

Reflective Practice: The Hallmark of Andragogics in Ubuntu/Unhu Societies

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ABSTRACT

One of the global contemporary goals of andragogics is the development of reflective practice. The fact that it was documented expansively by Schon and Dewey in the early decades of the nineteenth century is not tantamount to saying that it was alien to the Ubuntu/Unhu andragogics. Reflective practice is one of the hallmarks of the provision of quality education. In an attempt to explore the essence of reflective practice as a requisite for Ubuntu/Unhu andragogics, ten elderly people aged between 65 and 95 were purposively sampled and interviewed. The findings are that the epistemic reference in Ubuntu/Unhu andragogics was generally embedded in geronto-sophia. Some sagacious elderly people were the 'professors' who emphasized on reflective practice in learners. It is recommended that readers of literature about the aims of education in Ubuntu/Unhu and other societies should employ critical literacy as the essence of reflective thinking. The contemporary educators can gain some insights from Ubuntu/Unhu andragogics for sustainable development.

Keywords: *Reflective practice; andragogics; Ubuntu/Unhu societies; geronto-sophia; critical literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, there has been growing literature focusing on experiential learning and the development and application of reflective practice though the concepts underlying reflective practice are much older. Some scholars have claimed to find precursors of reflective practice in ancient texts such as Buddhist teachings (Winter, 2003), the *Meditations* of Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (Suibhne, 2009) and Ubuntuist/Unhuist philosophy (Ramose 2012). The term 'reflective practice' implies a deliberate action of critically interpreting experiences. Interpretation presupposes a vigorous mental engagement which can be described as reflection. According to (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985) reflection is a mental activity in which experiences are recaptured, thought about, mulled and evaluated. When reflecting, experiences are indispensable for the provision of the platform for the mental engagement that makes learning possible. In other words reflective practice is the capacity to reflect on experiences so as to engage in a process of continuous learning (Finlay, 2008). Thus reflective practice is the evaluation of practical experiences and theories that constitute reality. The constituent parts of reality are scrutinized under reflective and

reflexive lenses so as to give meaning to the whole of reality (Shapiro 2010). Reflective practice requires one to rethink events interrogating their meanings and essences in relation to the achievement of one's goals.

In the education phenomenon, Hartman (2010) has described reflective practice as meta-cognition of the educator. Meta-cognition is the awareness or analysis of one's own thinking processes which goes beyond reviewing of experiences and focuses on critical thinking about the interpretation of the experiences (Colman, 2015; Schraw, 1998). Thus meta-cognition is about the thoughts surrounding the experiences (Zohar & Ben, 2009). It requires that one becomes actively involved in the processing of experiences. There is reshaping of the understanding of the past and current experiences that leads to improved teaching-learning practices (Dunlosky & Metcalfe, 2009; Fisher & Wells, 2009; Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994). According to Schon (1983), reflective practice makes the education practitioner involved in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Thus the practitioner develops effective decision-making skills from the professional knowledge that is gained from the reflections on the experiences.

CONCEPTION OF UNHU/UBUNTU

Unhu/Ubuntu is an African philosophy that is peculiar to the indigenous societies of southern Africa. It has emphasis on axiological interactions. Thus *Unhu/Ubuntu* is conceptualised as an ethno-philosophy, a way of being, a mode of ethics and behaviour deeply embedded in African indigenous culture (Nussbaum 2003). *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy is characterised by the collective consciousness of the African people in gerontocratic societies. *Unhu/Ubuntu* societies were collectivist (Higgs & Smith, 2000). In collectivist societies, the moral behaviours of the members were gerontocratically guided and communally sanctioned (Street, 1994; Gee, 1994; Coetzee & Roux, 2002). Thus the *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy had moral ideological underpinnings that focused on harmonious living with others and honouring communal relationships (Metz & Gaie 2010). The socially accepted norms and values were inculcated in the youngsters through oral tradition. The elderly people told folktales that had emphasis on *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophical values. The themes in the folktales were presented as discourses that challenged the audience to think critically. The elderly people were considered to be the custodians and the prime disseminators of values and norms (Keevy 2008; Higgs & van Wyk, 2004). Thus the education system was geronto-sophic. The elderly people influenced the younger generations in ways they thought were effective in the acquisition of requisite cultural values and norms for the promotion of morality (Peresuh & Nhundu, 1999).

The overarching axio-ideological adage in *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies that has withstood cultural dynamism has linguistic variations in these societies. In IsiZulu, the adage is *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, whose variation in ChiShona is *munhu munhu muvanhu*. In Sotho, the adage is *motho ke motho ka batho*. The approximation of the adage in English is; a person is considered to be humane because of one's interactions with other persons (Letseka, 2013). The humane interactions with others were judged by being critical about all the interactions (Letseka, 2013; Ramose, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology was employed in this study and was guided by the social constructivist paradigm which is hinged on interpretivism. In the study the researcher developed subjective meanings from the

informants' experiences (Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990). The study focused on an understanding of the world in which the informants lived and was thus phenomenological hermeneutics. The aim of phenomenological hermeneutics is to understand the lived experiences of the respondents (Schulze, 2002; Mouton, 2011). These lived experiences were expressed in the respondents' own words to authenticate the interpretations of the researcher (O'Leary, 2010; De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2011).

The researchers used interviews for the generation of data. The data were analysed by employing the thematic approach while focusing on the Johnson and Christensen method (Johnson and Christensen, 2008; Slavin, 2007; Steyn, McDonald, Van der Horst, Loubser, Niekerk, Kamper, Schulze & Dreyer, 2004). The *emic* interpretations (informants' interpretations of experiences in their own words) informed the *etic* interpretations (the researchers' interpretations) (Hoberg, 2001).

THE VALUE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

According to (Bolton, 2010) experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning, but the deliberate reflection on experience provides some insights on the effective means of changing behaviour to accomplish some goals. In line with the above proclamation, one of the informants postulated;

Whoever failed to perform a duty to the expected standard was blamed for lack of reflective practice. One was supposed to introspect always laying the blame on the self. There were proverbs that encouraged collaborative reflections like 'Benzi vhunza rakanaka' (A fool who enquires is wise) and 'Chara chimwe hachitswanywi inda' (Literally it is 'One finger cannot crush a louse' and contextually it means 'Individualism does not yield efficacy').

Thus in *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies the premier goal of reflective practice was to promote an awareness of the essence of self-evaluation on the desired experiences. The practitioner of whatever profession was supposed to be motivated to seek strategies for enhancement of efficacy.

In practice-based professions, reflection is indispensable since the practitioners learn more from professional experience than from formal learning (Johns & Burnie, 2013). Thus reflective practice becomes one of the most effective means for personal professional development

and improvement. The theoretical knowledge that one would have acquired is contextualised and consolidated through reflective practice (Paterson & Chapman, 2013; McBrien, 2007). Thus reflective practice becomes one of the effective means of giving meaning to theory through practice

Reflective practice can be considered as learning from experience. According to Paterson and Chapman (2013), reflective practice is fundamental for a practitioner since it stresses on accountability of one's practices through introspection. Some confirmatory remarks were enunciated by one of the informants;

A wise person was expected to be always reflective on experiences. One was supposed to reflect before action, during action and after action. Rushing into action before adequate reflections was discouraged by the proverb 'Usamanyira kumedza kutsenga kuchada' (Which literally is 'Do not rush to swallow before adequate chewing').

Practitioners who are not engaged in reflective practice become unaware pawns in the implementation of some prescribed strategies. Thus the practitioners without an inclination towards reflective practice are not objective at their actions, consideration of their emotions, experiences, or consequences of actions to improve their practice (Jones & Jones, 2013).

Through reflective practice, practitioners review their thinking and practices and reflect on how best they would have performed in the light of achieving their objectives (Shapiro, 2010). The reflective practitioner is always open-minded to critical evaluations of his or her reflections in order to attain self-efficacy. One is intrinsically motivated to learn from the mistakes that one would have made (Cochran-Smith, 2003). In Ubuntu/Unhu societies, critical evaluations of reflections were communally done as posited by one of the informants;

Before a divorce was approved by the elders of the clan, both parties were asked to verbalize their reflections on their unpleasant marriage experiences. This was done for the sake of evaluating the soundness of the reflections in making the decision to divorce.

The discursive feedback from the other reflective thinkers evoked meta-reflections. Thus according to Wopereis, Sloep and Poortman (2010) the reflective practitioner consequently improves on practice by reflecting

on the decisions by the other members in the community of enquiry.

One of the informants postulated,

Whatever experience one went through was not supposed to be repeated in the same manner. There was supposed to be an improvement in the following experience to show that there were some reflections on the previous experiences.

Thus reflective practice was meant to improve practitioners from being bearers of static procedural knowledge to dynamic innovators and creators of procedural knowledge that suit specific contexts and situations (Larrivee, 2000). The practitioners who are engaged in reflective practice are always rethinking about improving strategies that could be employed to enhance their effectiveness. Thus according to Davies (2012) reflective practice promotes deep learning that involves identification of personal and professional strengths and areas for improvement. The professional growth that occurs stems from self-motivation and self-directedness.

The importance of reflection was expressed by one of the informants;

Reflection was considered a cardinal virtue of life and emphasized in our culture throughout one's life in some proverbs. One of the proverbs was 'Mungwaru haati chandanzwa ndicho asi benzi ndichandagwinyira' (Which literally is, 'The wise is sceptical about given information but the fool is close-minded').

The reflection that the practitioner does on own practice promotes life-long learning. Thus reflection promotes professional development which is not terminal but ongoing as long as one is a practitioner. Also, professional development does not come inherently with the number of years the practitioner would have spent practicing but comes about with the extent of reflections the practitioner makes on the experiences (Huxley 2000). A practitioner who reflects throughout his or her practice does not merely review the past actions and events, but makes conscious scrutiny of his or her emotions, experiences, actions, and responses to gain insights of his or her existing knowledge base so as to develop professionally (Leitch & Day 2000).

In Ubuntu/Unhu societies, reflective practice was widely employed in various spheres of life for professional development. One of the informants remarked;

At the chief's court, reflections on cases were communally done. The chief could not pass on judgement individually. The elders at the court gave their reflections of the cases presented and everyone was expected to reflect on the reflections of others. In such situations sound judgements were attained.

Thus every member of society was expected to embrace reflective practice since it entailed the process that the practitioner studies his or her own practice to discover the best practice of achieving one's occupational or professional goals. Reflective practice influences the extent of achievement of ethical and intellectual consequences of occupational or professional procedures (Davies, 2012; Johns, 2010).

The practitioner gets feedback about the extent of his or her effectiveness through reflective practice. Thus in such a situation, reflective practice can be regarded as learning from experience. In this context, experience is not what happens to the educator but the reflection that the educator does on what happens during the facilitation of learning (Huxley 2000). The reflective practitioner is open-minded and is always critical about own practice. The criticality that the practitioner is engaged in is a recipe for continuous professional development. The reflective practitioner is motivated to introspect as well as retrospect on his or her practice.

The reflective practitioner has insatiable quest for the creation of procedural knowledge about his or her professional practice. There is a propensity to be engaged in modifications of one's practices to suit specific contexts and situations, and eventually to invent new strategies (Larrivee, 2000). In Ubuntu/Unhu societies reflective practice was valued in any trade as posited by one of the informants;

The wisdom of a person in whatever he did was measured by the extent to which one was always involved in critical thinking and making sound decisions about what would have been experienced. Just like a cow which ruminates one was supposed to 'ruminate' on the experiences. When one could not 'ruminate' then he or she was not be able to make sound decisions about how to improve on the self.

Thus through reflective practice, practitioners were able to develop themselves beyond existing theories in practice and become responsive to the dynamic environments of their day to day practices

THE METHODOLOGY OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A person who reflects throughout his or her practice is not just looking back on past actions and events, but is taking a conscious scrutiny of emotions, experiences and responses in order to use that information to add to his or her existing knowledge base to reach a higher level of understanding (Price, 2004).

The development of reflective practice is manifested in interest in the integration of theory and practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). There is emphasis on the cyclic and spiral nature of experience where theory is built from practice that is reflected upon and practice is informed by theory that was generated by predecessors. Thus through reflective practice some improvements on procedural knowledge are made.

One of the renowned theorists about reflective practice was David A. Kolb who advocated for a reflective model which highlights the concept of experiential learning centred on the transformation of information into knowledge. Kolb was highly influenced by the earlier researches conducted by John Dewey and Jean Piaget in the development of his model. In the early 20th century, John Dewey wrote about reflective practice with his exploration of experience, interaction and reflection. Then Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget developed relevant theories of human learning and development which were considered valuable by Kolb. According to Kolb the generation of knowledge takes place after a situation has occurred, and entails a practitioner reflecting on the experience in order to gain knowledge about the concepts encountered during the experience. The practitioner then tests the knowledge in a new situation. In such a way, the knowledge that is formed from a situation is continuously applied and reapplied, building on a practitioner's prior experiences and knowledge.

The emphasis on reflection on practice implies that the practitioner could not be performing the expected duties to perfection. In other words, reflective practice is done to unveil some problems in practicing. Some pioneers in researches on performance management Chris Argyris and Donald Schön pioneered the idea of *single loop learning* and *double loop learning* in 1978. Their theory was built around the recognition and correction of a perceived fault or error when practicing.

The single loop learning is when a practitioner has some rigidity and some attachments to the old practices. Even after an error has occurred and corrections have been made, the practitioner continues to rely on the strategies, techniques or policies one is accustomed to when a situation again comes to light (Smith, 2013). In *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies, the single loop was realised as evidenced by one of the informants who postulated;

Reflections were also done on vicarious experiences. There was stress on the proverb, 'Kugara nhaka huona dzavamwe' (Which literally is 'Inheritance procedures are informed by the earlier experiences of others').

The double loop reflective practice is an improvement of the single loop since it is accommodative of new insights. It involves the modification of objectives, strategies or policies so that when a similar situation arises, a new framing system is employed (Smith, 2013). There was realization of the double loop reflective practice in *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies. One of the informants remarked,

The elderly wise people assessed one's ingenuity in criticality by interrogating the rationality of one's decisions and actions.

According to Schon professional growth is manifested by responding to problematic situations which are *inter alia*; problem framing, problem solving and the priority of practical knowledge over abstract theory. Insights about professional growth were derived from the writings of John Dewey (Shapiro, 2010). Thus from Dewey, Schon deciphered and developed the notions of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action can be perceived as the disposition and the ability of a practitioner to "think on his or her feet", otherwise known as "felt-knowing" (Wopereis, Sloep & Poortman, 2010). Thus at any given moment, when faced with a professional challenge, the practitioner usually connects with his or her feelings, emotions and prior experiences to attend to the situation directly. One of the informants posited,

A reflective man was supposed to effectively deal with problematic situations right on the spot without delay.

Reflection-on-action encapsulates reflection-in-action and focuses on the practice that after an experience, the practitioner analyses his or her reaction to the situation and explores the reasons around, and the consequences thereof. Thorough

reflection-on-action requires the documentation of experiences since it goes beyond just looking back on experiences but explores the reasons behind actions (Wopereis, Sloep & Poortman, 2010). In *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies there was emphasis on reflection-on-action. One of the informants postulated,

Since the experiences were not documented for future references thus there was emphasis on thorough capturing of experiences for future processing of the experience.

According to Schon, professional growth really begins when the practitioner starts to view his or her experiences with a critical lens which entails doubting the effectiveness of his or her actions. Doubt brings about a way of thinking that questions and frames situations as riddled by problems. Through careful planning and systematic elimination of the problems in the experiences, doubt is settled, and the practitioner could be able to affirm his or her knowledge of the situation. In relation to reflective practice, one of the informants posited,

The reflective practice was not left to be a spontaneous development but was deliberately nurtured. The education curriculum in Unhu society emphasized on reflective practice. The educators who were the elderly sages, emphasized on reflections on the characters of the foregone legends.

Thus the learners were enabled to think reflectively about possible effective decisions and their possible outcomes. In succinct terms, reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action explain how professionals meet the challenges of their work through improved practice based on rational reflections (Davey & Ham 2010).

The renowned scholar in andragogy, Stephen Brookfield (1998) proposed that critical reflective practitioners constantly research on their assumptions by seeing practice through four complementary lenses; the lens of their autobiography as learners of reflective practice, the lens of other learners' eyes, the lens of colleagues' experiences, and the lens of theoretical, philosophical and research literature. Through reviewing practice through these lenses makes the practitioner more aware of his or her shortcomings in the sphere of practice. The consideration of the four complementary lenses thus helps the practitioner to detect hegemonic assumptions. These are the assumptions that the practitioner would think are in his or her best

practice, but would actually work against his or her efficacy in the long run. Brookfield was convinced that these four lenses have the potential to make the practitioner introspective on his or her experiences. Similarly, in *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies, reflective practice was nurtured. One of the informants remarked,

The nurturing of reflective practice was done in stages and with the aid of different media. The media for the infants were folktales and the media for the adolescents were the legends. Thus reflective practice was emphasized from a tender age.

In implementing a process of reflective practice the practitioners are enabled to be critical about their practices and transcend the parochial practices that are prescribed by existing theories in practice. Some theories of practice in the teaching-learning are power-conservative on the role of the practitioner. In light of such perceptions, Larrivee (2000) postulates that the education practitioner should avoid establishing a classroom culture of control but should be a reflective practitioner who continuously engages in critical reflections, consequently remaining fluid in the dynamic environment of the classroom. In *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies, a peaceful learning environment prevailed. One of the informants posited;

The legends that were told at puberty were the criteria for the expected actions. The learners were supposed to reflect on experiences in order to improve on their actions. Thus they were always encouraged to give the verbal reflections on the actions of the characters. The audience, including the educator were expected to be critical about the verbalised reflections and give judgements of the soundness of the reflections in a harmonious manner.

CONCLUSION

The term 'reflective practice' implies a deliberate action to critically interpret experiences. In the teaching-learning situation, the term reflective practice is complex since it incorporates a wide range of the practitioner's meta-cognitive activities. Teaching-learning situations nurture reflective practice differently according to particular socio-cultural contexts. The different approaches of nurturing reflective practice in different societies are of degree rather than kind. In both Euro-centric and Afro-centric approaches the nurturing of reflective practice is concerned with the reshaping and the understanding of past and current experiences

that lead to improvement of particular practices. The practitioners are encouraged to be engaged in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action since they can develop professional knowledge from reflections on their experiences. In *Ubuntu/Unhu* societies the nurturance of reflective practice was encouraged by the elderly sages and was considered to be the hallmark of andragogics.

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Reflective Practice: The Hallmark of Andragogics in Ubuntu/ Unhu Societies

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