

BLENDING LEARNING FOR PREPARING REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

Teacher education institutions play a significant role in preparing teachers who are skilled and equipped with requisite knowledge and attitude for effective teaching in schools. The teacher trainees are in the prime position of being a teacher and a student and a researcher at the same time. It is imperative for them to acquire skills for reflection to help improvise the teaching learning process. The course on School Internship and pedagogy courses of B Ed programme seek to nurture this skill of reflection among student teachers. The present study is based on a small scale study conducted by the investigator to prepare the student teachers for reflection. The blended learning approach was used by the investigators, where the student teachers engaged in face to face interaction, online discussions and video sharing in a step wise planned manner. The study revealed provided significant insights. A small group of 08 student teachers of pedagogy of English were engaged in this study. The students were involved in reflection-in-action as well as reflection-on-action. The findings of the study showed that the use of blended learning provided opportunities for the student teachers to engage in reflections along certain guidelines interact and share their perceptions and educational experiences. Their reflections helped them understand the context and level of their learners well. It helped them analyze their learning environment and gain critical insights in the process of teaching learning in school.

Keywords: *Blended learning, Reflection, Reflective practice*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to David C. Berliner the developmental phases in becoming a master teacher includes Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent, Proficient and Expert. Different stages focus on different aspects of teacher development but at every stage a teacher needs to reflect upon their teaching learning experience. Reflective practice helps a teacher to build the teaching competencies at every stage.

In India, the concept of school internship has witnessed a paradigm shift in terms of the duration of 'internship' in schools. The purpose of the teacher training institutions is not only to

impart adequate subject knowledge but also to equip necessary pedagogic and reflective skills in the prospective teachers by extending the duration of school internship in the pre service teacher education curriculum.

This component of the curriculum helped the prospective teachers in their transformation from learners to equipped trainees to work in actual school setting.

As a part of internship the trainees have to undertake various tasks to be completed in a prescribed time frame which includes preparation of lesson plans, observation of peer classroom teaching, action research, case study and most importantly they have to maintain a reflective journal in which they have to record all

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the happenings in the school and reflect upon them on regular basis during the internship period.

Inclusion of this practice of reflection as a part of internship has compelled the trainees to reflect with or without will. Many times they have not been able to ascertain as to what they actually have to reflect upon. A study undertaken on the subject (Sharma, R and Shukla, N, 2017) revealed that although the trainees are theoretically clear about the process and nature of reflection, when asked to do it in practical, the results are different. The reflections recorded when analyzed revealed that there was scope for further improvement. There were several reasons cited by the teachers' trainees for this lack of critical reflection. As the teacher trainees are not able to update their reflective journal regularly due to factors such as work load of preparing lesson plans, completing the syllabus of the students, evaluating their understanding of what has been taught while working on the components of their curriculum keeping in mind the time constraints. The teacher trainees observed that they were packed with so many academic and administrative responsibilities in schools that they hardly get time to reflect and record seriously. They were also of the opinion that due to this overloading and diversity of task handling they could not remember the finer details of their day, which could be crucial for reflections. They were not comfortable in reflecting in writing out everything on paper as it was demanding in terms of time and effort. This often lead them to indulge in wrong practices -

reflections from the peers and online sources which completely discard the basic purpose of including reflection as a part of their internship programme.

The results of the abovementioned study revealed that the teacher trainees assumed that they were at the higher level of reflection while, their reflective diary revealed that they were one or two levels behind. This mismatch is not good if we seek to prepare our teacher trainees for developing their skill of observation and reflections.

The process of maintaining a reflective diary and providing feedback to teacher trainees on their reflections rests with the teacher educators in the respective Teacher Education Institution. It is extremely challenging for the mentors to provide timely and effective feedback to teacher trainees on their reflections as handling the hard copies of the journal of so many teacher trainees is not always comfortable. The opportunities for teacher educators to interact with teacher trainees are also limited as both are placed in field, which are far apart. For effective feedback a personal involvement is required to guide the teacher trainees in the art of reflection. Due to the time and space distance, the spontaneous reflections of teacher trainees and their feedback by teacher educators seldom happens. Thus the quality is compromised on many occasions.

Based on some of these observations in the research study mentioned it was believed that the current reflective practice in the school internship programme has scope for

improvement, the communication gap is acting as a barrier in providing experiences to gain the “experience of acting as a teacher in an authentic teaching context”(p. 179). This motivated the investigator to explore some innovative ways of developing a better understanding and experience of reflective practice among teacher trainees.

It was decided to follow a blended learning approach in ‘reflective practice’. The teacher trainees were engaged in face to face instruction, discussion as well as online mode of interaction to help them in reflective practice.

Blended approach should be promoted in the educational setting as “Technology is not just a tool. It can give learners a voice that they may not have had before.”(George Couros)

The following section will explore the conceptual and technical understanding of ‘blended learning’ and ‘reflective practice’ relevant to the present study.

1.1.1 Blended Learning

Over the past few years with the technological reforms the education sector is also reshaping. Not only the roles of teacher has transformed from a knowledge imparter to a facilitator, a guide, motivator, counselor, innovator, manager etc. but also the learners are playing an active role in the classroom.

One such approach that is supporting reforms in education sector is Blended Learning. Blended learning is an education programme where you combine online learning with offline learning (traditional, face to face learning) in way to provide best educational experience.

Blended learning gives an opportunity to the teacher training institutions to link the theory and practice. It also aids the trainees to become reflective practitioners by assisting them to in making the valuable use of technology for decision making, experience sharing, exploring, peer interaction, problem solving etc. The tech-savvy trainees are provided with the opportunity to enjoy their work as they are not restricted to pen and paper.

Blended learning is an online learning approach that provide the learners with some control over the place, time and pace of learning in a formal learning setup. It helps the teachers to guide and strengthen the learning experience of students by facilitating communication with and among the learners.

Blended learning is to be a positive force in education, it should not be cast as replacing the role of as teacher in the classroom or as an alternative classroom rather it should act as a tool to facilitate meaningful classroom processes.

1.1.2 Reflection: A learning process

In the present scenario the emphasis of education sector should not be only quantity rather more quality should be promoted as the primary agenda of the educational institutions.

The challenge for the teacher training institutions is not to fill the knowledge within their trainees about the various philosophers, psychologists and their theories, the different ways of teaching, making of lesson plans and unit plans but to build in them the capacity to reflect their views on the various philosophies, instructional

material and strategies, teaching learning process etc.

In 1983, Donald Schon through his book 'The Reflective Practitioner' introduced the concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. He linked reflection to professional development and professional practice. According to him, when reflection is done at the time of the event it is called reflection-in-action and reflection which is done after the event it is reflection-on-action.

According to Bright (1996), the teaching and learning is very much improved by reflective practice and reflective thinking. Teacher educators who themselves lacks the teaching and learning spirit and motivation will not be able to shape other individuals mind, body and spirit.

According to DeVille (2010), links attainment of the skill of reflective practice with the skill of questioning, inquiry and investigation.

Reflective practice is an art of systematic processing of reflection on the experiences and events occurred. This process of reflecting on one's own experiences brings self-awareness and leads to self-development of an individual. It motivates an individual to perform more efficiently in every sphere of their life.

When the teacher trainees engage in reflection in actions they think and act during the event which helps them to acquire higher order cognitive abilities, make them flexible and adaptable to the environment and to focus on the continuous learning. While reflection on action allows the trainees to think about what other instructional strategies they can adopt, what they might do differently if the similar event occurred again and

how can the learning experience be made more meaningful.

Reflection should not only be made a part of teaching learning process but also as a part of every individuals life as this practice leads to both personal and professional development.

Reflective teachers are not passive rather proactive in their approach. Reflective practice gives birth to teacher 'inner voice' i.e., their personal opinion, beliefs, perceptions about teaching and its context. Also it helps the teachers to know themselves better i.e., knowledge of self to be successful as a teacher, educational leader and a professional.

1.1.3 Significance of engaging in 'reflective practice'

- Reflective teaching provides the teachers with the ability to reflect on the origins and consequences of their actions and decisions.
- It helps the teachers to find embedded constraints within the curricular, instructional, school and also the social contexts in which they work.
- It gives them with an opportunity to think critically, rigorously and systematically about the educational system, its practices and problems to foster growth in self, students and system.
- It guides the teacher to assess their teaching as to what they did in the classroom, why they do it and how far it worked both for the teacher as well as the students.
- It involves identification of the needs of the teacher as well as the learner followed by

drafting a plan of action and its implementation and reflecting upon it.

1.1.4 Reflective practice through blended learning as the context of this study

The trainees were encouraged to participate in collaborative and reflective learning with online tools to promote their deep learning. Blended learning environment provide the trainees with ample time to reflect and share their experiences as compared to the classroom environment.

This study gave an online platform to the trainees through which they can share their insightful thoughts on the basis of their learning experience. A Google group was maintained in which the trainees' had to upload as electronic reflective journal twice a week with one video of their classroom teaching. Students were encouraged to share their reflections on their peers post and engage in online discussions to promote reflective and collaborative learning.

1.2 REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH LITERATURE

According to Abimbola Disu (2017) in the study on "A Phenomenological study on reflective teaching practice" Reflective practice is of vital importance to enhance student learning. To improve teaching learning process various ways can be used, one of which is reflective practice, which uses critical thinking to assess the teaching learning process in the classroom and improve upon students' performance.

This phenomenological study explored 20-25 elementary charter-school teachers' experiences with reflective practice to support their teaching

effectiveness. This study adds to the body of knowledge about different ways to develop teachers as reflective practitioners. The data was gathered through 40-50 minutes interview with each participant that focused on reflection and reporting of teachers lived experiences with reflective teaching practices. The data was collected through semi structured interview so it limits the researcher's observation of teacher's classroom interaction.

Findings of the study revealed that teachers reflected before their teaching, while teaching and after teaching. It helped them to make new discoveries and also improved their instruction. They implemented problem solving techniques and adjusted their leaning goals. Findings also emphasized on coaching with deans or administrators and engaging in PLC as effective forms to improve reflective teaching practice. It also emphasized on coaching with deans or administrators and engaging in PLC as effective forms to improve reflective teaching practice.

One of the challenges faced by the participants that affect their reflective practice was time constraint, as they did not had transition time between classes. Another factor was teacher's resistance to change which hindered their ability to reflect.

Pillay (2015) in the study of "Does training change teachers beliefs in teaching? A study at Secondary level in Bangladesh focuses on the vital importance of training in teaching. This study explored how different beliefs of teachers guide their ways of teaching. Training helps a teacher to improve upon their pedagogical sense

and familiarizes them with different teaching methodologies.

Findings show that training can enrich the subject knowledge, boost their confidence, enhances teachers professional development, make teacher ready to teacher in professional setting by changing their existing beliefs and it can reshape their old notion of teaching. Apart from the teacher education, this study points out some hurdles in providing teaching facilities in Bangladesh schools.

Nncy Lynelle Burrows (2012) study on Reflective thinking by teachers and improvement in teaching practices aimed to investigate the connection of teacher' reflections and their practice by self- evaluation through video recorded lessons. Teachers believed that through video recording they can have the permanent images of what really happened in their lessons and allowed them to elaborate and explain why they think, as they do. Teachers engaging in responsibility, wholeheartedness and open mindedness create a conducive environment for reflective teaching. Teachers gain insight into their teaching practices as they reflect upon their experiences. This study explains teachers' reflective thinking through self -evaluation.

Celes Raene Rayford (2010) study on Reflective practice: The teacher in the mirror determined that teachers believed reflection to be of vital importance as it helped them to improve their teaching performance. Researcher pointed out that teachers needed time to reflect and reflected through engaging in dialogues with peers. The study described the perceptions and professional

practices of the teachers and administrators from the 3 states of US on reflective practice.

This research indicates that reflection is very helpful in discovering strengths and weaknesses and better planning of the instruction. It is useful in improving the teaching by reflecting with a group about teaching experiences. Principals indicated that encouraging the teachers to enhance their teaching practices is useful.

Emily Hayden (2010) conducted a study on Pathways to Reflection: Exploring the reflective analytical practices of novice teachers'. The study analyzes the reflective practices of novice teachers and the ways in which they engage in continual decision making in teaching practices. Through written journals novices developed a reflective cycle of teaching by observing the responses followed by analysis of specific learning needs and planning for adaptations. Through writing reflections novice teachers had an opportunity to sharpen their knowledge and awareness of their teaching practices. Confidence plays an integral part in teaching, if a teacher beliefs in her abilities and implement appropriate adaptations in instruction then the result will be conducive change in practice and efficient student learning.

Svetlana Merglova (2008) highlighted the role of reflective practice in influencing classroom climate. The author wrote a journal as her reflection on her teaching, student's reactions and their behavior. And through critical analysis of her lesson she revised her plan. Reflective teaching is a cyclic process that goes through the

steps of describing, observing followed by planning and acting, then again observing and planning. It is also dependent on teachers' views, opinions, personality and her experiences. A reflective teacher should have self-awareness and open-mindedness. Author give importance in involving students to create the classroom rules as their feedback helps in improvement.

To enhance the classroom environment a teacher can improve upon communication skills, gestures movements, looks, eye contact, listening skills, etc.

In another study conducted by **Senem Sanal Erginelon (2006)** on Developing reflective teachers: A study on perception and improvement of reflection in pre-service teacher education. Pre-service teachers viewed reflective practice as a whole where the components such as development of competence, self-awareness, class atmosphere, guidance in reflection, authentic teaching experiences influenced on another. Pre service teachers found the teaching experiences such as microteaching, peer feedback, videotaped teaching, writing journals, observation as effective ways to combine their instructional concepts to their experiences and helped in professional development. Guidance and constructive feedback from the instructors and peers contributed in their self-development.

Reflective teaching also developed self-awareness towards their teaching practices through self-analysis. Pre-service teachers played an active role at every stage and gained new skills while improving their knowledge.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How effective is the Collaborative learning through blended approach in preparing Reflective Practitioners?
- What are the challenges experienced by teacher trainees while engaging in Reflection through blended learning?

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To study the effectiveness of the collaborative learning in preparing Reflective Practitioners.
- To determine the challenges experienced by teacher trainees while engaging in Reflective Practice through blended learning.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative research design. A small group of 08 student teachers of pedagogy of English were the respondents of the study. The trainees were involved in reflection-in-action as well as reflection-on-action. Data was collected from 08 respondents via Google group, video recording and face to face interactions.

1.6 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Objective 1: To study the effectiveness of the collaborative learning in preparing Reflective Practitioners.

Interpretation: It was found that this collaborative approach of learning benefited the trainees as every trainee had to reflect on the

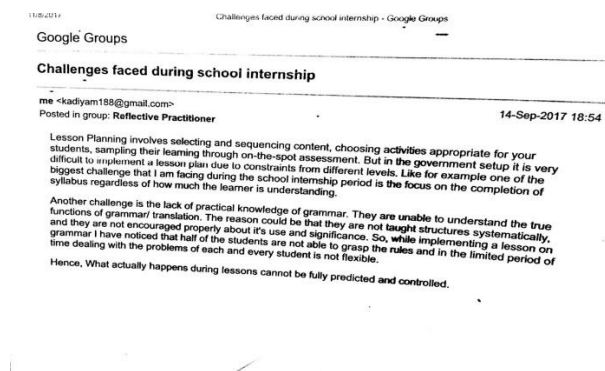
basis of their critical incidences and also had to respond to their peers post so no one hesitated in sharing their views. The trainees were able to encourage diverse perspectives, model problem solving techniques, explore alternate strategies in the class, build positive attitude in the safe learning environment, promote innovations etc. Also trainees' reflection enhanced day by day as they are invested in their own learning.

SAMPLE RESPONSE OF STUDENT TEACHERS IN THE INTERVIEW

Investigator- How effective is the Collaborative model in supporting and scaffolding Reflective Practice among Student Teachers?

Student teacher - The student teacher agreed that her beliefs as a English language teacher has changed through this journey of reflective practice. It gave her a chance to explore English as a language and herself as an English language teacher. When she saw the video she found that all the practices you undertake as a teacher may not be productive to all the learners so this idea of video recording gives you an opportunity to find out whether the teaching learning practices undertaken in the class are executed the way it was planned, are their students who were not able to comprehend, is the teacher concentrating only on the group which is interested in the class or the uninterested students of the class being involved in the teaching and learning.

Through online sharing of their challenges , the student teachers were able to articulate their problems and tried to find a reasonable solution for addressing it.



How effective is the Collaborative model in supporting and scaffolding Reflective Practice among Student Teachers?

The student teacher strongly agreed that collaborative model supported the reflective practice as she was able to see herself growing as an individual. Every week while sharing the reflections with other peers and uploading a video on the group gave an opportunity to improve by gaining perceptions of peers and the guide. She also reflected that the area which needs more improvement is the time management skills because as much as she wanted to transact in one class she was not able to as she did not consider the other external components such as students and their concentration level.

Objective 2: To determine the challenges experienced by teacher trainees while engaging in Reflective Practice through blended learning.

SAMPLE OF THE RESPONSES RECEIVED:

The few challenges faced by the student teacher included failure to keep up with the deadlines

due to practical teaching work overloaded in schools, availability of laptops, file size to be uploaded was heavy and lack of connectivity.

Interpretation: It has been observed that the teacher trainees faced certain challenges in blended learning such as the availability of laptops and technical issues in uploading files with large sizes. Also trainees are not used to the online mode so they felt submissions in the form of hard copy as easier. One of the major problems faced by trainees was to make and upload their teaching videos as the trainees were sent to the government schools for their internship and the schools didn't allow them to record any sessions inside the school premises may be due to privacy issues. This made the idea behind recording classroom teaching unsuccessful. Some alternative, hence, needs to be worked out. Overall, the collaborative model enabled them to reflect on their teaching beliefs and shape their behavior, skills and attitude accordingly.

1.7 CONCLUSION

The study found that blended learning provides an opportunity to build lifelong learners community. Also the students who earlier found reflection as a tedious task took interest with the blended approach to learning as the youth is tech-savvy and are comfortable working online. While blended learning provide trainees with an opportunity to learn independently, reflective

interactivity encouraged them to share and compare their experiences, views and perceptions with each other.

Blended learning made possible greater individualization, reflection, social interaction and greater learner motivation.

The study also highlighted the advantages of collaborative learning environment where the trainees in collaboration worked towards becoming reflective practitioners. Each trainee gave their reflections on the peer's post which motivated them to work in a "virtual learning environment". The study used the blended approach for compensating the lack of opportunity provided to the teacher trainees to process their experience, involve in critical thinking and make sense of it by linking theory with practice and by sharing their reflections and questions with the peers. Engaging in online discussions about the learners, instructional materials, teaching learning strategies, school environment, classroom management and challenges faced during school internship strengthened them as a teacher.

Innovative practice of using blended learning gave positive results as reflected in this study. Therefore efforts should be made by teacher education institutions to apply it in their programme delivery.

However cooperation from the schools where the interns are stationed need to be prepared to accept and facilitate such innovative practices in the larger interest of the students and society.

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