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Classroom engagement dynamics: examining the potency of reflective teaching approach among some selected universities in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of the use of reflective teaching approach by university lecturers in Ghana to achieve improved student learning outcomes. The research utilised a quantitative survey design involving 180 lecturers who were accidentally or haphazardly selected from four universities in Ghana to complete a reflective teaching survey (RTS) questionnaire. The results showed that participants frequently engaged in varied reflective teaching activities, and were successful in evaluating the effectiveness of their pedagogies. The research concluded that the approach should be an essential component of the teacher performance appraisal system.

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KEYWORDS

Ghanaian universities; lecturers; reflective teaching approach; professional development; classroom engagement

Introduction

Brief background

Reflective teaching is one of the most celebrated approaches to instructional delivery that is thought to enhance student learning (Cornford, 2006). As a concept and an approach to teaching, reflective teaching has been variously explained. Booth (2011) and Pollard (2008), for instance, have defined it as an instructional philosophy which requires teachers to think through and analyse their classroom performances for improvement in weak areas so as to achieve better learning outcomes. In the context of this paper, however, we have conceptualised reflective teaching as an instructional philosophy which requires teachers to self-evaluate what they do in the classroom, taking into consideration the motive behind every classroom action and finding out whether or not there is any success achieved in the actions, and what should be the way forward.

Research by Cornford (2006) has shown that reflective teaching is beneficial to teachers' professional development and students learning. Yet, it is not used in many classrooms

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(Sadeghi, 2013). On the global scene, available literature (Booth, 2011; Pollard, 2008) seems to suggest that although, in recent times, the use of reflective teaching approach has been gaining remarkable grounds and good patronage among teachers at the pre-university level, the same cannot be said about teachers at the university level. This positive development at the pre-university level has largely been attributed to the pre-university teachers' poise to increase classroom engagement and bring about improved learning outcomes (Pollard, 2008). It has also been argued that the situation has been so because of a widely-held conception among these pre-university-level teachers that, the practice of teaching could be developed through a chain of actions and reflections, where teachers teach and reflect on their pedagogies while planning new techniques informed by the results of the reflection (Booth, 2011).

In Ghana, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ghana Education Service (GES) have reiterated the need for teachers at the pre-university level to use reflective teaching approach to improve the effectiveness of classroom instruction as well as student learning outcomes. Similar calls have been made at the university level (Ghana web, 2012). Our motivation for this research emanated from the realisation that this aspect of educational practice at both levels in the country needed to be researched as a way to inform future practice.

The problem

Although reflective teaching is considered a useful approach for improving teaching and optimising student learning, there are only a few studies in Ghana on how teachers use the approach. The few studies available tend to focus only on how teachers at the pre-university level use the approach, neglecting how teachers at the university level also use it. Consequently, it appears little is known about how the teachers at the university level (lecturers) in the country actually perceive reflective teaching and whether or not they use the approach in their classrooms. Meanwhile, students at the university level, like those at pre-university level, could also benefit immensely from their teachers' use of the approach.

Purpose and objectives of the research

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of the use of reflective teaching approach by university lecturers in Ghana to achieve improved student learning outcomes. Its objectives were twofold: to find out the lecturers' perspectives about what constituted reflective teaching, and also to bring to light how often they engaged in some specific reflective teaching activities.

Research questions

Based on the objectives, the following research questions guided the research:

- (1) What are the perspectives of lecturers in Ghanaian universities about reflective teaching?
- (2) How often do the lecturers engage in specific reflective teaching activities?

Extant literature on reflective practice

The concept of reflective teaching

As has been indicated already (see Introduction), what really constitutes reflective teaching and what it is not appears to be somewhat elusive and nebulous defying a precise explanation. As Cornford (2006, p. 220) has put it, '...defining what actually constitutes a reflective teaching or a reflective practice is fraught with difficulty, and this major problem of definition has been recognised for some very considerable period of time'. In fact, the variety of operationalisations of the concept has, rather, ended up in a lack of precision resulting in overlapping assertions from one study to another (with myriads of views postulated by several experts in the field) in an attempt to explain what exactly the concept means according to relative orientations, epistemological positions and traditions. For example, Schön (1991) has conceptualised reflective teaching as teachers' classroom experiences and the thinking they do about the experience (reflection-in-action), and the learning that emanates from thinking about the experience (reflection-on-action). In a rather different way, Dewey has also defined the concept as 'a behavior which involves active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences which it leads' (Grant & Zeichner, 1984, p. 105). Expressing a similar view, Sadeghi (2013, p. 1) has also explained reflective teaching as 'the persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the ground that support it and the figure condition to which it tends'.

For their part, Booth (2011) and Pollard (2008) have rather explained the concept of reflective teaching as an instructional philosophy which requires teachers to think through and analyse their classroom performances for improvement in weak areas so as to achieve better learning outcomes. Contrary to this view, Richards has earlier argued that reflective teaching is:

an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experiences and involves a conscious recall and an examination of experiences as a basis for evaluation and decision-making, and as a source for planning an action. (Richards, 1990, p. 1)

Other sources (Cornford, 2006; Sanders, 2015; Serra & Marco, 2015) have posited that reflective teaching rather refers to a systematic process in which teachers collect and analyse both their thoughts and those of their learners about classroom instruction so as to make changes where necessary. Another group of researchers (Cruickshank & Applegate, as cited in Sadeghi, 2013) have explained the concept as involving:

...a teacher's thinking about what happens in classroom lessons, and thinking about alternative means of achieving goals or aims; he (the teacher) sees it (the thinking process) as a means to provide students with an opportunity to consider the teaching event thoughtfully, analytically and objectively. (Cruickshank & Applegate, as cited in Sadeghi, 2013, p. 71)

Summarising the literature above, it is clear that despite the differences in opinion, all the authors have a common understanding of reflective teaching as a thinking process requiring self-evaluation of teaching in order to be responsive to the needs of students. Reflective teaching thus requires patience, and careful observation of the entire learning experience (Gillis, 1988; Serra & Marco, 2015; Wildman & Niles, 1997). Recent terms that have been used to explain the concept include: technical rationality, radical pedagogy, moral crafting, action research, self-monitoring, clinical enquiry, linking theory to practice, comparing classroom

activities with some expectations, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, reflection-for-action, action research (Cornford, 2006; Peters, 1985; Sadeghi, 2013; Schön, 1991).

Benefits of reflective teaching to teachers

A growing body of literature has underscored the importance of reflective practices, and a current trend in our education system appears to increasingly make imperative the need for teachers to do a critical reflection on their classroom work. The supposition here is that, since the school and society are constantly changing, teachers ought to reflect on their performances in order to cope and live up to those changing expectations. Reflective teaching is therefore conceived as a thoughtful practice in which teaching is regarded as a disposition enjoining teachers to think about their practices rather than passively and merely following stereotyped procedures established over time by others (Sze, 1999).

As posited by Sze (1999), reflective teaching is a model of teacher preparation emphasising that teachers link theory to practice, thus bridging the gap between the two concepts. Reflective teaching also brings about organised professional developments which are life-long in nature, requiring teachers to identify their own assumptions about teaching and learning, and also use observation tasks as a means of developing their competence. Furthermore, it is a classroom enquiry allowing teachers to systematically examine their own teaching as a means of reflection in three dimensions, namely, classroom-based inquiry, teacher as researcher and action research. Reflective teaching concerns social justice and focuses more on what goes on outside the classroom. This assertion emphasises the need for teachers to correlate classroom experience to that of the larger society in order to find out why issues are the way they are in the classroom. Doing this gives teachers the power and will to transform the classroom (Sze, 1999).

Again, Sadeghi (2013), Sanders (2015) and Sze (1999) have argued that reflective teaching could be an instructional tool enabling teachers to observe and evaluate their classroom dispositions privately or do so with peers. It also enables teachers to examine the underlying principles and beliefs that define the manner in which they work. Bartlett, as cited in Richards (1990), is also of the view that a reflective teaching:

...involves moving beyond a primary concern with instructional techniques and 'how to' questions and asking 'what' and 'why' questions that regard instructions and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as part of broader educational purposes. Asking 'what and why' questions give us a certain power over our teaching. We could claim that the degree of autonomy and responsibility we have in our work as teachers is determined by the level of control we can exercise over our actions. In reflecting on the above kind of questions, we begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life. (Bartlett, as cited in Richards, 1990, p. 267)

Later literature (Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Hatton & Smith, 1995) has further argued that teacher professional development and learning should be a continuous effort in order to make teachers abreast of, and equipped with, current knowledge that is needed for the provision of cutting-edge information to students. Engaging in reflective teaching arguably satisfies this condition because it is a competency-based teaching approach, which has a potential of developing, supporting and maintaining teacher professional expertise, thereby, meeting the instructional needs of students. Teacher development and expertise has been explained as 'a meta-stable system of context-in-interactive change involving a continual cycle of

innovative behavior and adjustment to circumstances' (Longenecker, as cited in Sadeghi, 2013, p. 71). Reflective teaching is therefore a continuum conceptualised at successive levels in a teacher's career, right from the beginning where the person acquires expertise in teaching, through to the middle level where the person is in the early career practice, to the experienced level where the fellow becomes an expert teacher. Some critical reflective teaching approaches that could be used by teachers at various levels of their career practice include self-observation and observation of others, team teaching, and exploration of one's principle of teaching via writing (Sadeghi, 2013).

Other views by Cornford (2006) and Struanz (1998) have suggested that reflective teaching is important because it enables teachers to actively do a reflection of their teaching, and of the educational, social and political contexts in which their work is embedded, thereby, making them open-minded, whole-hearted and responsible. It also directs teachers' actions with foresights to be able to plan in accordance with ends which they are aware of. Unreflective teaching, on the other hand, compels teachers to uncritically conform to a stereotyped routine reality and devote considerable effort and time to finding solutions to challenges that have been defined by others (Cornford, 2006; Struanz, 1998). Despite the many advantages of adopting reflective practice as a teaching approach, Maclaren, as cited in Wendy and Natalie (2016), has noted that self-reflection could make a person (such as a teacher) ego-centric to claim an undisputed authority over others.

Benefits of reflective teaching to students

Research evidence (Cornford, 2006; Peters, 1985) has shown that an increase in reflective teaching could translate into action and bring about improvements in teaching and learning. Categories of teachers likely to use reflective teaching include: self-monitoring teachers, reflective teachers, continuous experimenting teachers, adaptive teachers, action research teachers, applied science teachers, moral craft teachers, problem-solving teachers, hypothesis-making teachers, clinical inquiring teachers, self-analytic teachers, radical pedagogical teachers, political craft teachers and scholar teachers (Cornford, 2006; Peters, 1985).

Additionally, reflective activity in the classroom often stimulates critical thinking without which there is 'little likelihood of meaningful storage of knowledge, and the result is superficial or "rote" learning' (Cornford, 2006, p. 230). It also ensures that teachers engage in a 'technically-oriented teaching' thereby ensuring effective classroom management and learning by students (Grant & Zeichner, 1984). These positive outcomes of using reflective teaching practices are critical to the learning of students at both the pre-university and university levels, and Ghanaian teachers at all levels should be using this approach to maximise students' learning.

On the whole, our research intended to address two major gaps in the existing literature. Firstly, earlier researchers have mainly conducted qualitative studies and have thus not been able to elicit the views of many teacher participants. Secondly, earlier studies on reflective teaching have tended to focus attention more on pre-university-level teaching than on university-level teaching. This dearth of knowledge of reflective teaching approach at the university level, we believe, could cause many doubts, uncertainties and much misinformation regarding the use of the approach. We are by this assumption arguing that, using a quantitative survey approach that would allow for greater participation by many teachers in a research at the university level, is timely.

Methodology

Approach and design

The questions informing the research were:

- (1) What are the perspectives of lecturers in Ghanaian universities about reflective teaching?
- (2) How often do the teachers engage in specific reflective teaching activities? To provide responses to these questions, the quantitative research approach was used with a specific reliance on the cross-sectional (descriptive) survey design. The approach and design were chosen because of our aim to solicit the views of a large number of people on the issues under investigation (Creswell, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Participants

The participants for the research were selected using three sampling techniques. The first was the modal purposive sampling technique which was used to select four Ghanaian universities namely: (University of Ghana (UG), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Cape Coast (UCC) and University of Education, Winneba (UEW)). The universities were selected based on their peculiar features as the older and larger universities in the country, and appeared to have larger lecturer and student populations (Creswell, 2009).

Relying on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) standard procedure for determining sample size, a cohort of 180 lecturer-participants was drawn from the four universities using another kind of purposive technique, the non-proportional quota sampling. The technique allowed us to subsequently select a uniform number of 45 participants from each of the universities (see Table 1). The last sampling technique used in the selection process was the accidental or haphazard technique which also gave us an opportunity to select any interested lecturer we came across from the four universities. The participants differed in terms of the following biographic data: age (31–40 years = 56/31.1%, 41–50 years = 96/53.3%, 51–60 years = 28/15.6%); sex (male = 118/65.6%, female = 62/34.4%). In line with ethical standards, the participants were asked for their consent and were fully briefed on the rationale for conducting the research. Participation in the research was therefore voluntary and participants could withdraw at any stage of the research.

Tool

A researcher-developed reflective teaching survey questionnaire with closed-ended questions, which yields quantitative data, was used for the research. The questionnaire was chosen

Table 1. Selection of lecturer-participants across four universities in Ghana.

University	Number of participants selected
UG	45
KNUST	45
UCC	45
UEW	45
Total	180

because of our expectation to collect quantitative data in a large survey to aid generalisation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The tool had two sections ('A' & 'B'). Section A had 15 items capturing the perspectives of participants on reflective teaching. Section B had 13 items on reflective teaching activities and frequency of engagement in each of the activities. All the items in both sections were designed according to views expressed by Booth (2011), Pollard (2008), Sadeghi (2013), Sze (1999) and Peters (1985) among others, who have contended that reflective teaching enables teachers to examine their classroom performances and address weaknesses thereby bringing about innovative teaching.

The tool was designed according to two forms of a five-point Likert scale. The first was: Strongly Agree–5; Agree–4; Unsure–3; Disagree–2; Strongly Disagree–1. The second was: Very often–5; Often–4; Unsure–3; Sometimes–2; Never–1. Because it was researcher-developed, a pilot study was conducted to ascertain its reliability. This was done using 60 university lecturers outside the sample. Of this number, 50 completed and returned the questionnaires we gave them. Using Cronbach's alpha test, we got a reliability coefficient of .880, making the tool reliable for use. A face validity test also conducted to measure its precision in covering all the domains of the research objectives revealed a positive result.

Procedure

The questionnaire was personally administered because our belief was that the administration of the instrument by ourselves would bring about the anticipated co-operation, at least, better than commissioning others to assist in that direction. We gave participants two weeks to complete it. However, we allowed a one-week extension for participants who could not complete the task on schedule. A total of 180 participants completed the questionnaire.

Analysis technique

Analysis was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). We chose SPSS version 22.0.0.0 because of its efficacy as an analytical tool for the analysis of complex data (Pallant, 2007). Also, it is a reliable tool for the running of all data meant for descriptive and inferential statistics (Field, 2009). In doing the analysis, various categories of questions on the questionnaire were coded according to the two forms of Likert scale already described (see Tool). Being a cross-sectional descriptive survey, the research made use of descriptions through which responses for individual items in the tool were put in mean scores and standard deviations for interpretation and discussion.

Results and discussion

This section presents and analyses the data collected from the field in order to provide responses to the research questions.

Research question 1: what are the perspectives of lecturers in Ghanaian universities about reflective teaching?

Table 2 presents in mean scores a summary of the perspectives of lecturer-participants of this research regarding what constitutes a reflective teaching. A close look at the table shows a general agreement with all the variables. However, in relative terms, it appears some

Table 2. University lecturers' perspectives on reflective teaching.

Reflective teaching means...	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Recalling, considering and evaluating experience in relation to broader purpose	4.23	1.00
Examining teaching from the perspective of learners	4.17	1.04
Reflection-on-actions	3.84	0.78
Reflection-in-actions	3.61	0.80
Reflection-for-actions	3.73	0.79
Thinking about alternative means of achieving goals	3.99	1.20
Development, support and maintenance of teachers' professional expertise	4.00	0.95
Deliberate learning	3.77	1.03
Observation of classroom disposition either privately or with colleagues	3.97	1.00
Thinking about how to link theory to practical teaching	3.68	1.05
Active and persistent behaviour based on beliefs	3.97	0.96
Self-assumption about teaching and learning	3.75	0.96
Self-monitoring and continuous experimentation	3.68	1.03
Having good understanding of what goes on outside the classroom	3.59	1.12
Thinking and analysing classroom performance	3.75	1.05

(Source: Field Data, 2016).

of the variables recorded a more positive affirmation than others. For instance, whereas variables such as recalling, considering and evaluating experience in relation to broader purpose ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.00$); examining teaching from the perspective of learners ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.04$); and development, support and maintenance of teachers' professional expertise ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.95$) have higher agreement rates, variables such as thinking about how to link theory to practice ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.05$); self-monitoring and continuous experimentation ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.03$); reflection-in-actions ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.80$); and having good understanding of what goes on outside the classroom ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.12$) rather, have lower agreement rates.

Since our analysis of the results in this section has shown an overall affirmation of all the variables we presented to the lecturer-participants to measure their perspectives about reflective teaching, we infer and argue that the lecturers had familiarity with and good understanding of the varied nature of the concept of reflective teaching. We argue further that because the participants seemingly have demonstrated familiarity with and good understanding of the concept, they were very likely to use the approach in the classroom. Settling on this premise also implies that this particular finding invalidates and challenges the assertion in previous literature (e.g. Booth, 2011; Pollard, 2008) that reflective teaching approach is often common with only teachers at the pre-university level. Again, we assume that since the lecturers appear to have patronised the approach, they perhaps have recognised the beneficial effect of reflective practice on both teaching and learning, thus affirming some aspects of the literature. For instance, in teaching, literature (Sze, 1999) has claimed that reflective practice enables teachers to reflect on their performances in order to cope and live up to changing classroom demands and expectations. Other sources (Sadeghi, 2013; Sanders, 2015; Sze, 1999) have also asserted that it is a model of teacher preparation linking theory to practice, and examining the underlying principles and beliefs that define the manner in which teachers work. In learning, it helps students to engage in critical thinking instead of mere memorisation of facts (Cornford, 2006).

Research question 2: how often do the lecturers engage in specific reflective teaching activities?

Table 3. University lecturers' frequency of engagement in reflective activities.

Activity	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-analysis of teaching	3.98	1.00
Relating theory to practical teaching	3.87	1.10
Receiving feedback from students	3.21	1.47
Monitoring of instruction	1.68	0.66
Problem solving	1.72	0.79
Metacognition	2.23	1.21
Comparing classroom activities with societal expectations	4.69	0.59
Peer observation of teaching	1.44	0.50
Classroom observation and evaluation	4.88	0.42
Keeping of a reflective diary	2.16	1.03
Thinking about alternative means of achieving teaching goals	1.47	0.51
Continuous self-assessment and evaluation of classroom teaching	1.68	0.57
Organising group discussions among students	2.07	1.24

(Source: Field Data, 2016).

The 13 variables on Table 3 provide responses to the second question we posed in this research. The variables are the specific reflective teaching activities we compiled based on the literature we reviewed on the concept of reflective practice. The frequency of involvement in each of the activities provides the basis of our analysis of the results in this section. Referring to the table, it is apparent the lecturers indicated that the reflective teaching activities they often used were: classroom observation and evaluation ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.42$); comparing classroom activities with some societal expectations ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.59$); action research ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.00$); linkage of theory to practice ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.10$); and continuous experimentation ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.47$). However, an assessment of the mean scores of the variables based on the scale we used in ranking the data in this section (see Tool) shows that the lecturers engaged in classroom observation and evaluation, and comparing classroom activities with some societal expectations on a higher scale (Very Often).

A further analysis of the results in this section also shows that the lecturer-participants were not sure with the use of the following variables as reflective teaching activities: clinical enquiry ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.21$); moral crafting ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.03$); radical pedagogy ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.24$); problem-solving ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 0.79$); self-monitoring of instruction ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.66$); and devising alternative means of achieving teaching goals ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.57$). A more negative aspect of the results indicates that the lecturers never engaged in technical oriented teaching ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.51$) and self-analysis of teaching ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.50$) as reflective teaching activities.

Situating the results in this section in previous literature, it is obvious our participants' engagement in classroom observation and evaluation, comparison of classroom activities with some societal expectations, action research, linkage of theory to practice, and continuous experimentation as reflective teaching activities is perhaps an affirmation of the views of Cornford (2006); Peters (1985); Sadeghi (2013) and Schön (1991) who have cited the variables as some recent reflective activities recommended for teachers. In contrast, however, given that our results point to the fact that our participants rarely engaged in some of the reflective teaching activities recommended by these authors (e.g. making clinical enquiries, moral crafting and radical pedagogy) and also never engaged in others such as, technical-oriented teaching as well as self-analysis, is equally a clear indication of inconsistency of this aspect of our results with the literature.

Limitation

Admittedly, the findings of this research have a limitation in terms of the capacity to generalise for the entire lecturer population in all universities in Ghana due to the non-probability sampling techniques used in the sampling process. For instance, two purposive sampling techniques (modal and quota) were used to select only four out of the many universities in the country; and to further select 180 lecturer-participants. An accidental or haphazard sampling technique was also used to complement the two techniques.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitation of the research, we argue that the findings have significant merits in contributing to existing knowledge in the field because they support contemporary literature suggesting that reflective teaching has recently gained prominence in the education sector. Furthermore, the fact that the research used a quantitative survey approach, allowing for a greater number of participants to examine the subject matter instead of a qualitative approach, also arguably, qualifies it as an extension of knowledge. Again, contrary to what is found in existing literature, this research has found that reflective teaching approach is also widely used by many university lecturers in Ghana, and by that, this research has made an important contribution to the current body of knowledge. Finally, we would like to state that although reflective teaching cannot be said to be a panacea for the numerous challenges confronting teacher performance, our findings appear to justify the argument that teachers who engage in reflective teaching are likely to boost their professional experience with a considerable degree of classroom success. Of particular interest is the fact that participants of this research frequently engaged in one form of reflective teaching activity or the other, and were successful in evaluating the effectiveness of their pedagogies from their own perspectives, and also from the perspectives of their colleagues and students.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we make two important recommendations. Firstly, we strongly advocate the use of reflective teaching approach by all teachers and suggest that educational policymakers make the use of the approach an essential component of the teacher performance appraisal system aimed at ensuring that every teacher adopts the practice. Secondly, we also recommend a replication of this research using a mixed-method approach and covering a wider scope.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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