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Doing Reflective Arts Education Practice: My Experience in Supporting and Assessing Learning in Drama through the Lens of UK Professional Standards Framework

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Abstract

Being an effective arts educator requires continued reflective practice. In this article I discuss how I made effort to improve my arts education practice by reflecting on the teaching and learning situation, the teaching methods and the significance of feedback in shaping the learning process. My reflection is based on my experiences as an arts educator while serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Drama at the University of Exeter. The discussion is grounded in the theory underpinning teaching and learning and the UK Professional Standards Framework.

1.0 Introduction

This essay is a conscious critical reflection on my role as a facilitator of learning in higher education. In September 2011, the College of Humanities at the University of Exeter contracted me as Graduate Teaching Assistant in the department of Drama. I was part of the

team of four tutors who were to facilitate weekly seminars on one of the module. This model is a highly theoretical engagement and it aimed at introducing students to a selection of modern and contemporary theatrical artists and forms. As students engaged with the course, they were supposed to become aware of interweaving strands of questioning and conceptual development as they considered the different ways in which practitioners have imagined, theorised and practiced the relationship between theatre and audience, theatre and the real, theatre and presence, theatre and politics among others. Given this background, the module impressed upon the teaching team to foster research led education one of the core values promoted in higher education in the United Kingdom. The learners were supposed to engage in their own research so that they could understand the conceptual and theoretical relationship between one practitioner and another and other aspects of the module such as theatre and politics and theatre and presence among others.

As a graduate teaching assistant, I implemented the curriculum that had been planned and designed by a senior academic member of staff hereafter referred to as the course convener. Consequently, I was not involved in module design and planning. But as Morss and Murray have commented on the role of post graduate students involved in supporting learning, 'even if you are told what to do and have materials and a teaching schedule organised for you, you will have decisions to make' (Morss & Murray, 2005:10). Morss and Murray's assertion practically applied to me. In my role as a facilitator of seminars, I was often challenged with the need to plan my own sessions and motivate student learning. In this reflective fort polio, I reflect on both the general module design and plan as laid down by the course convener and my own decisions and plans. My reflection is informed by existing research on how students learn which I delineate in the subsequent section.

2.0 Theoretical underpinnings of Student Learning

This section is vital in this reflection for two reasons. First, according the UK professional standards framework, one of the core knowledge areas expected of a postgraduate student supporting learning in higher education is to demonstrate knowledge of 'how students learn, both generally and in the subject'. Second, John Biggs and Catherine Tang have argued that 'in reflecting on our teaching decisions, we need a theory' (2007:21). Consequently, the effective way of reflecting on my role as a facilitator of learning in higher education requires a backdrop of knowledge in the theory underpinning the nature and processes of learning. In this section 1 excavate the concepts and theories relating to how students learn which later on

guide my reflection. Delving into theory in order to do reflection is consistent with Biggs and Tang's advice that 'teachers need to do transformative reflection where they use theory to enable them transform from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be' (ibid, p.43).

There are a number of inter- related schools of thought explaining how students learn. These include the experimental learning theory, social learning theory, the behaviourist school, the cognitive view and constructivist view of learning. I have used the word inter-related to articulate the fact that all these theories echo the centrality of the learner in the process of learning. The experimental learning theory propounded by Kolb (1984) espouses the experiential learning cycle, a model of learning that incorporates four stages namely, doing, reflecting, reasoning and planning (cited in Morss & Murray, 2005:12). According to Heather Fry et al, experiential learning is based on the assumption that experience gained throughout, life, and work should play a central role in learning 2009:15). Morss and Murray assert that 'Kolb's experiential learning model is one useful way of understanding what genuine learning involves-that we have to engage actively to do a task to try out, to practice, to think retrospectively about what we have done, to form theories or postulates why we got the result we did and to plan again'(2005;13).

The behaviourist school takes as its starting point that 'learning happens through stimulus response and reward. The stimulus is referred to as an input and the learned behaviour as output' (Race, 2007:02). The cognitive view of learning focuses on perception, memory and concept formation and on the development of peoples' ability to demonstrate their understanding of what they have learnt by solving problems (ibid, p.02). Constructivism is the process of building up knowledge by connecting new information with what students already know and informing concepts that are models of reality (Biggs, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Indeed Ausubel in 1968 had argued that, 'the most single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly' (1968: 127). Augmenting on constructivist's view of learning, Morss and Murray argue that 'as new knowledge and experiences are assimilated, knowledge structures grow and are modified' (2005:14). The constructivist view is underpinned by the assumption that 'because we all have different knowledge bases with discrete connections between those knowledge elements each of us has to scaffold our own learning for ourselves. For this to happen, we have to take an active role in our learning' (ibid, p.14).

From the above excavation of literature related to learning theories, one realises that placing the learner at the centre of learning is one of the issues that has for long pervaded pedagogical debates. I would like to argue that the theories I have highlighted above apply to all the disciplines across the curriculum namely the physical sciences, the natural sciences and the humanities. Most of the concepts students learn in the various disciplines are naturally grounded in human experience and knowledge. For example a student learning floatation of objects in physics will have in his/her life time seen some objects float when placed in water while others sink. From this basic knowledge, the student will build a great knowledge base and use it in relevant applications such as ship engineering. For us in the performing arts and drama in particular, the theories above apply to us more particularly. Taking the example of stage acting and play directing, most of the roles performers enact on stage are drawn from real life situations and experiences. This is the foundation of the naturalistic acting school of thought which draws experiential resources such as the imagination or the 'magic if,' observation and concentration and emotional recall among others. An actor learning a role that requires him/her to shed tears will easily master the role if he/she remembers an experience in life that caused him/her to cry. Consequently, learning acting would draw so much on the performer's life experience, hence the importance of the experiential learning theory and constructivism.

Besides, pedagogical theory has conceptualised teaching and learning process in terms of levels. For example Biggs and Tang delineate three levels of teaching and learning which give rise to the 'blame models of teaching and learning' and the 'integrated learning and teaching model'(2007:16-19). Level 1 teaching focuses on what the student is, assuming that there are good students and poor students. In Level 1, teachers see their responsibility as knowing the content well and expounding it clearly. There after it's up to the students to attend lectures, listen carefully to take notes, to read the recommended readings… Level 1 teaching is about transmitting information, usually by lecturing. So differences in learning are due to differences between student in ability, motivation and what kind of school they went to… (Biggs and Tang 2007:16). Level 1 is also called 'blame the student model'. Level 2 of teaching focuses on what the teacher does. This view of teaching is still based on transmission but transmitting concepts and understanding not just information. The responsibility of putting it across rests to a significant extent on what the teacher does…. Learning is seen as more a function of what the teacher is doing than what the student is doing (ibid, p.17). This level of learning and teaching is also called the 'blame the teacher

model'. Level 3 focuses on what the student does and how that relates to teaching and learning. Level three of teaching is a student centred model with teaching supporting learning and is also called the integrated teaching and learning model (ibid, p. 19). Level 3 teaching is based on the belief that 'teaching is not a matter of transmitting, but engaging students in active learning, building the knowledge in terms of what they already understand' (Biggs and Tang, 2007:21). This is the level of teaching and learning desired in experiential learning and constructivism.

Related to the above theories and concepts is one of the most outstanding pedagogical thought I have encountered in educational literature which is the concept of constructive alignment proposed by Biggs (2003). Constructive alignment is the deliberate linking with in curricula of the aims, learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities and assessment (Morss and Murray 2005:20). The approach arose out of two key principles;

> 1. Learning and teaching should be learner centred; because individual learners must construct their own learning given that it is what the learners do that is most important.2. Aims and learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities and assessment must be aligned so that learners know what is to be achieved, how they will engage in the activities which will help them achieve those outcomes and how they will demonstrate they have done so (ibid, p.20).

A number of educational researchers such as Marton et-al (1997), Entwistle and Ramsden ((1983), Morss and Murray (2005) have concluded that students have different approaches to study and that their intentions determine how they engage with set learning tasks. This constitutes another key debate in teaching and learning in higher education. Morss and Murray highlight three approaches to student learning namely; surface learning, deep learning and strategic learning (2005:16). For this essay, let me explore in more detail the surface and deep approaches. Students who take a surface approach to learning simply memorise facts, reproduce information and often fail to make connections between related ideas. Such students make no distinction between new ideas and existing knowledge and tend to treat the subject as externally as possible (Fry et al 2009:11). In contrast, students who take a deep approach to learning attempt to link ideas examining the logic of the arguments and usually check for evidence in the process of learning. Fry et al aptly put it that:

> The deep approach to learning is typified by an intention to understand and seek meaning, leading students to attempt to relate concepts to existing knowledge and each other, to distinguish between new ideas and existing knowledge and to critically evaluate and determine key themes and concepts (ibid p.11).

It is vital to note that of the three approaches to learning highlighted above, the deep approach is the most desirable approach to student learning especially in higher education settings. Since the purpose of teaching and learning in all disciplines on the higher education curriculum is to empower students with skills and competencies which they will need in their careers, it is pertinent that they get deeply engaged in their training. This is because by making attempt at linking ideas, examining the logic of arguments and checking for evidence, students enhance their understanding of the subject which is the very essence of learning. This implies that in facilitating student learning, teachers should design the necessary strategies to foster deep learning among the learners. This requires an appreciation by the teacher of the causes of surface learning. According to Ramsden surface learning will be encouraged and re-enforced by assessments which focus on recalling large amounts of material, low levels of application or relevancy of the material, lack of background and limited independences or choice in study. Deep approaches to learning are stimulated by challenging assessments, teaching which stresses relevance to students, opportunities for choice, interest and background to the subject matter and explicit, clearly stated academic expectations. (Ramsden 2003, cited in Morss and Murray 2005:17). Biggs and Tang (2007) note that, surface approach to learning arises from an intention to get the task out of the way with minimum trouble, while appearing to meet course requirements.

The excavation of the above theories on student learning raises two key questions which are at the heart of this reflective portfolio. They include: where these vital theories and concepts on student learning adhered to in my work as a facilitator of learning and the teaching processes of the module? Were my decisions and plans guided by these theories? The sections below address the questions.

3.0 Reflecting on the Teaching Methods and Processes

Knowledge of appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme is one of the core knowledge areas promoted by the UK Professional Standards Framework. By discussing the teaching methods that were employed on the module, I make attempt to reflect on whether I adhered to this demand. The teaching methods that were used in this module included the lecture method, student group presentations, e-learning and one to one tutorials. Let me reflect on the efficacy of these methods in facilitating learning on the module beginning with the lecture method.

3.1 The Lecture Method

The lecture method was used by the course convener during a weekly one hour lecture session during which she would present about the chosen theoretical artists. As a graduate teaching Assistant who was also new to the UK higher education system, I attended all the lectures in order to acquaint myself with the system and the processes of learning at the University of Exeter. The lecture method was largely a presentation of information in a predominantly one direction: the ideas, information and arguments were conveyed from the lecturer to the students. The lecturer was the expert who selected and shaped ideas and information and then presented them to the students. By the very nature of the method, it was teacher centred and not learner centred. In terms of the level of teaching and learning already highlighted in this portfolio, the method operated at level two of teaching emphasizing what the lecturer does. Educational literature has abhorred this method asserting that telling students about facts and ideas in science or humanities is not in itself correct. It is simply that it is only one part of the teaching and not it's most important part (Ramsden, 2003:18). In additional, educational literature has emphasised that what students do, not what teachers do is what really matters (ibid, p.10).

In spite of the weaknesses inherent in the lecture method hinted above, I found the use of the lecture method quite useful in this module. The method was helpful in providing background information on the various topics of the module which would be the beginning of student driven activities in the process of taking control of their own learning. I argue that though learning is most active when students are empowered to take a centre stage in their own learning, student learning activity may not be set in a vacuum. It has to be based on background information which may often be provided through the lecture method. Providing background information to the subject matter is one of the ways of encouraging the much desired deep approaches to learning among the students (Ramsden 2003, cited in Morss and Murray 2005:17). This deep approach to learning which in my view would be triggered by the background information provided through the lecture method would be nourished when students were challenged to prepared group presentations about the theatrical practitioners. The point to make here is that lecturing is just one approach and it has its place but we cannot rely on lecturing alone. When teaching groups of students, we can never be sure that 'deep learning' will be 'triggered' by a lecture or any other form of learning, for that matter. This is why it is so important to use a variety of teaching methods and modes of assessment, to

maximise the chances of us as teachers tapping into different students' inherent motivations to learn.

However, my own criticism of the lecture method is about how the lecturer employed it. The amount of the material given to students during the one hour lecture in my view was often too much for students to take in. In addition to being excessive, many a time the material lacked a coherent and logical flow, yet the students thereafter were required to prepared and deliver coherent presentations. Ramsden has advised that 'as we begin to learn about teaching, an important start point is to think about your experience as a learner' (2003:12). Linking my experience to Ramsden's assertion, I found it difficult to concentrate up to the end of the lecture because of lack of a coherent flow in the presentation of the lecture. If as one of the facilitators of learning on the module I experienced difficulty in deciphering the material, then most likely many of the students felt the same.

During of the seminar which I facilitated, one of the students remarked 'we learn more during these seminars than during the lecture. I do not know why we even attend the lecture.' This could have resulted from the difficulty in absorbing the lecture material which I have just described. My response to the student who remarked as above was 'no, the lecture is not meant to provide you with all the information you need on this module. Rather it is meant to provide you with background to the subject matter so that you are able to take control of your learning.' In this way, I was putting in practice a key professional value of refraining from approving student's criticism of a member of staff. It also offered me an opportunity to inform the students that they were supposed to take control of their own learning.

3.2 The Group Presentation Method/Learning in Small Groups

The group presentation method was mostly used during weekly seminars and was based on the topic of the previous lecture. The year-group of 120 students was divided into seminar groups of 15 students each. The seminar groups were put under the leadership of four tutors (graduate Teaching Assistants). Being one of the four tutors, I led two seminar groups. My first task was to divide each seminar group into small groups comprising of 4 students. Using the group presentation method, each group of four students was challenged to prepare 20 minutes presentations on particular theatre practitioners studied in the module. The presentations were both formative and assessed. This means that each group gave two presentations; the first being formative and the second for summative assessment. The presentations were prepared in such a way that there was a group of students giving

presentations and another which would give feedback after the presentation by giving a critical appreciation of the presentation, seeking clarification and asking questions. Consequently, the presenting group received feedback from their student peers and then from the tutor.

During the presentations, my role as a tutor was to facilitate student learning by providing a supportive environment, motivating them and giving them constructive feedback. For every seminar presentation, I would ensure the class is well settled and poised for the presentation. I would then address the class by giving them the plan of the session, which in the order of events involved introducing the group giving the presentation, a session of feedback from the group meant to give feedback, the plenary in which all the students in the session would be given the opportunity to respond to the presentation and finally feedback from myself. My role during the presentations was like that of a chairperson, involving kick starting the seminars, leading the feedback sessions from the students by providing a useful link between the presenting group and the group giving feedback. My role also involved prodding and motivating quiet students to speak and give their contributions. There was one student of Japanese origin who preferred to keep quiet, perhaps because she felt she was not proficient in English language. I used to encourage her in a friendly manner to say something or ask a question which in most cases she would do.

One of the methods I would use to motivate students during presentations was to make them believe that once one has done his own research, it was possible to give a good presentation. All that was needed after good research was to effectively and confidently communicate the research to the audience. I would also motivate them by underscoring the value of engaging in giving presentation. For example I would tell my students that the skills learnt from giving presentations would be useful in their future careers; they would become good speakers, a skill they would use to make conference presentations, interviews etc. In this way I was applying the 'expectancy value of motivation theory' (Feather 1982, cited in Biggs and Tang p.32). By undertaking the above practices of supporting student learning I was addressing one of the areas of activity of the UK professional standards framework that is: Developing effective environments and student support and guidance. But one of the pitfalls of our approach to group presentations on the module was that we assumed that all students were at the same level and were familiar with giving presentations. We did not recognise the fact that in that some students may have experienced giving a presentation many times before while for others it is something they may have never done and they may value guidance, discussion

and hand-outs about what makes a good presentation, before they embark on planning their own. Whereas we provided this guidance in the formative feedback during formative presentations, I concede that this should have been done before they embarked on giving presentations. This need relates to one of the points of feedback I received from one of the students. She noted that 'it could have been better if you had given us a sample presentation so that we learn the qualities of a good presentation.' by exhibiting this pitfall, we down played one of the professional values promoted by the UK professional standards framework which is commitment to encouraging participation in higher education, acknowledging diversity and promoting equality of opportunity.

Generally, the group presentation method was a very effective method of facilitating student learning. The method provided the students with an opportunity to engage in activities in which they would take control of their own learning. For instance, in preparing for the presentations both the presenting group and the group that was meant to give feedback would do research about the relevant theatrical practitioners by reading books proposed in the reading list and beyond. By actively engaging in activities for their own learning, students would engage in deep approaches to learning and grow in deeper understanding and achievement of the intended learning outcomes. As already noted, learning in educational institutions should be about changing the ways in which learners understand or experience or conceptualise the world around them (Ramsden 2003:06). By engaging the students in group presentations, we were engaging in level three 3 of teaching which focuses on what the students do rather than what the teacher does or what the students are promoted in level 1 and 2 of teaching and learning. This was a good practice in teaching since it is widely accepted in pedagogical practice that what matters is what students do, not what teachers do (ibid, p.10).

Furthermore, the group presentation method was a good avenue of applying the social learning theory which 'involves learning outside of what students have been taught formally' (Morss and Murray 2005:19).Through this kind of social learning, students were able to benefit from the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to unintended outcomes of the schooling process and deals with the tacit ways in which knowledge and behaviour get constructed outside the usual course materials and formally scheduled lessons (McLaren, 2003: 86). As Jarvis et-al (2003) have put it, people also learn as members of a group who share common goals and participate in collective learning. This kind of learning is mutual and proactive not merely responsive and is more than the sum of individuals' learning within

the group (Jarvis et-al, 2003, cited in Morss and Murray 2005:19). Often students learn from each other by observing and copying behaviour, through peer tutoring and through vicarious learning during group work (Bandura, 1986, cited in Morss and Murray, 2005:19). Also, by engaging in research in preparation for their presentations, the students engaged in research-led education which is one of the core values promoted in UK higher education system. Also, by encouraging students to learn in small groups as elucidated above and be in control of their own learning, we were addressing one the professional values envisaged in the UK Professional Standards Framework which is 'commitment to development of learning communities'.

3.3 E-Learning

The module was designed in such a way that the students engaged with the virtual learning space which in the university of Exeter is called the Exeter Learning Environment (ELE). The module information, essential e-books, lecture notes and power point presentations for lectures were uploaded on the ELE and the students would access them all the time. In the modern times, one of the essential aspects of research led scholarship is being able to interact with electronic learning systems. Consequently, by engaging with scholarly material on the ELE, the students were encouraged to behave in research led ways.

3.4 One to one tutorials

The students were given an opportunity to have a ten minutes one to one tutorial in which they would discuss any questions and concerns on such aspects as essay writing, and the assessed presentations with the tutor. All the students were given an opportunity to book a time slot with me to discuss their needs with me. For me this was an opportunity to cater for individual needs of students. One of the students of Japanese origin on an exchange programme explained to me her concern of the difficulty of writing essays in English. I had noticed this need when I assessed her formative essay and pointed it out in the feedback. For me this was an opportunity to encourage this student. I explained to her that since she was from an educational culture where English is not the traditional medium of instruction, she did not need to worry so much about the weakness in writing in English but simply make effort to improve. I even applauded her success in writing an essay which scored grade band B despite her language need and encouraged her to put more effort to write coherently and always proof read the essay. Another student who confided in me to be having dyslexia

explained to me his difficult in doing personal research for his essays. He explained that he finds it difficult to find the appropriate material for his work. Again this was an opportunity for me to provide individual support to the student to foster his learning. I explained that though his problem could be resulting from forgetting what he has read, he needed to enhance his research skills. I advised him that in order to find the right material, he needed to look for books, articles and journals that are relevant to the topic of research at hand (selective reading). To address his problem of forgetting what he has read, I advised him to always take notes while doing research. I noted that this is a skill needed by any researcher with or without dyslexia. The student felt supported and he noted that my advice had been so helpful. But one thing that I did not do was to ask the student whether there were things I could do as a tutor that would help. Certainly if a student is dyslexic, selective reading can be challenging in itself and he/she may need more help. If this help does not come from the tutor, it may come from a specialist adviser in the accessibility service of the university. It is important that students are not left with the impression that their disability is seen as 'their problem'. I was not already aware that the Accessibility Service at the university of Exeter can help students obtain a formal 'diagnosis' of their dyslexia, if they don't already have one, access specialist skills support, put in place arrangements to obtain extra time in exams, and perhaps receive specialist equipment that might help. In future, if I continue with a career in higher education, I will endeavour to know the available services in the university where I can refer students for further support. In this way I will be promoting equality in accessibility to education opportunities one of the values promoted in the United Kingdom.

4.0 Reflecting on my experience in assessment and giving feedback

4.1 Reflecting on the Assessment Plan for the Module

Information relating to assessment of the module such as the methods of assessment, feedback, assessment tasks and timelines was well set out and included in the module information. This implies that students were notified of how they would be assessed well in time. This was another aspect of good practice since as Morss and Murray argue, 'students need to have well in advance information about how and when they will be assessed and what assessment criteria would be used to judge their work. Assessment is not a guess game' (Morss and Murray, 2005:117).

The methods of assessment were varied and assessment was both formative and summative. In terms of formative assessment, the students wrote a formative essay on one of the questions provided on which they received feedback individually on a feedback sheet written by the tutor. They also prepared and gave a group presentation for which they received on spot feedback first from their peers and then from the tutor (myself). The formative assessments were designed to allow students to practise and receive constructive feedback to improve their knowledge and skills but did not count toward a final award. For summative assessments, students wrote a longer essay and were assessed for their second group presentations. The outcome of this assessment counted toward the final grade. Another important aspect was continuous assessment whereby the contributions of students in assessing their peers and other contributions to learning yielded part of the final mark for the course. Consequently, the summative assessment of the module included a group presentation 30%, an essay 50% and continuous assessment 20%.

I found such a scheme of assessment highly enriching and supportive of student learning. The formative assessment provided students with constructive feedback on their performance and helped in enhancing their learning and understanding standards of academic work. Moreover formative feedback for both formative essays and presentation was given early in the module so that students had time to act on it. To this end, Biggs and Tang have argued that 'arguably the most powerful enhancement to learning is feedback during learning' (2007:97). In addition, formative feedback provided an opportunity for students to learn from error. Again as Biggs and Tang have argued, in the course of learning, students inevitably create misconceptions which need to be corrected so that any misunderstandings can be set right, literally in the formative stage (ibid,p.97). Biggs and Tang have also argued that so important is formative feedback that the effectiveness of any particular teaching or learning activity can be judged by how well it provides feedback to students as they learn (ibid,p.97). In the same vein, Phil Race notes that 'advise on how to improve the next element of work can be particularly helpful to students receiving feedback especially when the feedback is received during the progress of on-going work so that adjustments can be made in a progressive manner' (Race, 2007:74)

The written essay assessment both formative and summative provided unique opportunities for student learning. The assessment tasks/questions probed the students' knowledge base requiring them to write extended prose answers. As Tang (1991) discovered, essay

assessment tasks fostered application related activities hence leading to deeper approaches to learning among the students (cited in Biggs and Tang 2007:197). As a way of eliciting application of knowledge acquired, assessment tasks/questions required students to relate their knowledge about the practitioners studied to the social, political and economic milieu in which they (the practitioners) worked. The following two questions picked from a list of assessment tasks for students are good examples of where assessment was used to foster application of knowledge:

> 1. Examine the work of two practitioners in relation to the development of Communism. 2. Discuss the political significance of the work of two practitioners. How did their political aims influence their aesthetics? Do critical responses of the time suggest that they achieved their political aims?

The fact that the essay assessment tasks required students to apply knowledge about the theatre practitioners to social phenomena meant that they had to do intensive research about the practitioners which fostered the practice of research led education among the students.

The group presentation assessment method is also another method which offered a set of unique student learning opportunities. Race observed that, 'giving presentations to an audience requires substantially different skills from writing answers to exams…the communication skills involved in giving good presentations are much more relevant to professional competences needed in the world of work' (2007:61). It is particularly useful to develop students' presentation skills if they are to go on to research, so that they can give effective presentations at conferences (ibid, p.61). Another value emanating from group presentations is the fact that as students were aware that they were preparing for a public performance, they would ensure that their research and presentations are addressed well. This most likely compelled them to engage in deep learning. Also, since the presentations were followed by a question and answer session, students were able to develop some of the skills they may need in future oral examinations and interviews. Peer assessment offered a valuable learning experience in that students had the rare opportunity to hear what fellow students had to say about their work. As Morss and Murray has put it, 'by using a given criteria to judge others work, they came to a much deeper understanding of how criteria can inform the development of a piece of work. They also came to understand more the marking process and see how staffs go about marking work' (2007:125). Conversely, Race argues that, 'when given the chance to assess each other's presentations they take them more seriously and will

learn from the experience. Students merely watching each other's presentations tend to get bored and can switch off mentally…' (2007:62).

4.2 My initial fears and anxiety in assessment

Assessment and giving feedback to learners is one of the areas of activity promoted by UK Professional Standards Framework. But Morss and Murray have noted that 'assessment can be quite threatening and is a high stakes activity for both students and teachers' (2005:114). This was my actual experience at the Department of Drama at the University of Exeter. I became anxious about marking and giving feedback because I was doing this in a completely new culture, in a developed country and in a World class research led University compared to my University back home. Compared to my previous experience in marking and giving feedback, the experience at Exeter would be a completely new way of doing things matching the rapidly changing trends in higher education. I started grappling with concepts in assessments such as reliability. Aware that there would be a second marker, a popular practice in UK Universities, I became anxious as to whether I would be able to give the same marks as my course convener. I was also worried about what level of performance is expected for each grade band from A-E since this is different from that of my former university.

My anxiety or the challenge of being reliable in my marking was increased by two experiences. The First was when I marked and gave feedback for formative essays. I submitted three essays which I had marked to my course convener for a second marking.

For one of the essays I had awarded grade A, for another I had awarded B while for another I had awarded C. The assessment by the module convener produced different grades. For the essay I had awarded A, she noted the candidate deserved B because his work had many stylistic and grammatical errors. For the essay I had awarded B, She noted that the candidate deserved an A since her work was well researched and rich in independent thinking. For the essay I had awarded C, she observed that the candidate deserved B citing that though the candidate had not addressed the gist of the question as I had pointed out, his essay was coherently presented. The second experience was when I co-assessed a student presentation with the module convener. At the end of the presentation she asked me "what mark do you propose for this presentation?" I replied, "given that the students are in first year, I think they deserve a merit". Her view was quite different. She said they deserve between 60 and 63 and

finally settled for 62, a lower B citing that the presentation lacked depth of knowledge. Upon questioning my practice, I realised that all the worries of lack of reliability were caused by failure to adhere to a set criteria in my assessment. In my subsequent marking for the summative essay, I began to adhere to set criteria as much as possible. I learnt that as people engaged in supporting learning, 'we have to accept that assessment can be a subjective process because we are human. However the application of criteria or marking guidelines helps to remove some of the subjectivity in attempt to be as fair to students as possible' (Morss and Murray 2005:118). Let me now consider criteria as an important aspect of assessment by reflecting on the assessment criteria of the module.

4.3 Reflecting on the Module Assessment Criteria

The assessment criteria for both the group presentations and essays were clearly laid out in the module information which was given to all the students before the start of the term. For the presentations, each presentation had to demonstrate:

a, An understanding of the methodologies and approaches favoured and employed by key twentieth century directors and practitioners.

b, An understanding of different conceptions of mise-en-scene in the modern theatre.

c, An exploration of significant methods of exercise and performance that have been prescribed by leading practitioners. In the presentations, presenters had to demonstrate certain academic and intellectual skills such as the ability to work with others, the ability to analyse, critique and manipulate complex material, the ability to utilise basic research tools effectively, Basic IT and library skills and communication skills and analytical ability in discussion. They also had to show evidence of team work, balancing self-direction with collaborative work.

The marking criteria for written essays included:

a. The quality of the argument, demonstrating understanding of the methodologies and approaches favoured and employed by key twentieth century directors and assembles.

b. The knowledge displayed indicated by the use of primary and secondary sources and evidence of ability to utilise basic research tools effectively.

c. The independent thinking of the writer, indicated by the development of independent individual and original thought.

d. Clarity of presentation demonstrated by the mastery of scholarly conventions, spelling and grammar.

Having such a well laid out criteria was a significant aspect of good practice. As Morss and Murray have noted, criteria provide a framework for giving students feedback. For each criterion, the maker makes a decision about how well it has been met and he gives the student a comment which explains that judgement (2005:118). Associated criteria will define what the marker will be looking for (ibid, p.115). But before I delineate the efficacy of the above criteria, let me comment on an important aspect evident in executing this module which is constructive alignment.

4.4 Constructive Alignment in Practice

Looking at the above outlined as criteria and the methods of teaching examined above, one realises that the principle of constructive alignment was well implemented in the execution of the module. The aims of the module and intended learning outcomes were linked to the assessment tasks and methods of assessment and criteria. The module aimed at introducing the students to a selection of modern and contemporary theatrical artists. By the end of the module, the students were expected to have gained an understanding of the principle methodologies and approaches favoured and employed by some key modernist and post-modern theatre practitioners. This is what the assessment criteria sought for. Such linking of assessment tasks with what is intended that students should learn is called criterion referenced assessment. As Biggs and Tang have argued, 'when the aim of teaching is that students learn specified content to expected standards, aligning the test of learning to what is to be learned is not only logical but it is more effective in getting students learn' (2007:53). Where assessment is not aligned to the intended or other desired outcome…students can easily "escape" by engaging in inappropriate activities that become a surface learning approach. Constructively aligned assessment means that assessment must allow us to assess students' achievements of their learning outcomes (Morss and Murray 2005:115). 'Aligning the assessment with the learning outcomes means they know how their achievements will be measured' (ibid, p.20).

Returning to the assessment criteria outlined above, it had the following strength. First, it challenged students to engage in intensive research, consequently encouraging them to engage in research led learning, a core value of UK higher education. The students could only achieve an understanding of the methodologies and approaches favoured by the theatrical artist by doing research in the library and other sources such as internet. Moreover, one of the criteria for essay writing tested the level of knowledge displayed, an aspect which would be exhibited by the use of primary and secondary sources in one's essay. In addition to challenging the students to behave in research-like ways, the need to engage in intensive research compelled the students to engage in deep approaches to learning as opposed to surface learning. To this effect, Race notes that 'deep learning generally gets a good press in scholarly literature' (2007:04).

4.5 Reflecting on my experience in giving feedback

Scholars and educational practitioners have lauded feedback as one of the key aspects in fostering student learning. John Cowan, formerly Director of the Open University in Scotland famously described 'assessment as the engine that drives learning, to which Race adds that feedback is the oil that lubricates the cogs of understanding' (cited in Race 2007:74). Alluding to John Cowan's view, Race notes that 'if assessment is the engine that drives learning then the ways in which we give feedback are important in gearing and lubricating the engine so that maximum effect is achieved from the effort put in by all concerned'(Race 2007:79).

For me giving feedback as Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Exeter was not initially an easy task for two main reasons. First, I was afraid about the impact my feedback would have on the students. Second, I was just beginning to grasp the principles of giving good feedback. These two points are rooted in my background both as a student and as a teacher. I come from an authoritarian education system where learning is at level 2 of teaching and learning focusing on what the teacher does and not on the centrality of the learner. In Ugandan institutions where I studied for my first and second degrees and where I also taught for seven years, little care is given to the nature of feedback given to students. Many a times, feedback is given to students much later when it is of no help to facilitate improvement of student learning. Sometimes, students submit essays and the feedback is not given at all. All they see at the end of the semester is the grade they obtained. As a student, I had been a victim of such an anomalous education system and continued with the tradition

when I started teaching at Makerere University. Consequently at Exeter I had to be mentored in developing feedback and using it in a way that fosters learning by senior academics at the Department of Drama. I had to submit sheets of formative feedback to a member of staff who mentors graduate students in the department which she read and gave me feedback. Her comments on my feedback improved my skills in giving feedback substantially. Given the process of mentorship that I went through, I learnt that becoming a good teacher is a process that may involve support from experienced colleagues.

In the process of being mentored, I learnt some very important points pertaining giving feedback. First, I learnt that however badly written or presented a student's work may appear, there is always something good to point out. I also learnt the significance of beginning by pointing out the strength of the work, then what needs improvement and ending with an encouragement. I learnt the necessity of having feedback address the individual needs of a student. My mentor used to advise me thus: 'Be specific. What has the student done well? What needs improvement?' To this end, Race argues that 'global ways of compiling and distributing feedback can reduce the extent of ownership which students take over the feedback they receive, even when the quality and amount of feedback is increased. Each student is still a person (2007:79). To stress the individuality of the student, my mentor advised me to begin by addressing the students by name. For example, Kenneth your work is interesting to read…

The other important thing that I have learnt about giving feedback is the wording in phrasing the feedback. This point is two pronged. First, the wording has to be such that it opens doors instead of shutting them. As Race observes, 'clearly, words with such final language implications as 'weak' or 'poor' cause irretrievable breakdowns in the communication between assessor and student and have to be avoided' (2007:79). Second I learnt that the words used to describe the quality of the student's work such as excellent, good fair etc have to be consistent with grade band given. Thus it would be inconsistent to say the quality of writing is excellent and then award grade B.

Considering our practice on the module, the time frame in which we dispensed feedback on the module presented an important area of good practice. The feedback on the module was generally timely. For the formative essays, feedback was given to students before they could begin writing their assessed assays which gave them time to ponder on the feedback and use it to improve their learning. For the formative presentations feedback from both the students'

peers and the tutor was given on spot to help them consider improvement in the future assessed presentations. To this effect Race argues that:

> There has been plenty of research into how long after the learning event it takes for the effects of feedback to be significantly eroded. Ideally feedback should be received within a day or two, and even better almost straightaway, as is possible (for example) in some computer-aided learning situations, and equally in some face-to-face contexts. 2007:79).

5.0 Evaluation and continued reflection

Evaluation and continued reflection relates to one of the core professional values promoted by the UK Professional Standards Framework that is: 'commitment to continuing professional development and evaluation of practice'. The concept of evaluation is used here to mean a way of understanding the 'effects of my teaching on students' learning, collecting information about my work, interpreting the information and making judgements about which actions I should take in order to improve my practice' (Ramsden 2003:209). According to Ramsden, 'evaluation is an analytical process that is intrinsic to good teaching and concerns learning to teach better and exercise over the process of learning to teach better' (ibid, p.209). For me, the process of evaluation and continued reflection was three pronged. It involved receiving feedback about my teaching from the students and from my peers. As an aid to reflecting on my teaching, I had also to observe a more experience member teaching. Let me examine each of these prongs.

As far as collecting feedback from students is concerned, Dunkin and Precian (1992) note that 'a characteristic of award winning university teachers is their willingness to collect feedback on their teaching in order to see where their teaching may be improved' (cited in Biggs and Tang 2007:41). I requested students to write down feedback relating to what they liked or disliked about my service to them and beseeched them to be as honest as possible. The students gave me the feedback which comprised strengths and weaknesses. For purposes of reflection I will ponder on the weak points. One of the most common points for my consideration in the students' feedback was 'please learn to distinguish between first names and surnames of students so that you address them by their first names'. Indeed this had been a common pitfall in my work as I did not know how to distinguish between students' surnames and first names. This is explained by my cultural background. Back home in Uganda and Africa in general, the surname is so distinct from the first name. The surnames

are informed by the ethnicity or tribe while the first name is given based on one's religious inclination such as Islam or Christianity. Given this background I found it difficult to know which the first name is for students with names such as Jonathan Evans. Since I received this feedback, I have found it so vital to learn the students' names properly. It is so pertinent since students names could be perhaps one of the most important bonding aspects in teacher-learner relationships. The other weak point I received from one student was, 'please think about the analogies you use in your teaching. There are some analogies you use which leave most of us wondering what you mean'. This greatly aroused my sympathy for the students who could not understand what I wanted them to learn due to the irrelevancy of the analogies I used. Consequently as a point for continued reflection I plan in future to be as simple and clear as possible. This is very critical because as Ramsden has argued, 'the aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible' (2003:07). I plan in future to hid Ramsden's advice that 'the assumption that the primary aim of teaching is to make student learning possible leads to the assertion that each and every teaching action should be judged against a simple criterion of whether it can reasonably be expected to lead to the kind of student learning we desire' (ibid, p.08).

As for feedback from my peers concerning my teaching, I have already related how from time to time received and reflected on advice relating to giving feedback from the course convener and the member of staff who mentor Graduate Teaching Assistants in the Department of Drama. (See the sections on my fears and anxiety in assessment and my experience in giving feedback). In addition to this, I was observed by a senior member of staff using the university observation form. One of the sections of the form required me to reflect on the observer's comments. Most of the points raised by the observer were food for thought for me to improve in my work as a facilitator of learning in higher education. For example she noted:

> It is important that you are very clear with them about course requirements and procedures. Please can you make sure that you are clear yourself and that you pass this on? The students did not seem to be aware that they are required to produce a hand out. While they should have known this, because it is in the module information, you needed to notice when groups did not supply a hand out and remind them that this is part of the criteria. I think there is scope for more intervention from you in asking questions and prompting students to engage with further areas of the topic. You could also chair the questions, so that the students feel you are helping them to have an effective discussion.

For me the observer's comments echo the significance of being in charge of students learning at all times. Upon submitting my reflections to the observer, we met and discussed issues relating to the session. I found this a highly supportive experience and in future I will seek the support of my peers in a bid to improve my carrier in higher education teaching.

Related to above, I observed a more experienced member of staff teaching. I admired how this member of staff approached the lesson. He started his class well by introducing the topic and spelling out what areas that the lecture will cover. In his introduction of the lesson, he engaged the class in defining the key concepts of the topic at hand topic- theatre as a complex sign system. He also made a link and built his lecture on the previous lecture and the reading the students had done. Then he went on to explore the aspects of his lesson one after another. He was coherent and clear in delivering the lecture. The topic of the lecture contained complex terminologies used in semiotics such as symbol, index and icon. In fact the topic itself was not easily accessible to the learners. But he took an appropriately low pace to ensure that he moved with the students step by step. One could observe him move along with the students in the lecture. He was kin to monitor the progress of student learning. I found this an action of good practice in teaching. Though he used the lecture method of teaching, he for the good of student learning digressed from the traditional lecture method. His class did not adopt the pure transmission of material approach used in lectures but rather he engaged his learners by asking them questions which led to interactive teaching and learning. Student learning was facilitated by the use of visual aids on power point slides. For example he used appropriate pictures to denote concepts such as symbol, icon and index. Generally his lecture was logically and coherently laid out. The class was effectively executed and student learning was evident. In my teaching career I plan emulate these points of good practice. One most striking lesson I drew from this observation was that using the lecture method does not mean adopting a pure transmission of materials model. A teacher can still foster participatory or interactive learning even if he uses the lecture method.

6.0 Conclusion

My experience has indicated that becoming a progressive teacher in higher education in the UK is something that can emerge out evaluation and reflection. This requires acquaintance with appropriate educational literature and support from peers in the field. My experience has

also highlighted the needed for new and emerging higher education teachers to seek support of more experienced members of staff in one's academic and professional community. For students who come from other education traditions especially the developing world where teaching and learning has not shift from authoritarianism to student centred learning as promoted in the United Kingdom, this essay may be of profound help.

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