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Critical reflection as an essential part of developing higher education teachers to be future-ready – *Why* and *how*?

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Abstract

Awareness about the benefits of critical reflection to support the development of university teachers is growing in the higher education field. This paper explains how critical reflection is enacted within the academic development program in one Danish university. This is done through a structured process of observations, focused dialogue among colleagues, and narrative reflections. In order to gauge the success of the program, narrative reflections were assessed using a rubric to evaluate the teachers' reflective processes. This aimed to give some indications of whether the program enhanced teachers' ability to critically reflect on their practice. Evaluations of the teachers' narrative reflections show that while some aspects of critical reflection were evident, teachers' approaches to testing the accuracy and validity of their assumptions could be expanded and enhanced.

1   Introduction

This paper focuses on *why* critical reflection is essential to developing future-ready higher education teachers, and *how* this is enacted through an academic development program at Roskilde University in Denmark. The aim of critical reflection is for teachers to see new perspectives on their practice based on the hypothesis that this will lead to a more profound understanding of how their teaching practices affect student learning. The question I will address in this paper is how and if we are enhancing ability and developing capability in terms of doing critical reflection *consciously* and explicitly for the purpose of improving teaching practice and fostering learning.

The academic development program, known as *Collegial Intervision* (CI), is an "in situ" teacher development process. Through Peer observation of Teaching (PoT) and critically reflective sessions, the teachers learn to identify and challenge the ideas and perspectives they have on their own teaching practice. In particular, they are encouraged to be curious about whether their espoused action is aligned with their enacted action. In this way, the critically reflective session allows teachers to get alternative perspectives on their teaching practice.

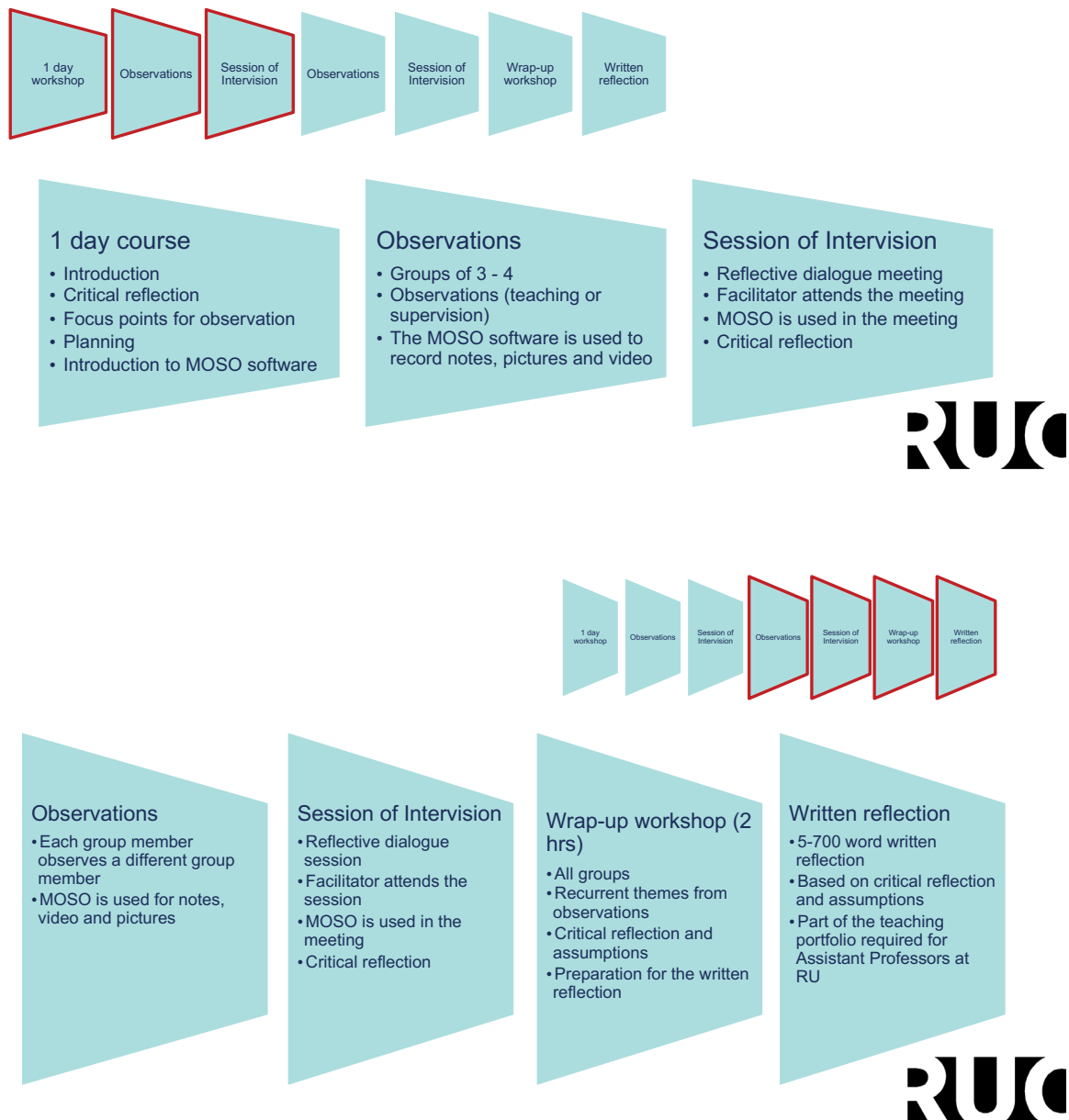## *2   The CI program*

2.1   Presentation of the program

In the CI program equal peers conduct a shared exploration of practice based on observation**.** The method is based on observation of teaching and reflective dialogue among peers with the purpose of developing and improving their teaching and/or supervision through interaction and collective introspection. The intervision dialogue is anchored in the

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specific observations on the observed teacher's pre-chosen focal points. In the dialogue, the teachers activate and challenge their knowledge base and meta-reflect on their own teaching practices. This method develops both the individual teacher's practice as well as the community of practice. The method is inspired by several educational philosophers and learning theorists, including Schön's (1983, 1987) concepts of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. At Roskilde University (RU) this approach to teaching staff development is enacted through the following elements:

Collegial Intervision (CI) process elements

1 day workshop | Observations | Session of Intervision | Observations | Session of Intervision | Wrap-up workshop | Written reflection

1 day course
• Introduction
• Critical reflection
• Focus points for observation
• Planning
• Introduction to MOSO software

Observations
• Groups of 3 - 4
• Observations (teaching or supervision)
• The MOSO software is used to record notes, pictures and video

Session of Intervision
• Reflective dialogue meeting
• Facilitator attends the meeting
• MOSO is used in the meeting
• Critical reflection

RUC

1 day workshop | Observations | Session of Intervision | Observations | Session of Intervision | Wrap-up workshop | Written reflection

Observations
• Each group member observes a different group member
• MOSO is used for notes, video and pictures

Session of Intervision
• Reflective dialogue session
• Facilitator attends the session
• MOSO is used in the meeting
• Critical reflection

Wrap-up workshop (2 hrs)
• All groups
• Recurrent themes from observations
• Critical reflection and assumptions
• Preparation for the written reflection

Written reflection
• 5-700 word written reflection
• Based on critical reflection and assumptions
• Part of the teaching portfolio required for Assistant Professors at RU

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2.2   *Critical reflection*

One of the fundamental parts of the program is the process of critical reflection as a way for the teachers to get new perspectives on their practice. Reflection has been defined as thinking about one's practice and beginning to see it in new ways (McAlpine, 1999:106). In

the 1980s Schön (1983, 1987) suggested its important role for professionals in coming to understand and improve professional practice. Reflection can be imagined as an ongoing conversation between present action, past experience, and intentions for the future (McAlpine, 1999:106). In the program we work with Brookfield's (2017) definition of critical reflection as "the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions" (Brookfield, 2017:3). Brookfield emphasises identifying underlying teaching assumptions, which are hidden beliefs about how best to help students learn. When teachers are critically reflective, they check if their practice, which derives from their assumptions, achieves their intended learning goals. This means teachers first need to identify their assumptions and secondly reflect on student learning. This allows them to identify whether their assumptions are valid in their daily practice as teachers.

While theories about critical reflection aim to support astute professional transformation, enacting it in practice is more difficult than imagined. Our approach to this challenge has been to (i) introduce software to support the observations (MOSO) and (ii) initiate a process of written narrative reflections for staff. This was complemented with the development of a rubric to assess teachers' narrative reflections and give them feedback (see Appendix 1). In order to evaluate the level of criticality demonstrated in the teachers' written reflections, the rubric is based on Mezirow's (1991) three levels of reflection: content, process, and premise, and Brookfield's (2017) understanding of hunting assumptions.

2.3   Teacher's narrative reflections

Based on the observation and the reflective dialogue sessions the teachers write narrative reflections (700–1000 words). In the narrative reflections the teachers articulate what they have learned in the CI, both from being observed and from being the observer. The instructions for the narrative reflections are guided by Brookfield's work with assumptions, with the questions in Box 1.

Box 1: **Guiding questions for the narrative reflections**

- Decide on some examples from your teaching or supervision that led you to reflecting on your practice and describe them
- What hidden assumptions, beliefs or values have you identified about your practice, for example from the examples you described?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of your assumptions, beliefs and values for your students? (ask questions about the assumptions, look at as many angles as possible, analyse them for their effect on us and on others).
- Have you come to see your practice from new angles, new understanding of teaching, the teacher's role and/or students over the time of the CI seminar?
- Look at your teaching through a student lens and/ or reflect on evaluations from students (if you have them). What do you see?
- What areas for improvement have you identified that you will like to develop going forward?

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3   Analysis and discussion

In this analysis of 11 teachers' narrative reflections from the program in spring 2019, I focus on whether or not the teachers critically reflect on the impact of their assumptions on student learning. This aim is to assess both the usefulness of narrative reflections to support teachers' critical thinking on practice and how the CI program supports the teachers' critical reflection. All narrative reflections were evaluated using the reflection rubric. Two aspects are discussed here:

2) Explain why (providing reasoning behind beliefs and actions, justifying choices) = identify assumptions, thoughts and values and discuss if these are "good" for your teaching

6) Reflections on the learning for the students. Looking at your teaching through a student lens and/or reflect on evaluations from students (if you have them) and WHY.

In relation to the criteria on identifying assumptions, all 11 teachers demonstrated the identification of assumptions in their narrative reflections. For example, Teacher 11 noted:

> *How can I support student participation and learning? I myself have an assumption that the "good" supervisor can explain everything, which I also experience as an expectation from students. As a relatively new supervisor … [when things become uncertain I can see that] I fall back on trying to "please" students by stepping into an expert position. In those situations, I can take a learning opportunity from them by giving an answer before they get the chance to think for themselves. In the future, I can pose questions that will be a reflection point for students and eventually I will tell them that I will not answer their questions in the first place because I would like them to practice thinking.* (Teacher 11, translated from Danish)

This teacher identifies a current assumption, reflects on its impacts in her current practice, and imagines a possible new practice. Here, the teacher practices testing the validity of her assumptions. In this way, she demonstrates critical reflection on practice.

Narrative reflections showed that nine of the 11 teachers demonstrated the criteria of reflecting on student learning from their own perspective. For example:

> *The same lecture also made me start thinking more systematically about how to check during a lecture to what extent students follow the arguments. The classic "do you have any questions?" is often inadequate. For instance students may be so "lost" that they do not even know what to ask about.* (Teacher 8)

> *But the most interesting part of the process has been being asked questions that I didn't expect … one of these "hard questions" – which I am still thinking about and probably will continue to think about … was "what is it we have to accomplish? What end goal is it we are trying to achieve with a lecture?"* (Teacher 7)

Although teachers thought about student learning, not one of the participants asked *students* specifically for feedback related to the identified assumptions in order to further check the validity of their interpretations. However, in one CI discussion group, they were able to identify and reflect on this, considering possibilities for future practice:

> *Finally, someone [in the group] came up with the idea of ending a lecture with an exercise asking [student] participants about what they had learned and what was not so clear for them. This is something I will try out in the coming semester.* (Teacher 8)

The reflections imply that the value of student feedback on teaching is an area that needs more attention in the CI program.

4   Conclusion

We asked how and whether we are enhancing ability and developing capability in terms of doing critical reflection *consciously* and explicitly for the purpose of improving teaching practice and fostering learning. Analysing the narrative reflections from the spring 2019 cohort shows that while all the teachers have shown the ability to critically reflect by identifying their assumptions, not all demonstrated checks for the accuracy and validity of their teaching assumptions. This needs to be further addressed and developed in future iterations of the program.

References

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Appendix 1: Rubric for assessing critical reflection in narrative reflections (June 2020)

Criteria for critical reflection / Reflection level	1. Description of situations (who, what, where, how)	2. Identify assumptions, for example, ideas, thoughts and values and discuss if these are "good" for your teaching practice. Explain the why (provide reasoning behind beliefs and actions, justify choices). Are your beliefs and practices aligned?	3. Challenge beliefs (ask questions about the assumptions, look at as many angles as possible, analyze them for their effect on us and on others). Open up to new perspectives (Brookfield, 2017:75).	4. Possible changes (if any) in beliefs, ideas, assumptions or values – transformation, new action, reflection of new beliefs	5. Ideas for specific future changes in action ("nuts and bolts")	6. Reflections on learning for the students. Look at your teaching through a student lens and reflect on feedback from students.
Content reflection: Reflection that principally draws on existing knowledge – "What is the ('content' of the) problem and what do I presently know about how to solve it?" Content reflection shares similarities with McAlpine et al.'s (2004) "drawing on existing knowledge".						
Process reflection: Reflection that questions knowledge. Process reflection is focused on the effectiveness of the strategy chosen to solve the problem. Here we ask "How effective am I with solving the problem?" The goal is to find out whether what we do works by seeking some form of "evidence".						
Premise reflection: Reflection which leads to a construction of new knowledge. Question the core beliefs on which the definition of our problem was based and ask "Why is it that I choose to attend to this problem – is there an alternative?" Researching one's own ideas, thoughts, assumptions and values. "Like nailing jelly to a tree"						

Derived from Brookfield (2017), Mezirow (1991) and McAlpine (2004)