (Eisner, 1991). We make sense of what is learnt and re-process this information by reflecting on it and integrating it with our current understanding of the topic (Vygotsky, 1978).

The process of reflection slows down learners' activities, giving them time to fully process and comprehend learning materials and then connect this new information to previous ideas. Certain research has demonstrated that when a lecturer pauses in a lecture it enables students to learn better (Tobin, 1987). Students should be persuaded to stop and think about an issue that has arisen in a lecture, as reflection gives learners greater personal 'ownership' of the learning materials, which makes it more meaningful to them and helps them to grasp the essence of what is contained in the educational matter (Rogers, 1969). Educational programmes that support the learner's awareness of their learning processes have been shown to be highly effective (Main, 1985).

3. Personal Development Planning

According to the U.K.'s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education, academic personal development planning (PDP) is, "A structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development." In the U.K., PDP has to be integrated into the higher education (HE) experience at all levels (undergraduate and postgraduate), resulting in a progress file that shows the learner's reflections on their learning and planning for improvement towards stated goals, alongside the transcript of records regarding their achievements. The motivation for developing and expanding practice in personal development planning (PDP) was instigated by recommendation of the Dearing Review (NCIHE 1997), which directed HE Institutions

(HEIs) to develop the, "means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development".

Effective PDP develops an individual's abilities to reflect on, review, plan, monitor and take responsibility for their own learning in an active manner and also to understand what and how they learn by articulating their learning. The purpose of PDP is self-awareness and self-improvement. Students should be able to recognise and discuss their own strengths and weaknesses via the PDP process via reflection. By having experience of PDP, students are also better prepared for the demands of continuing professional or vocational development when they enter employment in the new knowledge economy where personal appraisals of current performance and future training needs are now commonplace.

In an academic context, core questions that underpin reflective learning and planning for self-improvement might be; retrospective reflection, reflection on the current situation, a review of opportunities and identification of personal goals or objectives and a strategy for setting targets and reviewing progress

Personal development planning (PDP) can involve different forms of reflection and reflective learning. 'Deep' levels of academic reflection can be described as dialogic and critical. Dialogic reflection suggests that the learner has 'stepped back' from events and actions which leads to a higher level of discourse than simply recording events. There is a sense of consideration of the qualities of judgements and of possible alternatives for explaining and hypothesising, and discourse with an exploration of the role of self in events and actions. Reflection is analytical or integrative, linking factors and perspectives. Critical reflection, in addition to dialogic reflection, provides evidence that the learner is aware that the same actions and events may be seen in different contexts with different explanations associated with the contexts.

The implementation of PDP in academia has been proven to be most effective when it is a mainstream academic activity which is linked to the outcomes and assessment of the academic programme under study. It should also be seen to have the support of senior managers and academic staff so that students understand that the process is valued.

4. Applications for Undergraduates in Business and Economics

Reflection-in-action underpins the concept of knowledge management (Alavi & Leidner, 2001), which became a key business concept from the middle of the 1990s. In more recent literature, Vince (2004) talks about collective reflection-in- action with regard to learning processes within a business when rapid changes occur. Thus, the importance of students

learning to reflect on their practice and development and the relation to the business environment can be clearly seen. Indeed, the significance of knowledge management in business implies that students who are skilled and adept at participating in reflective dialogues can bring this experience usefully into their working lives once they have graduated.

In order to facilitate reflective practice and subsequent PDP, students need to spend time contemplating their own learning – both what and how they learn, and the connections they can forge between their existing knowledge and new information. To successfully reflect and improve, students also need to look at themselves critically so that they can not only be aware of their current knowledge, but can plan for future development by being aware of what they still need to learn.

When developing reflective skills, it is important that students feel supported, that they are given an appropriate amount of time and that they have access to others who are effective at reflecting and on whom they can model their own practice. To really engage in a deeper way, students should use different forms of reflection in different contexts: for example, both reflection-in and -on practice, private and dialogical reflection, and experimentation with different forms of formal, informal, written and verbal reflection. Through engaging with different forms, students can learn what is appropriate for different contexts and, as a crucial part of subsequent self- development, what works best for them in what types of situations. An important part of learning about reflection is to understand the crucial elements of good reflective practice, which should contain evidence of serious thinking and questioning, self-awareness and honesty, and concrete and specific examples. Effective reflective practice should also demonstrate good organisation and be correct in terms of grammar and mechanics, the ability to synthesise different concepts and the ability to analyse.

Students can create a variety of documents to help support reflection. These can include both structured and unstructured forms of learning journals, logs and diaries. They generally consist of reflection over a sustained period, and are maintained with the intention of improving or supporting learning. Learning journals have already been used successfully for this purpose in most disciplines (Moon, 1999). Reflection on experience external to the classroom may include a student's participation in internships and work-placements. This may help the student make sense of their experiences in world of work (Boud and Garrick, 1999) in order to develop employment skills, or to use the experience as a basis for learning about self and personal functioning (Collings and Watton, 2001). As has previously been mentioned, just like effective professionals in business, students

need to learn to learn from experience, or to make greater use of learning where there is no formal guidance or teaching.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, reflection and subsequent personal development planning are important, not just to aid the learning process, but also to develop efficient and effective business professionals who constantly examine and re-examine their current practice and knowledge in the light of new information and future skill development. Due to the importance of reflective practice and PDP for undergraduate students in business and economics, a more thoughtful and integrative approach, fully backed by heads of department and curriculum leaders, would certainly benefit Bulgaria's undergraduate students and help them to gain the advantages they need to compete in the fast-paced global business environment.

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