Academic and life values to improve teaching–learning skills: A self-reflective action research approach

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Abstract

Open-mindedness, fairness, and responsibility are important ontological values that influence how I live and work, giving meaning and purpose to my academic life. In this article, I present major teaching–learning strategies I followed, guided by my values, to improve students’ basic study and learning skills as well as my own teaching skills. In keeping with action research methodology, my students and I kept diaries of our critical reflections throughout the process. Data sources also included transcriptions of informal chats, observations, and an open-ended questionnaire. Data were analysed thematically. The study revealed that there was no single best and/or suitable method of teaching university students. University students cannot be forced to change their learning method, especially if they feel they are progressing well in their studies using that particular method. I make a case that self-reflective action research has a vital role to play in the development of appropriate teaching and learning strategies at higher institutions of learning.

Keywords: Self-reflective Action Research; Ontological Values; Teaching–learning Methods; Reflexive Action Cycles.

Introduction

The entire education practice is determined by the manner in which the student is guided into accepting what is existentially valuable. “There is a genius in every one of us and whatever is highest on our list of values is where we awaken our genius. Our greatest potential sits there” (Demartini, 2011, pp. 3–4). My academic life is shaped by values such as open-mindedness, fairness, and responsibility. I tested my claims to knowledge against these values and opened a dialogue between my students and myself to determine whether I was living my values fully in my practice. McNiff and Whitehead (2009, p. 147) argued that “the challenge is to turn these [living values] into social practices, so that talk becomes political talk, and to explain the processes involved”. To turn my values into living values I allowed them to be questioned, modified, and changed as the study proceeded. Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 162) argued that “where this kind of critical engagement with values is not possible for personal or cultural reasons, action research is pointless”. 
According to Briggs and Coleman (2007) it is the task of action researchers to clarify their educational values so that the values can be used as a clear yardstick for measuring the success of the action. Gray (2009, p. 320) presented the argument that, in aiming to attain the focus of the research project, sometimes we need to make “our own personal values explicit, so that we can explore the relationship between these values and our own behaviour”. The Chambers-MacMillan Dictionary (1996) describes open-mindedness as willingness to accept new ideas and responsibility as acting in a sensible way. According to the Further Education and Training Institute (2010), fairness in assessment means that assessment must not in any way hinder or advantage a student. I used my values in the realisation of effective instruction in the lecture room through self-study practitioner inquiry. Samaras (2011) observed that self-study research offers teachers a new way to think about their professional accountability. I fully agree with her when she says that self-study teachers question the status quo of their teaching in order to improve and impact on the learning of their students and the education field. This is a report on the self-study research of a lecturer committed to taking action to improve practice and to create opportunities for students to improve their study and learning skills.

My educational concern

My concern is that, just as I realise the importance of teaching methods and learning skills, so I wish to know how to improve them so that I may be as effective as possible, both as lecturer-educator and as learner. I believe the answer to my concern lies in my professional values developed over a 13-year teaching career. However, I am experiencing a tension between my commitment to the values of fairness, open-mindedness, and responsibility and my actual practice. I experience tension because the values I uphold seem to be negated every time I enter my lecture room. The challenge is to turn my values into “social practices—living the values” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009, p. 147). I have to test my claims to knowledge against these values and I am a “living contradiction” if I do not live my values in my practice (Whitehead, 2010, p. 3). I experienced myself as a living contradiction after reflecting on the first observation of my teaching. My living contradiction emerged when I realised that I deny the true meaning of education by dominating lecture room proceedings.

McNiff and Whitehead (2002, p.102) observed that “we raise our deep tacit knowledge which contains our values base to an explicit surface level where we try to live our values in our practice”. The struggle is to find a way to live my values in my practice. Put in another way, my concern is that I am not contributing to the quality of teaching and learning in higher education if I do not live these values. Since I started teaching at the university, I have always been eager to learn and improve my teaching.

Research Aim

It was my intention to learn the best teaching skills I could to create opportunities for my students to develop appropriate learning and study skills that would enable them to complete their course in four years—the minimum designated timeframe. As part of my enquiry, I hoped to determine which essential teaching skills and learning methods were suitable for me at a higher institution of learning. As a beginner lecturer who started lecturing in 2009, I felt the need to revisit teaching skills learned over a period of 13 years at technical high schools and further education and training (FET) colleges.

The two concepts, teaching and learning, must be defined in order for their meaning and context in this paper to be understood. Teaching should be seen as “enabling learning” (Watkinson, 2006, p. 6). This is an important definition for educators. It means that they recognise that students have the potential to learn; their job is to unlock this potential and guide them in the process—not to dictate what must be learnt and how it should be learned, as I had been doing. The best teaching process recognises learners as partners in the whole process of teaching and learning (Watkinson, 2006). In his words, “relationships between the
learner and the teacher are important” (p. 8). He further proposed a teaching process that encouraged teachers to value the needs, strengths, and reactions of learners in order to find an appropriate match between classroom activities and the material the teacher wants learners to learn. According to Watkinson (2006), if any of these are inappropriate, “then something goes wrong” (p. 9). The teaching process should therefore find a match between the content or curriculum, the teacher, and the learners.

According to Abbott (as cited in Watkinson, 2006, p. 18), learning is that reflective activity which enables the learner to draw upon previous experience to understand and evaluate the present in order to shape future action and to formulate new knowledge. This definition of learning emphasises the idea that students should establish and maintain a reflective portfolio of learning. I find progressive education appealing as an approach to teaching and learning. It encourages teachers to live the values they fully aspire to in their teaching practice. Kohn (2008, p. 2) observed that “progressive educators don’t merely say they endorse ideas like ‘love of learning’ or ‘a sense of community’. They’re willing to put these values into practice even if doing so requires them to up-end traditions”. Principles of progressive education are normally compared with traditional education. Traditional education encourages learners to memorise endless facts and formulas from a “dreary academic curriculum remote from their own youthful interests” (Hampel, 2008, p. 1). By contrast, progressive education encourages education to be learner-centred, offering learners an opportunity to become creative. I believe that all teachers who aspire to improve their practice should adopt a progressive education approach and ask themselves this question: “How do I improve what I am doing?” (Whitehead, 2010). As Kohn (2008) contended, to the progressive teacher, learning is a process; more a journey than a destination. The real challenge lies in the incorporation of these essential teaching strategies to assist students from poor and rural schools to learn at higher education institutions (HEIs). My first-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme students were not required to write a course psychometric test to determine their level of readiness and learning skills. I was guided by the 2011 study conducted by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) at the university. The study revealed that “in direct comprehension assessments, students performed slightly better in English, while questions involving synthesis of information—combination of old and new information, were performed better in isiXhosa (primary language) especially among rural students” (CLTD, 2011, p. 2). In summary, I aimed to involve my students in their own learning by adapting my teaching practice and living my ontological values consistently.

**How do I improve my practice?**

I developed the main research question(s) by looking at my academic and professional life values. The research question that guides this paper is, “How do I improve my practice in such a way that my academic values and practice concur?”

By practice improvement, I refer to the betterment of instruction (teaching and learning at HEIs). As McNiff (2002, p. 9) contended, the question, “How do I improve my work?” contains a “social intent”. The intention is that one person improves his or her work (teaching skills) for own benefit and for the benefit of others (students’ learning skills).

**The context**

My annual class size is approximately 28 students. My university students possess the following characteristics: they are between the ages of 20 and 33 years; they have a high school certificate and/or Level 2 FET certificate; some have one semester (six months) electrical engineering coursework, and others have worked in the industry or other commercial settings. A noteworthy fact is that in classroom research the concern is more with cases than samples. As Schumacher (2007, p. 29) pointed out, “in action research, the subject of the study is often thought to be the teachers or instructors themselves—not the students”.
The students nevertheless remain the research participants. The data for the study were collected from BEd programme first-year undergraduate students.

My students registered in 2011 for the BEd, an initial four-year qualification for teachers. I am committed to creating opportunities for students to practice and learn the best teaching and learning methods they can. These methods can contribute to a transformation of education by encouraging students, upon their qualifying, to become facilitators of learning, rather than adopt the more teacher-centred methods still common in many schools today. According to the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), to prepare prospective teachers for this comprehensive role, a BEd programme should foster self-reflectivity and self-understanding among prospective teachers (Council for Higher Education, 2006).

Self-reflective action research as a strategy to conduct the study

I started by asking myself the following questions: (1) “Will the methodology that I choose assist effective change?” and (2), “Are valid data interpretations adequately assured by the methodology?” The methodology is important because it must align with what is being asked. This element of the action research design states exactly what data will be collected, how it will be collected, and how it will be analysed (Ross-Fisher, 2008). McNiff (2002) argued that the methodology of action research means that you need to check constantly that what you are doing really is working. Self-reflective action research is used by many practitioners as the basis for practice improvement. Samaras (2011) argued that self-study draws directly from teachers’ personal experience “which is situated within their classroom” (p. 10). I agree with her idea that in self-study, teachers question the status quo of their teaching in order to improve and impact on the learning of their students, and on the education field. I have always wanted to conduct research that would not only identify problematic situations, but also afford me an opportunity to “get my hands dirty”—work with research participants to solve identified problems.

Methods used to collect data

The specific techniques I used to collect data were transcriptions of recorded informal conversations, observation, and an open-ended questionnaire.

Informal conversations: I used these as open response interviews to allow students to express their experiences about my teaching strategies in their own language and thinking. A chat occurred every time I seized a chance to have an unplanned conversation with a student. This type of interview was chosen because “people will tell interviewers things in a chat they might not in a formal interview” (Briggs & Coleman, 2007, p. 211). Whenever an opportunity arose, students were asked the following questions individually:

- Today in class, did you learn anything new and interesting from the session?
- How do the new teaching and learning strategies affect you? Do you feel satisfied after the changes?

Observation: I engaged the help of a colleague to observe my teaching. Observation allowed my colleague, who I used as a critical friend, to observe my lesson inductively, that is, “without predetermined categories” Parahoo (1997, p. 330). This critical friend used a combination of audiovisual camera and field notes (observation checklists) to record anything impressive or unusual in his observations during the second phase of data collection. Samaras (2011) observed that “critical friends serve as valuators who provide feedback, help shape the research, and work as a validation team” (p. 8). Although my critical friend observed my lessons without predetermined categories, some form or degree of structure was introduced by having broad topics or items to look out for during lecture room observation. Introducing
broad topics was a way of having a clear purpose for his observation. Another reason is that lecture rooms are complex social settings and there are many things going on at once (Wilson, 2009). The aspects that he concentrated on were:

- Lesson delivery (student engagement, how I ended the lesson, etc.).
- Classroom climate (did I recognise prior knowledge, welcome student contributions, use appropriate questioning techniques, etc.).
- Teaching style (did I invite students to take part in the lesson activities? If yes, how? If not, what seemed to be the problem?).
- Overall impression (lecture room climate, questioning techniques, lesson flexibility, etc.).

Open-ended questionnaire: Gray (2009) observed that the use of a questionnaire is valid for discovering information that cannot be ascertained in any other way, or for evaluating the effect of an action research intervention. I used a questionnaire in my study solely to evaluate the impact of my teaching strategies at the end of our last reflective action cycle. I used a short open-ended questionnaire, which afforded my students the opportunity to freely express their views and experiences of the course in the past academic year. Students were asked the following questions:

- Did you feel positive as a student in this course? Explain your answer.
- Are you afraid to ask questions in public (lecture room)? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- Did the lecturer create opportunities for you to ask questions? Explain how you experienced this.
- When answering your questions, did the lecturer’s responses indicate a caring, respectful attitude? Explain.
- Do you feel that your questions and contributions were welcomed and valued? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- What was your experience of being given the opportunity to answer one another’s questions in the lecture room?
- How did the teaching–learning strategies affect you in terms of your teaching and learning methods? What did you learn about the learning and study methods in this course?
- What influence if any, did your lecturer have on you?

Data in each cycle was collected through students’ portfolios, my reflective journal, and lecture room group reflections.

Reflexive action cycle as a model for improving teaching–learning skills

I followed Zuber-Skerritt’s (1992) traditional, spiral action, research cycles model, which focuses on planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, to decide which ideas I should take forward. The aim of adapting the model was to gather data in such a way that I would be able to generate enough evidence. What I was looking for was episodes of practice to show how I had developed my own learning (and episodes where I thought my learning had influenced the learning of others). Although I treated each cycle as a “discrete experiment” (Riel, 2010, p. 5) in taking action to study change, I allowed ideas to flow from one cycle to the
next. It was easy to build a body of knowledge by letting one cycle correct the flaws of the previous cycle, and to review and evaluate the modified action in the next cycle. I generated different data sets depending on the question I asked in each cycle. To become a critically reflexive practitioner I made adjustments before the next cycle according to the feedback from students, my critical friend, and my own reflections. Diagram 1 represents the working model of my reflexive action research spiral of cycles.

**Diagram 1: The traditional spiral of action research cycles (adapted from Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p. 13)**

![Diagram 1: The traditional spiral of action research cycles](image)

In order to monitor my actions I had to develop a research question suitable for each cycle. By suitable, I mean a question showing intent to solve a problematic situation. According to collaborative studies, cycle questions are subquestions that help address the larger issue in different ways. The cycle questions were aimed at addressing this question:

- How can I adapt my teaching to encourage students to improve their learning and studying skills?

**Cycle 1**

*Study and plan:* In my plan, I worked out possible improvements to the problems I had identified, and took action to put these improvements into practice. I started with a lecture entitled, *Learning how to Learn*, that explained the meaning of learning and conditions under which learning could take place. During those first weeks of our encounter, students made it clear to me that their most popular method of learning was rote learning, that is, learning by memorising. I pointed out to them that rote learning was not encouraged at the university as a method of learning because it leads to memorising disconnected facts that are easily forgotten. My experience has taught me that students who rely on rote learning are unable to relate theory with practice. I introduced to them two methods, (1) Reading and Summarising and (2) Question and Answer, as alternatives or methods to be coupled with rote learning.

*Take action:* I reminded students about our earlier discussion of the rote learning method and explained to them that I should like us to try other learning methods. They readily accepted this suggestion. The new teaching and learning strategy was Question and Answer. The use of questions while teaching was
encouraged by Mwamwenda (2004) and by Jacobs, Vakalisa, and Gawe (2004), among others, as a technique that would promote deep learning and so I decided to try it—and link to progressive education. As Jacobs et al. (2004, p. 188) contended, “questioning is a key technique in most teaching–learning situations”. Mwamwenda (2004) proposed the following factors for effective questioning: prompting, wait time, frequency, and equitable distribution. I requested students to develop five basic questions (“Where?”, “What?”, “Why?”, “Which?”, “How?”) from a learning materials handout. In groups of four, students wrote their impressions of the lesson—in particular, of the learning methods used in the lesson and of my teaching methods. The question that guided my first cycle was:

- If I let students work in groups on a certain activity, using their own language and thinking, and developing and answering each other’s basic five questions (“Where?”, “What?”, “Why?”, “Which?”, “How?”), will they develop a questioning attitude?

In addition to students reflecting on books and, when doing assignments or preparing for a test, using a process of planning, acting, asking themselves the significance of their actions, and reflecting on the outcomes, they also had to answer the following questions as part of monitoring their learning in a student portfolio:

- Do you feel the lecturer allowed enough questions from students? Why?
- Did you learn anything new and interesting from the session?
- Did other people (co-students and lecturer) help you enough to learn? Not enough? Why not?

I prepared a reflective journal for myself in which I wrote the following three points: “What did I feel?”; “What did I discover?”; “Learning and significance”. I took these from the work of Grande (2006).

Collect and analyse data: I taught my lesson, observed by my critical friend who made notes. Some students felt that developing questions was a really difficult thing to do. They wrote, “It is difficult to develop questions. It is better if the lecturer develops the questions himself”. However, the good moment of the first action lesson was highlighted as students being free to ask questions. Students also appreciated working in groups. Group discussion contributed to students assisting one another. The next portfolio extract captures this well: “The group played an important role in solving problems. What makes it easier is the group work. Some of us understand easier when we are taught by other students”. In general, students felt that the two methods, Question and Answer and Group Discussion, should be tried again. They wrote: “At first the methods were a bit confusing”; “Try other questions like mention, list, describe etc.”; “We think that can help us ask questions”. My critical friend now plans to use this method too.

Reflecting in Cycle 1

Next came what I was thinking about in my first action lesson. My reflections were guided by what I felt and discovered, followed by learning and significance.

What did I feel? I was excited by some students who explored answers to their co-students’ questions. The session soon became a question and answer which is something that needs to be applauded.

What did I discover? I discovered that students were not happy with only using the five basic questions, “Where?”, “What?”, “Why?”, “Which?”, “How?” They used the word, vacuum, saying that I let them operate in a vacuum. I interpreted this as the reason the method was viewed as being difficult. I also
learned that I should allow other ways and methods of asking questions. Students wanted to develop questions starting with action words such as explain, describe, mention, list, evaluate, and so forth.

**Learning and significance:** The importance of learning, I think, is that in a lecture room, group discussion should be appreciated. We have learned the importance of allowing one another some space to be creative—students standing up and showcasing their various talents, developing questions, and exploring their answers. According to the above reflection, students were able to develop questions and explore answers to the questions but (1) the questioning aptitude was still lacking and (2) they were not happy with developing only the basic questions, they wanted something more—questions starting with action words such as mention, describe, list, explain, evaluate, and so forth.

**Cycle 2**

**Study and replan in another cycle:** I continued with the objective of my first action lesson in Cycle 2. The question was slightly altered to:

- If I give students the freedom to ask questions that start with action words such as mention, state, outline, evaluate, discuss, reflect, identify, and so forth, to what extent will they be able to develop and formulate their own questions with ease, and develop a questioning aptitude?

In this cycle, I planned to continue with group discussion as a teaching strategy, combined with lecturing. I taught students how to develop questions beginning with action words based on Bloom’s Taxonomy (Further Education and Training Institute, 2010). These are reproductive questions normally used to show 'reflections.'

**Take action:** In small group sessions, I facilitated students developing questions and formulating answers. I allowed them not only to develop the basic five questions but also to begin their questions with action words such as describe, mention, explain, and discuss.

I gave them charts on which to write their impressions of the lesson, requesting them to choose a group representative to present their impressions to the entire group. I invited my colleague to conduct the second lecture room observation.

**Figure 1: Students during group work, July 2011. Photograph, Paul Mokhele**
Figure 1 shows students interacting with one another and discussing solutions. It also shows how committed and dedicated they were to their work. Here I attempted to live out my value of responsibility by allowing students to work together in searching for, and gathering, new information.

**Collect and analyse data:** To elicit appropriate questions from students, I decided to practice the following caring responses: “Perhaps you feel...”, “It sounds as though...”, “You feel... because...”, “It seems as though you are saying...”. This made it easier for my students to accept my reactions to their questions and concerns. Hence, my data was categorised according to the following criteria, followed by my critical friend recording his impressions of the lesson:

- Critically look at my responses (instances where I showed respect, sensitiveness).
- In posing the questions, am I patient or impatient—was I successful in allowing students to answer one another’s questions?

Examine the overall impression (lecture room climate, questioning techniques, lesson flexibility, and so forth).

Students did not like the idea of me developing questions involving re-direction. I think I am to blame. Some even went to the extent of questioning my strategy of not answering some questions directly. They reflected: “He takes time to answer our questions”; “Why is he ignoring our questions?”; “Our lecturer answers questions after we have answered them ourselves”. This was also observed by my critical friend: “The lecturer needed the views of students’ classmates before he could respond”. I redirected too many of their questions; I did not explain to them my strategy of pausing after each question. However, they appreciated being given a chance to develop questions starting with action words.

Reflecting in Cycle 2

My reflections were guided by the following three points:

What did I feel? I was overwhelmed by joy at seeing students develop so many questions. At that moment I was satisfied that my action was bearing fruit—students were beginning to get used to the idea of going through the study materials, developing and exploring questions and answers.

What did I discover? Students were really excited by working in groups and developing questions. They got tired of walking into a lecture room every day to find the lecturer ready to deliver another stand-in-front lecture, ignoring what students feel and think about the lesson. I need to work on my strategy of redirecting questions. Some demanded to see the necessity of the Question and Answer method. They requested to be tested with those questions they developed. We agreed that for our assessment to be fair I should keep a record of our developed questions and use 60% of them in the tests and assignments.

Learning and significance: The significance to learning is that questions form part of school assessment and therefore the skill of asking questions should be developed as early as the first year of study. By students being involved in their learning, they created a dialogue where they exchanged ideas. I value students working together—it gives a sense of belonging; it leaves students with a feeling of comfort in a strange (the university) environment. Kohn (2008, p. 1) discovered that “children learn with and from one another in a caring community, and that’s true of moral as well as academic learning”. I have learned this important lesson with regard to redirecting students’ questions: do not overdo it. Adult students can become suspicious that you do not know the answer or that you are rude. In the next action lesson, I guarded...
against that by reducing time taken to pause, and by not redirecting too many questions. I was also
criticised for denying them an opportunity to develop questions that start with action words such as: draw,
evaluate, mention, explain, and so forth. I welcomed the criticism with an open mind. In short, I can say I
lived my value of open-mindedness in my practice.

Cycle 3

Study and plan: Being able to develop questions and explore their answers required students to be able to
read intuitively and write a summary as they go through the tutorial learning materials. These skills are a
prerequisite for young and aspiring student teachers hoping to become better teachers. I therefore
planned to introduce another method I called Reading and Summarising. The reflexive cycle question was:

- If I teach students how to read and summarise study materials will they be able to read
  intuitively and develop questions and answers in much improved ways?

The following questions assisted me in trying to achieve the objective of my action lesson: “How was the
lesson?”; “Describe the likes and dislikes about the lesson.”; “Do you think we should try this method
again? If yes, why yes? If not, why not?” I gave these to students to use when reflecting on the action
lesson. I wanted students to tell me if the introduction of the method influenced their learning in a
significant way—if it complemented the Question and Answer method.

Take action: I handed out prepared tutorial learning material to students. I led them through it by showing
them how to search and highlight important concepts. Here, I directed students to the known piece of
information. We summarised the important points of each paragraph in a few words. The learning strategy
was Reading and Summarising and the teaching methods used were lecturing and group discussion.

Collect and analyse data: Data in this cycle was collected through students’ learning portfolios, my
reflective journal, and lecture room group reflections.

Some students wished to leave our research study—feeling that it was a waste of time. This was after I
picked an example from a different study material when introducing Reading and Summarising as a learning
strategy. They viewed the move as shuffling of chapters. With regard to time wasting, they wrote, “We are
rereading and translating to mother tongue”. This was a sad moment, not only of my action lesson but also
of my research study. The reaction from my colleague was not what I had expected: “Your study is
qualitative in nature don’t worry about who wants to leave, huge samples do not count. In every research
we experience attrition”.

Reflecting in Cycle 3

My reflection was well captured by the points I used to guide my thoughts.

What did I feel? I felt happy combining the two study methods, Question and Answer and Reading and
Summarising. It was fair to give students a choice.

What did I discover? Some students were not happy. At first I thought this was a group of students who
wanted me teach what they thought was in the syllabus. They felt that with so many academic disruptions
experienced by the university, chances were we might not finish the syllabus. I also realised that some
students wanted to be left out of the research study. I needed to pause and revisit the aim of involving the
entire population. Revisiting meant discussing the ethical issues with students, and setting aside a day and time for students who were willing to remain and see out the end of the research study.

Learning and significance: Students wanted to know how far we were in terms of the syllabus; they needed the assurance that we would complete the remaining course material. The university had experienced academic disruptions on numerous occasions. We arranged an extra day on which to continue with our research study, Learning how to Learn. I was surprised when all my students arrived on our appointed day. I had misjudged the whole situation in my reflections when I thought some students wanted to be left out of our project. The significance to learning is that students desire a greater cooperation between themselves and the lecturer. I fell short on this one. In the next cycle, I applied the method, Reading and Summarising, to a series of presentations by the students.

Cycle 4

Study and plan: My plan involved affording students the opportunity to present lessons on various subtopics from the remaining scope of course work. I wanted to put their different questioning skills into practice by allowing them to prepare short lessons to present so they could ask one another questions. The reflexive cycle question was:

- If, after introducing the major topic, I step back in my lessons by giving students subtopics to prepare and present in the next action lesson(s), will they be able not only ask and answer questions from the presenters (co-students), but (1) develop teaching and learning skills and (2) take interest and initiative in leading lecture room discussions?

When students lead lecture room discussions, the lecturer’s role becomes more that of a facilitator.

Take action: In this cycle, I used presentation as a learning strategy for my students. My teaching strategy was more of a mentoring role where I guided students on how to write on the board, how to control and maintain order in the lecture room, and how to lead lecture room discussions. I introduced the major topic and allowed students to lead discussions by presenting subtopics. Once again, I showed them how to develop questions and to summarise main ideas in tutorial materials. Students wrote their impressions about the lesson in their individual learning portfolios. I also kept my reflective journal.

Collect and analyse data: The cycle data was collected using students’ and my reflective journals. I watched my critical friend’s video recordings of the sessions, searching for instances where students showed a level of readiness with regard to developing an individual teaching style, and confidence when asking questions; such students can lead lecture room discussions.

Students prepared themselves well for their lesson presentations. Lesson plans were well written; drawings were clear; questions ready for co-students. They felt that lesson presentation prepared them for the real life school situation. The following extract captures this well: “It gives us an idea of what we are going to do in the teaching field”.

After watching the video clip of their presentations, there was no need to plan another action lesson. I had reached “theoretical saturation” (Wilson, 2009, p.224). According to Wilson, this is the point where no further data collection is needed because all new data fit into the model without having to make any more adjustments. Here are my journal reflections after the lesson presentations:
Reflecting in Cycle 4

What did I feel? It is okay to allow students to present the lessons to test their content knowledge. It is okay because it gives students an opportunity to develop an individual teaching style.

What did I discover? I discovered that students really enjoy presenting to their co-students. They prepared well. My students’ excitement led to some of them not adhering to the stipulated time. The group behaved well by giving each other chance to present, and showed respect to each other. This was a sign that they were ready to lead lecture room discussions. I also realised that some students needed some presentation skills. However, the majority of them showed confidence—they demanded questions from their co-students at the end of a lesson presentation. I think, because they were beginning to realise the importance of questioning.

Learning and significance: One of the lessons I learned from being a facilitator a few years ago, was to allow my student teachers to learn from experience by encouraging student presentations and reflection. As a staff-development facilitator, I would sit back and allow participants to learn from each other and to raise questions that help learning take place. I thought I could try this technique with my university students. I did, and it worked well. The significance of the learning is that university students, regardless of the career course, must be given an opportunity to get their hands dirty—experience the practical working situation. It was fair to score students’ presentations, and I recorded these scores and later used them for assessment.

My criteria and standards of judgement

The criteria I used to judge the success of my performance are my statements of intention I used to direct my practice. As Whitehead and McNiff (2006) contended, criteria take the form of words and phrases that are used as markers of performance. The following are the criteria with which I judged my performance:

- I allowed students to lead the discussions (student-centred).
- I made the lesson (instruction) a two-way process (active engagement).
- Students could develop and respond to questions (questioning aptitude).

I created space for my students to learn (process-oriented).

My criteria are focused on teaching–learning encounters between a lecturer and students at a higher institution of learning. However, my criteria generally said little about the quality of the practice. I therefore needed to make judgements about the quality of my practice.

Standards of judgement

I have indicated that my ontological values are my standards of judgement. I used my ontological values of fairness, open-mindedness, and responsibility as standards of judgement to test the validity of my claims to have influenced the learning of my students in a significant way, and improved my practice. My standards of judgement are based on what I consider to be good. I judged the worth of my action in the feedback I got from students and its relation to my standards of judgement. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) argued that standards of judgement enable us to make value judgements from a reasoned position. My standards were:
- To show fairness in my assessments.
- To value students’ responsibility for their own learning.
- To allow myself to be criticised with an open mind—my practice questioned.

I linked my criteria with my values to help me make judgements about whether the situation had improved. I used my values as practical principles to explain the reason for my doing what I had done, that is, I showed the meanings of these values as they were clarified in the course of their emergence in the practice. I can only evaluate the quality of my influence on the learning of others and in the learning of social formations by checking how others respond to me (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

**Concluding thoughts**

I write my concluding thoughts as the issues and lessons I learned throughout my reflexive journey and from data analysis. These kinds of lessons could inform and refine improvements towards effective teaching strategies at HEIs.

I bring my lived experiences in relation to my life and academic values as standards of judgement about the claims I make about my practice. I agree with McNiff (2002, p. 6) when she said that “because these standards are part of the lived realities of people’s lives, they become living critical standards of judgement”. In having researched my practice, I am now able to make connections between my practice and progressive education.

**Important lessons**

One of the first things that struck me was that students do not want to be taught content. Hence, I conclude with this friendly suggestion: do not teach students—facilitate for them to learn and/or improve their acquired practical skills. Involving students in their own learning and assessment raised their level of confidence. I did not assert my superiority; instead, I openly welcomed ideas and concerns from my students. Give students an opportunity to be involved in their own education by allowing them to choose what they want to learn and how to learn it. I agree with Van de Venter and Kruger (2003) that a positive lecture room climate manifests itself in listening, openness, critical questioning, and a feeling of being cared for. Our point of departure should be to involve students as partners in their learning.

A questioning attitude can enable students to link new concepts and ideas to existing personal experience. This view also accepts that our educational knowledge will change as we engage with students’, and colleagues’, ideas on the best teaching–learning practices at HEIs. Students can voice their own opinions about issues that affect their learning in a democratic lecture room climate. The best teaching–learning practice is the one developed and agreed upon between the lecturer-educator and his or her students. Be flexible; be mindful of diversity.

Students learn best in a community of caring. I interacted with my students and the lecture content amid the fear raised by Steinert (1999) that undergraduate students, because of their limited knowledge, cannot participate in an interactive lecture. I was open-minded about new ways of communicating with, and teaching, adult students; a combination of strategies—for one strategy can never be enough to strengthen students’ learning. Students learn best when new concepts are explained by fellow students. Learning cannot take place until a student is able to communicate verbally what has been learned. I encouraged this by allowing my students to explain what they had learned to one another. Communicating verbally what has been learned can stimulate the brain to process and store the new content into the long-term memory.
University students always seek to learn content knowledge that will help them when they enter the world of work. I agree with White (2005), after selecting poor examples when introducing Reading and Summarising as a teaching method, that adult students want their education to be relevant to their jobs and lives. Also, students cannot be forced to change their learning method, especially if they feel they are progressing well in their studies using that particular method. We must ensure that tutorial materials used, and teaching strategies employed, will influence appropriate learning skills and study habits. Students have their unique styles of learning; implementing various learning styles affords students an opportunity to find a style that matches their own. My value of responsibility (inviting students to be responsible for their own learning) was not a favourite among some of my students who were used to relying on their teachers for knowledge. As a result, they demonstrated their own values. I am referring here to values such as respect, compassion, helping others, and listening, which were demonstrated by my students. The crux of the matter is that no matter how wonderful our values are, there is always another side—other people may not necessarily agree with our values in that particular context. This is my next inevitable step: to determine what is most valuable to my students and use this to equip them with suitable learning and study skills.

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