CHAPTER 14

Getting the balance right: Reflecting on the 'study pack' as a pedagogic tool for self-directed learning in an Extended Curriculum Programme during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Reflective practice has gained considerable momentum as discourse central to meaningful pedagogy and professional development. Critical reflection, as an arm of reflective practice, illuminates the importance of interrogating one's practice with the view to contributing to transformative teaching and learning. Since transitioning to remote teaching and learning in 2020, I have been forced to step outside my comfort zone of almost three decades of in-person, student-teacher interaction. The time had arrived for a shift in pedagogy and the need to address the "disorientating dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991) of getting the balance right between providing enough pedagogic tools for students to succeed, but also to ensure student self-directedness is fostered for the same purpose. After recurriculation of my subject in a Foundation Year programme in 2018, with more in-person contact time having been built in, I find myself only two years later after implementation of the new programme, having to 'recurriculate' yet again. This chapter shares a critical reflection, based on Mezirow's (1978) Transformative Learning Theory, of my experience when examining one of the pedagogic tools, namely the use of study packs, adopted over twelve months of remote teaching and learning brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown in South Africa. This reflective journey has impacted my

practice positively, specifically in the realisation that self-directedness is a pedagogical imperative, forming part of the pedagogic toolkit for transformative teaching and learning.

Keywords: critical reflection, extended curriculum programmes, study pack, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted our familiar ways of being and doing and impelled us to review, re-evaluate and reconceptualise our educational practices. My journey was no different. Many facets of my educational practice were agitated and invigorated to varying degrees. For example, I had not fully embraced online teaching and learning. Having previously relied mostly on in-person interaction with students, I found the transition uncomfortable. I had also set up materials suited to in-person pedagogy. Remote teaching and learning necessitated a reorientation of my practice.

Reflective practice cements the foundation for quality teaching and learning. Recent decades have seen reflective practice evolve as a movement towards the negation of a technicist approach, still prevalent in educational settings today. Reflection, as a construct, dates back to Greek philosophy, to Socrates' meaningful questioning on ethics, knowledge and understanding (History.com 2019), and Plato's quests for social justice (Sanni and Momoh 2019). Copious formal definitions and models of reflective practice abound to date. These include, inter alia, Dewey's (1933) three attributes of open-mindedness, intellectual responsibility and wholeheartedness essential for successful reflection, Schön's (1983) practice-based reflection in, on and for action for better decision-making, Kolb's (1984) model

incorporating experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application, Mezirow's (1978) 10-phase process towards transformation, Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) three-question model and Russell's (2005) problematisation of the generalisation of meanings around reflection and reflective practice.

Even though the terms reflection and reflective practice are still used interchangeably, there is a notable difference to consider. According to Bolton (2006: 203-218), reflection essentially refers to thinking about issues without the execution of thoughts, whereas reflective practice refers to thinking about, questioning and challenging a status quo, and the implementation of these for growth and change. The more recent theorists in adult education, for example Habermas in the 1970s, and Brookfield and Mezirow in the 90s, suggest that critical reflection should be an essential component of reflective practice. Mezirow (1990: 13) states that critical reflection encompasses a redress of one's perception of a problem, one's beliefs of a problem, one's knowledge of a problem, as well as one's feelings and actions. Critical reflection is a cornerstone of transformation theory, which advocates the process of undoing assumptive ideologies of thinking, feeling and doing with the aim of cultivating "autonomy, self-development and self-governance" (Mezirow 2000: 28).

This chapter shares a personal reflection of my "disorientating dilemma" of getting the balance right between providing sufficient meaningful pedagogic tools for student success and fostering student self-directedness. I apply Mezirow's (1978) ten-phase transformative process outlined in his Transformative Learning Theory to illuminate this progression and highlight its merit for my professional learning journey during the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa from the start of 2020 to date.

Context

My journey on the extended programmes began in 2015, teaching Communication in English across departments at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The same prescribed curriculum was presented to both Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) students and first-year mainstream students within an Extended Model. Prior to the pandemic, our lessons were presented in-person on campus, three times per week. In 2016, the Department of Public Administration and Governance (PAG) undertook a revisioning of the then Extended Model in the department to better suit the needs of the PAG students transitioning into university. Together with the Head of Department, the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development and the other two ECP lecturers, we embarked on an empowering curriculum design and development journey. The Fundani ECP Unit assists with academic staff development and facilitates workshops with PAG lecturers focusing on ECP curriculum design, theory, responsiveness and delivery. The rationale for the process was that the Extended Model previously used by the department was not adequately addressing the needs of students, that is, students needed a responsive curriculum that offered significant support in transitioning into tertiary education as well as foundations in literacy and numeracy. ECP students are typically presented as previously educationally disadvantaged students who spend additional time, and receive additional support, in a designated Higher Education (HE) programme (South Africa 1997; South Africa 2012). A detailed student profiling exercise, lecturers' reflections on student progress, several workshops and National Benchmark Tests[1] (NBTs)

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[1] The National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) determine academic readiness for South African universities. Some universities use the NBTs together with the National Senior Certificate (NSC) for access. Others use the NBTs to gauge the level of support students may require during their academic careers (National Benchmark Tests Project 2016).

undertaken in 2017, confirmed this premise and presented evidence that over 80% of students completing business-related ECP courses in the institution needed extensive foundation support. The Extended Model was revamped into a Foundation Model. The Extended Model (currently still functioning in other departments) comprised a two-year ECP path, with the same curriculum offered to both ECP and mainstream students, whereafter students would progress into the second-year mainstream programme. This did not align with the vision of meeting ECP students' needs and, therefore, the recurriculation was initiated. The Foundation Year, implemented in 2018, is a one-year path, whereafter students progress into the first-year mainstream programme. The Foundation Year offers a tailor-made PAG curriculum with eight in-person periods for specific content, outcomes and themes intended for public servants, as well as a blended learning and an integrated approach, a timetabled computer lab period, course readers and consideration of PAG trends locally and abroad. This reflection focuses on my practice with one of the Communication groups in the Extended Curriculum Programme at CPUT during 2020.

A new curriculum and transitioning into remote teaching and learning

I embraced the recurriculation of the Communication component of the Foundation Year (FY) programme as the privileged opportunity to meaningfully contribute to social justice in our country through educational redress with the intention of widening access and success for students (South Africa 1997; South Africa 2001; South Africa 2012). Very often, lecturers perpetuate dominant technicist or skills discourses that encourage correct usage of grammar, adherence to formats, reproduction of accurate concepts and structures in assessment, and adherence to predetermined curricula (Lea and Street 1998; Ivanic

2004). According to Gee (2012), we need to not only be aware of Discourses we employ in teaching and learning but should also be committed to reflecting on these Discourses. Gee's (2015: 2) theory of discourses puts forward discourse with a little 'd' as a more general linguistic approach to language usage and meaning, whereas Discourse with a capital 'D' incorporates multiple considerations like language usage, value systems, emotions, behaviour, thought and any other tools that recognise and acknowledge varied social and historical identities. As part of my endeavour to continuously reflect on my practice, particularly in my commitment to the new programme, my first critically reflective undertaking in 2017 involved reviewing my pedagogic approach to fostering greater student participation in the classroom. This was a formal start to meaningfully thinking about and implementing pedagogic changes that would mitigate the problematisation of ECP students as deficient in dominant discourses (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 59-61) and the "basalization" of lecturers' roles and curricula (Sivasubramaniam 2011; Day and Edwards 1993: 5-7). With the rapid switch to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL), I have now had to rethink a relatively new curriculum yet again. Not only did I have to revisit my approach, but I also had to think about how to teach my students to self-direct.

After careful consideration of the eight in-person periods assigned to the new FY programme, ERTL has made me question the extent to which I may have made students rely on me for their learning. The tools deployed during in-person interaction included, inter alia, a hard and electronic copy course reader with content and assessments, predominantly individual work, handouts, weekly formative assessments, six in-person teaching lessons, two computer lab periods for research and assignment preparation, and prepared hard copy

readings. Even though self-study is stipulated in the subject guide and framing of the programme, the students did not really need to do anything on their own or in their own time, since all work was accounted for in the eight in-person periods. Therefore, with the emergency shift to remote and online teaching, I needed to revisit some of the pedagogic tools to enable student self-directedness.

Self-direct or self-regulate?

Self-directed learning (SDL) and self-regulated learning (SRL) are often used synonymously (Mahlaba 2020). The distinction between the two was important for my point of departure. According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning encompasses individuals' proactive attempts to map out their learning paths, goals, resources and strategies after which they will themselves reflect on their success. Self-regulated learning denotes students' responses to teacher-designed activities (Gandomkar and Sandars 2018; Saks and Leijen 2014) where students only react to those activities for a limited period of time. SRL, important in its own right, should form part of SDL (Mahlaba 2020). How could I encourage self-directedness and not merely self-regulation? My aim is to contribute to a student cohort that can carve out their own trajectories for learning, reflect on their learning, apply content, develop a desire for their own development and growth, feel part of the curriculum, be independent and interdependent, be open to diversity, evaluate their learning and become active citizens. Perhaps FY students initially need self-regulation before developing self-directedness?

A focus on pedagogic tools

The rapid switch to remote and online teaching and learning has necessitated many pedagogic changes which, for me, included the introduction of (1) a study pack emailed to students per term with a

weekly calendar, content, readings and assessments, (2) weekly emails with reminders, (3) Blackboard Collaborate sessions, (4) feedback on assignments using Track Changes and (5) how-to visuals (for example, create a PPT, use Track Changes, access Blackboard (BB) recordings). For this chapter, I will only share my journey regarding the study packs as a pedagogic tool since its use sparked my initial reflection around students' self-directed learning – whether or not I was encouraging self-directedness. I apply Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning in an attempt to critically unpack the journey I undertook to tweak my study packs in order to foster SDL during ERTL. As with my first critical reflection in 2017, I have developed the habit of keeping a reflective journal or notes before during and/or after interacting with students. I have extracted relevant verbatim reflections regarding the study pack from my journal, added them to a table outlining Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning and then linked these to my experiences on this journey (Table 1).

Applying Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning

Transformative learning, according to The Transformative Learning Centre (2004), is "…a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions". Although this forms the essence of transformative learning, it is undoubtedly complex (Kitchenham 2008). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning itself has undergone transformation spanning more than two decades. His first study in 1978 identified ten phases that could be progressed through before attaining personal transformation. Further developments included critical self-reflection or premise reflection in 1995, acknowledgement of the importance of the affective and social aspects of transformative learning in 2000 and a likening of transformative learning theory to

constructivism in 2006. Mezirow's theory has met with notable arguments both for and against his approach to transformative learning. Some of the criticisms against Mezirow's theory include the notion that his theory is essentially a cognitive process (Taylor 2008; Illeris 2014), the question of what exactly evokes transformation (Kegan 2000), how understanding oneself better develops (Taylor 2008; Illeris 2014) and achieving clarity around how transformative learning can effectively be implemented (Newman 2010). Despite the criticisms mentioned by these authors, very little is offered by them towards how transformative learning can take shape in educational settings or in the workplace. The table and discussion below represent my interpretation and application of Mezirow's ten-phase approach in my attempt to critically reflect on the use of my pedagogic tool, the study pack, to foster student self-directedness.

Table 1: A reflection on the use of study packs using Mezirow's ten phases of transformative practice outlined in 1978

Mezirow's phases	My thinking, feelings and experiences	A peephole into my journal notes
1. A disorientating dilemma	Are my study packs as a pedagogic tool during the Covid-19 pandemic encouraging self-directedness? - What is the difference between self-direction and self-regulation? - How do I get the balance right for developing both SDL and SRL for FY students?	*...do some homework on SDL and SRL before reviewing study packs for 2022...are my study packs making my students dependent on me?*
2. A self-examination – with feelings of guilt, anger, shame	Greater clarity on SDL and SRL. - I recognised an over-compensation of 'support' provided through the study packs, which defeats the purpose of developing students who can manage their own time, learning pace, content and assessments. - Disappointed but also noting the emergency reaction to teaching and learning needed during the pandemic.	*Move away from doing everything for students ...* *SRL being fostered instead of SDL? Add more formatives and student input into planning, structure, topics etc.* ☹

3. **A critical assessment of assumptions**	Making my assumptions explicit. My assumptions about the learning habits of FY students are based on: - FY thrive in in-person conditions with a significant number of timetabled lessons and teacher-led support and, therefore, need the equivalent teacher-induced support in remote teaching and learning. - FY students do not know how to self-direct.	*Students too dependent on the study packs provided...regurgitating summarised notes, not finding their own sources.* *...facilitating a teacher-centred approach.* 😟 *Review study packs to create space for student-centredness and SDL.* *I KNOW that everybody has something to offer but I am frustrated by how long this takes for me to instil in my practice during the pandemic.*
4. **Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared**	Engagement with other ECP lecturers - Who can I collaborate with? - Reach out to others who have previously expressed discomfort with a similar situation in ECP. - Solace found in colleagues who share their practices and dispositions.	*Speaking to other ECP colleagues about frustrations* 😊 *I am not alone...* *Speak to X about forming CoPs for ECP* *Speak to X about developing student-centred activities.*
5. **Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions**	Moving towards new roles as mediator, facilitator, reflective practitioner, lifelong learner, collaborator, social justice advocate.	*So, what is my role actually now...teacher as spoonfeeder?* 😟 *Get back to facilitating, mediating, empowering students* 😊
6. **Planning a course of action**	Re-evaluate study pack Physically create space in the study pack for: - Weekly planning: students to design their own road map - Content: suggestions put forward + space for students' input - Assessments: suggestions put forward + space for students' input - Readings: suggestions put forward + space for learning how to find own reliable resources	*...greater student input in the study pack* *Get input from students re content and assessments – current PAG issues for comprehension activities, topics for essays, types of assignments, what reinforcement in language are needed...* *More reflective activities for students* *Students to draw up own weekly planner*
7. **Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the plan**	Improve my practice. - Development in course design - BB webinars attended on course design principles and assessment - Explore what courses or training or development ECP lecturers are attending. - What are ECP lecturers doing, thinking, feeling? - Take care of my wellbeing	*Check out:* - *BB courses/training* - *Academic literacies webinars* - *Inclusion through Connection* - *Course design* - *SDL and SRL sources/workshops/presentations* *(These are webinars/training sessions that I targeted.)*

	- Take care of my wellbeing	targeted.)
8. Provisional trying of new roles	Try out my plan: - Changes to assessments – giving students option to work independently or collaboratively; choices in content offered - Two personal reflection assessments - Do research on SDL and SRL	*Can't change entire study pack right now, but can alter assessments, then plan for 2022.* *Save sources for SDL and SRL.*
9. Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships	Critical reflection builds my confidence and competence. - I view myself as a lifelong learner seeking improvement in my practice for the benefit of all. - I need to sustain this thinking.	*...feeling motivated, more confident, clearer about SDL and SRL, making progress towards better alignment between pedagogic tools and SDL* *Will attend more seminars/webinars...present again...*
10. A reintegration of one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives	My reflective journey assists with changing my perspectives and approaches. - Continuous critical reflection is crucial – form the habit	*Moving closer to more meaningful pedagogic tools to implement in 2022* *Wear the hat of mediator, facilitator, reflective practitioner, lifelong learner, collaborator, social justice advocate* ☺

The subsequent sections present discussions, extended from Table 1, of my reflection linked to Mezirow's phases of transformative learning.

A disorientating dilemma, a self-examination and a critical assessment of assumptions

(Phases 1, 2 and 3)

After receiving students' contributions (formative and summative), indicating regurgitation of content, poor application of knowledge and minimal inclination to find their own sources, the manifestations left me with feelings of disappointment and discomfort. In my attempts to ensure comprehensive, sufficient teaching, I have inadvertently been bypassing my intention to foster active learning in students. Therefore, it is important for me to critically reflect – to constantly agitate the journey of moving away from teacher-centredness. When teaching staff consciously acknowledge areas of their professionalism that need development and shift towards becoming agents of transformation,

they will seek to effect the same for their students (Sivasubramaniam 2011: 7). With a clear perspective of SRL, SDL and a reminder of my pedagogic intentions, I assessed the assumptions I defaulted to, namely that ECP students require significant teacher-led support. A recalibration of this perspective steered me back to my goal – to provide meaningful learning opportunities for my students so that they can learn to self-direct.

Recognition of discontent transformation, exploration of new roles and action

(Phases 4 and 5)

The isolation of the lockdown caused by the pandemic saw staff reaching out to each other more than usual. This entailed many Microsoft Teams discussions, emails and telephone calls, which proved particularly helpful for me as I learnt that several other ECP lecturers were experiencing similar dilemmas and discontentment with the hastiness that leads to traditional, technicist teaching approaches in emergency remote scenarios ((Sivasubramaniam 2011: 6-7). Shared experiences have led to, inter alia, increased collegiality, greater confidence, and an appreciation of differences in opinion. Furthermore, collaborative learning is another characteristic of SDL (Knowles 1975) and Taylor (2017) reminds us that transformative learning and therefore, critical reflection, is not a fragmented practice but flourishes in the formation of relationships with others. This social aspect of transformative practice is particularly important for growth in times of crises (Mälkki 2012). As a mediator, facilitator or collaborator, I therefore need to move towards greater inclusion of student voice in my practice. The plan of action involved re-evaluation of my study packs and teaching approach through critical self-reflection, collaboration with

colleagues, and attending workshops or webinars aimed at inclusivity of students through course design and assessment practices.

Acquiring knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, building competence and reintegration of new perspectives

(Phases 6–10)

In addition to engagement with colleagues, and reading literature on SDL and SRL, I attended a series of Blackboard Webinar Office Hours[2] presentations focusing on course design, assessment and inclusive classrooms, Jackie Tuck and Theresa Lillis' webinar on evaluative regimes in academia, and a presentation titled 'Self-care in a time of radical flux' offered by the CPUT ECP Unit in the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development. With renewed vigour and motivation, I started adapting my study pack incrementally – since it was close to the end of the students' first year and sudden great expectations of SDL imposed on students would be overwhelming. I included two reflective activities (one on students' own journeys over the twelve months and one that required input into the programme), an outline for students' own planning, and space for discussion around content and assessment topics. As seen from the first critical reflection in 2017, this required more effort and time (Alexander 2018). However, students' contributions were reaffirming of the importance of instilling SDL and creating an educational environment that acknowledges different discourses, thus making this a valuable and worthwhile exercise). Amongst the future considerations for me, lies the dilemma of strategically planning and balancing teaching and learning activities for SDL with SRL as one of the components that will enable this. These reflections and actions have propelled me further on my transformation journey. I consider the

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[2] https://go.blackboard.com/Instructor-webinar-series

process of critical reflection emancipatory and integral to my professional learning (Mezirow 1994; Morrow 2009; Mann *et al.* 2007; Mezirow 1997; Phair 2009).

Conclusion

Mezirow's (1978) ten phases of transformative practice and a critically reflective stance provided valuable lenses through which I could reflect on my disorienting dilemma of whether I was encouraging SDL through meaningful pedagogic practice or not during ERTL. Critical reflection of my practice reminded me that it is easy to default to a teacher-led pedagogy and, therefore, I undertook the continued journey to improve my practice. A critical reflection of one of the pedagogic tools used, provided the opportunity to clarify SDL and SRL, include students in my planning, collaborate with colleagues and seek professional development courses that would assist me in realising my aim. This approach strengthened my desire for and implementation of a practice that embraces collaboration, meaningful content and assessment, and the need to contribute to transformative learning to produce active agents in our country.

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