

Narrative experiences from first year students in human resources provide opportunities for an academic to reflect on self-improvement

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Abstract.

Feedback is seen as a crucial way to facilitate performance of academics who are continuously monitoring their own teaching practices. The purpose of this paper is to present first year human resources management students' feedback on their experience in a module by reviewing their narratives in order to help an academic identify areas of self-improvement. A case study is used for this research. The key results indicate that the academic was very motivational who facilitated student learning in a friendly engaging manner. However, one comment was made that relates to the lack of experience by the academic who could not explain in detail some of the difficult theoretical concepts. This is an area of self-improvement that the academic can focus on by continuing to participate in the scholarship of teaching and learning by improving her teaching practice. Furthermore, many of the students enjoyed the module that suggests that they were motivated to learn more about human resources management. It is recommended that academics should continuously reflect on their teaching practices for self-improvement. One way of doing this is by using narrative experiences of students.

Keywords: Academic; education; feedback; journal; self-improvement; students

1. Introduction

Green, Sedikides, Pinter and Van Tongeren (2009), once said "The self-improvement motive orients individuals to the future" These words are very applicable to academics who would like to continuously seek feedback from students with the motive of improving their own teaching practice. The authors of the opening statement point out that individuals are open to if not enduring of, more accurate but potentially threatening feedback in the present to better their characteristics, skills or abilities in the future.

Doğan, (2015) points out that self-improvement contributes to one's desire to be self-better than currently. Sedikides and Hepper (2009) emphasise that self-improvement orientated feedback requires factual input, critical and useful suggestions, constructive advice, upward social comparisons, and information that follows an upward trajectory or permits temporal comparisons that conveys progress. Furthermore, Evans (2013) indicates that feedback should be presented in a way that does not threaten the ego of the recipient, it should include information on how to improve performance and a formal setting goal plan with the feedback.

This conveys the idea that feedback needs to be positive and constructive, motivating the individual to improve his or her performance in future endeavours. It should not be negative nor involve criticism as this demoralizes individuals and may cause them to perform poorly in the future.

On the one hand, Yeo and Neil (2004) points out that individuals who are performance goal orientated, tend to view mistakes and negative feedback as an evaluative threat to the self. This may lead them to withdraw from the assignment in the face of setbacks as an effort to protect their egos. On the other hand, individuals with a learning goal orientation seeks out challenges and persist in striving for goal attainment despite obstacles and setbacks (Cianci, Klein, & Seijts, 2010).

There is a substantial and growing body of research within an educational context considering feedback in learning. Feedback-seeking behaviour is a valuable resource for individuals in work and educational settings and to enhance learning and performance (Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013). In an educational context feedback can be obtained in many forms, with student feedback being a unique example.

There are different methods of obtaining student feedback such as through questionnaires which are often used to collect student feedback, they by no means constitute the only method (Kean & Labhrainn, 2005). Other means to obtain student feedback can be through student representation on staff-student committees and institutional bodies, structured group discussions and/or focus groups, one to one student interviews, e-mail, bulletin boards, students' diaries and/or log books and informal comments (Kean & Labhrainn, 2005). Student evaluation feedback of teaching is a way to measure teaching performance in higher education institutions (Zabaleta, 2007). According to Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William (2003) effectual questions must assist in raising issues which academics need feedback or that requires students to think. This shows that feedback involves students to think critically. It is mandatory that academics acquire the art of skilful questioning in order to ask effective questions that will engage students in a higher cognitive process such as critical thinking (Swart, 2010).

In the context of this paper, an academic requested feedback from first-year human resource management students by asking them to compile a narrative of their experiences in a module that she taught. Narrative inquiry is stories that are collected as a way of understanding experiences as lived and told through both research and literature (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). Narrative inquiry creates a pedagogical space which is shaped by counter stories in teacher education (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). Pedagogical space was created at the end of the semester where students could provide their story about their experiences in a human resource module. It is important to note that these stories were analysed by the academic offering this module in order to identify areas of self-improvement. These narratives were not meant for assessment purposes. A case study is used where qualitative data was collected from student narratives in order to determine their personal experiences in a human resources module. The paper begins with outlining the use of narrative experiences in education along with its perceived advantages and disadvantages. The importance of student experiences in a classroom environment is then discussed. The context of the study then follows along with the research methodology, results and discussions.

2 The use of narrative experiences in education

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) claims that, narrative inquiry is an old practice that may be new to some academics. Research (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) indicates that the uptake of narratives in social sciences occurred when the academy opened the space for narrative inquiry. Blake Jr and Blake (2012), however, state that nowadays narrative inquiry is not only used in educational circles but also in popular cultural circles and in intellectual cultural circles. According to Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) narrative inquiry is an ongoing process of thinking narratively. Furthermore, Clandinin, Huber, Steeves, and Li (2011) points out that narrative inquirers are much more than telling or analysing stories. Downey and Clandinin (2010) are of the view that stories are not just about experience but experience itself; we live and learn in, and through, the living, telling, retelling, and reliving of our stories. Indeed, students are content to reveal their stories and reflect on their experiences by using narratives (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007) .Furthermore, Swanon, Gordon, Khooshabeh, Sagae, Huskey, Mangus, Amir and Weber (2017) brings to attention that subjective language expresses opinions, emotions, thoughts, preferences and other mental states of the narrator. Drawing from this view, narrative inquiry can create a space for students to share their class experiences, opinions and thoughts with their academics through means of storytelling that can be analysed.

Though it should be conceded that narrative experiences are much more than telling a story, Clandinin and Murphy (2009) state that there are concerns about ways in which narratives could be interpreted, leading to misunderstandings. Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) concede that stories can be difficult to interpret in terms of the relationships between storytelling in the interview and the story making in the presentation of data. Similarly, Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2013) supports the view that narrative experiences can be overwhelming and susceptible to endless interpretation. It is important to acknowledge that in narrative inquiry stories could be misinterpreted thus leading to misunderstanding between the narrator and the researcher. Furthermore, Walcot (2010) points out that narrative stories are subjective, interpreted version of accounts remembered by storytellers. This subjectivity may introduce a level of bias from the researcher towards the narratives.

In the context of this study, narrative inquiry is used in educational circle where an academic requested feedback from first-year human resource management students at the end of a semester in terms of storytelling. Analysing these stories that are a reflection of student classroom experiences are used by the academic to identify areas of self-improvement.

3 Student's classroom learning experiences.

In general, it is alleged that student's classroom experiences influence their academic development (Kong, 2008). In light of this, it could be assumed that students learning experiences can be influenced by different factors, such as how students view the academic and the module. Moloney and Oguru (2015) believes that teacher education should focus not only on addressing the educational issues of the past and the present, but also in transforming its programs to meet the needs of the societal future. When it comes to addressing the educational issues of the past and the present, it is certain that an experienced and knowledgeable academic will be required. This view is supported by Moloney and Oguru (2015) who defines a quality teacher as one who has excellent knowledge about the content, knowledge about how to teach

the content, and how to continue learning about teaching in their social settings/contexts. Furthermore, teachers with many years of experience are usually considered to be better teachers than ones with fewer years of teaching experience (Syahril, 2019).

Teachers play a critical role in promoting students learning experience and influencing their academic development. Teachers need to assist in raising students' test scores, in fostering student learning, in increasing student motivation, and in fostering awareness, responsibility, and engagement for social/community issues (Kennedy, 2008). It seems that teachers, or academics, also plays a key role in being a motivator when facilitating and engaging students in the classroom. This would increase student's motivation to learn and pass the module. You (2017) insist that future teachers should be able to think and work in an interdisciplinary manner. They must facilitate higher-order thinking skills, expand the explanatory capacity of knowledge and provide the additional richness of viewing topics through multiple lenses (You, 2017). By improving their facilitation in the classroom, teachers could improve their teaching practice. Elton-Chalcraft, and Mills (2015) further points out that learning that is enjoyable can be more effective than the one, which is boring. Therefore, good teachers really need to facilitate more student engagement by using enjoyable learning experiences as part of their teaching practice. There is a strong possibility that some students might find learning enjoyable while others perceive topics or concepts difficult. It seems that Etoro and Fabinu (2017) agree that teaching strategies, students' attitudes, lack of learning resources, along with learning habits are factors that contributes to students having difficulty in some learning concepts or topics.

4 Types of reflective practices.

Lyons (2010) examines reflective practice and sees some of the key components as having a perspective on knowing, making investigations into one's own teaching practice and taking on an inquiry stance to interrogate the contexts of learning. Barnard (2011) brings to our attention that the concepts of "reflection" is mostly used by education scholars and is sociologically a feature of 'the production of self' in contemporary society. As can be seen, reflective practice should be used by academics in higher education to investigate their own teaching practice in order to identify areas of self-improvement.

Schön (1983) illustrates three types of reflective practices, which are reflection -inaction, reflection- on- action and reflection-for-action as shown in Table 1 where they can be applied by both the student and the academic. Throughout the year, students encounter different experiences in a module. Students could apply reflection-in-action by reflecting on their experiences about this module while still engaged in it. Reflectionon-action can occur when students reflect on their experience in a module to link what they have learned to their overall qualification. As for reflection-for-action, this can occur when students reflect on their class experiences and lessons in order to apply them in the future.

An academic can apply reflection-in-action by thinking about the impact of various teaching strategies as they unfold in a classroom. As for reflection-on-action, an academic uses his or her experiences regarding the impact of a teaching strategy to determine its effectiveness. Reflection-for-action calls on the academic to reflect on how he or she could improve a teaching strategy in the future. For the purpose of this study, reflection-for-action was used by an

academic who reviewed the classroom experiences of students contained in their narratives to determine how she could improve her teaching practice in the future.

Table 1: Reflective practices and their definition with possible application.

Reflective practices	Definitions	Student application	Academic application
Reflection-in action	Thought process that occurs as an experience unfolds, guiding action with the experience.	Students reflect on their experiences about a module while still engaged in it.	Academics reflect on the impact of their teaching strategies as they unfold in the classroom.
Reflection -on-action	Thinking back on an experience to gain new knowledge or gain a better understanding.	Times New Students reflecting on their experience in a module to link what they have learned to their qualification.	Academics reflecting on which past teaching strategies were effective by analysing the impact it had in the classroom.
Reflection-for-action	Drawing inferences from one's experience to create possible future action plans to create possible future action plans.	Students reflecting on their experiences and what they learned in order to apply them in future.	Academics reflect on how they can improve on their teaching practice in the future by using effective teaching strategies.

Source: (Schön, 1983)

5 Context of the study.

The module reported on in this study is termed “Human Resources Management 1” (HRM1) that is compulsory for the Diploma in Human Resources Management qualification in South Africa (Central University of Technology, 2019). Students must obtain a minimum of 384 credits to successfully complete this three-year qualification. This qualification offers different career opportunities such as being a human resources manager, industrial relations specialist and training specialist. Students have to pass the first semester, before they are allowed into the second semester of this module. Students write two tests in each semester that contributes to the course mark. In order for students to write examination, they must obtain a minimum course mark of 40 %. Examination paper is composed of questions that requires students to distinguish, demonstrate, explain and discuss what they have learned in the module. A final mark is the combination of a 50 % course mark and a 50 % examination mark. Students must obtain more than 50 % for their final mark to successfully pass this module.

The focus of HRM1 is on psychology and related psychological processes, as it forms the backbone of understanding human behaviour. Furthermore, it involves the study of the employees as human beings. It offers a broad overview of the human resource management functions. HRM1 has a credit value of 24 that indicates that students need to spend at least 240 notional hours dedicated to this module. The structure of HRM is presented in table 2 where semester one and two are shown along with the outcomes and assessment weights.

Table 2: Structure of HRM1

Semester one Time Period	Main outcomes	Assessment
Week 1-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientating students regarding the module. • Understanding individuals' differences and abilities • Defining personality and perception 	
Week 5-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing frustration and conflict • Dealing with stress, alcoholism, and drug abuse • Comprehend how students learn and process information. 	Week 6 = Test 1 Weighting :50%
Week 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain human attitudes. • Describe social perception concepts. • Defining role theory • Explain group dynamics. • Explain group characteristics. • Describe various group processes 	Week 12= Test 2 Weighting:50%
Week 13-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the historical developments of HRM. • Explain HRM in SA 	Week 14= Course mark finalisation
	Main outcomes	Assessment
Week 1-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining Human resource management • Describe Human Resource management in the context. • Explain the context of employment. • Explain the foundation of obtaining the right person for the right job 	Week 4 = Test 1 Weighting =50%
Week 5-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain training and its purpose in an organisation. • Define performance appraisal. • Discuss various career concepts. • Describe the reward processes. 	Week 8= Test 2 Weighting= 50%
Week 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the objectives of the health and safety legislation in SA and how it is enforced. • Explain the impact of HIV/Aids on an organisation. • Describe the concept of labour relations in SA and within an organisation. 	Week 12 =Course mark finalisation.

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6 Methodology

A qualitative study was chosen for this research to better understand the student's experiences in the HRM1 module. Qualitative research relates to the meaning people have constructed in their lives and how they make sense of their world and their experiences (Merriam, 2009). This type of study is applicable as the researcher desired to make meaning of student experiences in her classroom in order to reflect on ways for self-improvement.

The experiences were contained in narratives that students were asked to compile at the end of the second semester of 2018. Narratives opens a gateway to better understand a given topic (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). According to Savin -Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) there are various data sources in narrative inquiry that can be used, which include field notes of shared experiences; journal records of participants; interviews (usually unstructured); storytelling; letter writing; autobiographical and biographical writing. The researcher encouraged her students to tell a story about their classroom experiences in the HRM1 module in written format. The researcher then used these written narratives to try to better understand her student's experiences in order to engage in reflection-for-action to improve her future teaching practices.

A research population comprises the potential contributors of interest to a study (Luck & Kappenman, 2011). In this study it comprises all the students in two HRM1 classes that the researcher taught during 2018, equaling 120 students. Only 22 of these students were selected for this study that equates to the sample size. Convenience sampling was used because students were accessible and willing to participate in the study. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) reports that convenience sampling is a type of nonrandom sampling whereby members of certain target population meet practical criteria, such accessibility, availability at the given time and willingness to participate in the study.

Data analysis serves to provide meaning to specific phenomenon, and this is done by analysing the perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, feelings, and experiences of the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2014). A method used for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterned meanings or themes in qualitative data is called thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This was used in this study as the researcher collected and analysed narratives in order to construct meaning from them for self-improvement.

According to Clandinin (2006) ethics is described as a set of responsibilities in human relationships which include responsibilities for the dignity, privacy, and wellbeing of the participants. In this study, the researcher maintained a respectful attitude towards the participants and highlighted that their participation is completely voluntary and that their responses are confidential. No academic consequences would result from their participation.

7 Results

The research findings of the thematic analysis are given in Tables 3 through 5. Table 3 focuses on positive feedback comments that the participants made regarding the academic. The number between brackets represents the number of participant responses relating to this theme. The

comments by the different participants show that they had a positive viewpoint regarding the academic. The main theme relates to being a motivating academic who facilitates student learning in a friendly engaging manner. The importance of being a motivator and good facilitator has been noted by Kennedy (2008) and You (2017).

Table 3: Positive feedback from the students regarding the academic

Students' comments	Theme	Literature
<i>"The lecturer made learning environment more bearable by involving us in the lessons more like interacting with us".</i>	Engaging (2)	Swart, (2010).
<i>"HRM is one of the major modules in our programme and I have been struggling with the module for the past two years and this year I think I have done better. I wish the lecture could continue lecturing us HR module until we finish the course".</i>	Facilitator (3)	You, (2017).
<i>"I have learnt a lot of things this year in human resources. It has been an interesting journey. The teacher was very intuitive and made the course a blast".</i>	Intuitive (1)	You, (2017) and Kennedy, (2008)
<i>Being absent from your class is not nice at all. You are nice lecturer indeed".</i>	Friendly (2)	

On the other hand, there is one important comment that represents constructive feedback from one participant. The participant said:

"Human Resource it's a bit difficult so we needed a lecture who is good at it, because it's our main module. Ms Lefera tried, and we did appreciate that, but she did not know how to explain to us in a way that we could understand as students and at the end we are suffering".

One major theme that emerged from the narratives is related to an inability to explain certain concepts. The young academic may attribute this inability to a lack of teaching experience. More experienced teachers tend to be better teachers than their younger counterparts, according to Syahril (2019).

Table 4 presents positive feedback from the participants regarding the module. The main theme that emerged from the narratives relates to enjoyment. This suggests that when students enjoy a subject it may improve their engagement with a module that may impact positively on their academic achievement. These findings are supported by Elton-Chalcraft, and Mills (2015).

Table 4: Positive Feedback from the students regarding the module

Students' comments	Theme	Literature
<i>"I really enjoyed the module despite being late for all the time and I am happy that the lecturer understood us as students every time we had a problem".</i>	Enjoyment (9)	Elton-Chalcraft, and Mills, (2015)
<i>"As for HRM subject I have learnt how to manage my studies and my personal issues".</i>	Management (2)	Moloney and Oguru, (2015)
<i>"I have learnt a lot of things this year in human resources. It has been an interesting journey. The teacher was very intuitive and made the course a blast".</i>	Intuitive (1)	You, (2017) and Kennedy, (2008)

<i>“When coming to class sometimes demotivates me because of my fellow classmates, who would talk while am learning. Also, there are many students in the class so obviously there will be no silence, and control”.</i>	Description (2)	
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Table 5 presents constructive feedback from the participants regarding the module. The main theme that emerged from the narratives relates to difficulty of specific topics and the overall workload. These findings support Etoro and Fabinu (2017) who points out that teaching strategies, students’ attitudes, and lack of learning resources, along with learning habits are factors that contributes to students having difficulty in some learning concepts or topics.

Table 5: Constructive Feedback from the students regarding the module

Students’ comments	Theme	Literature
<i>“HR was and interesting module, but most difficult part was studying chapter 3-4 modules just for test that is 35 marks or 40 marks that part alone drove me crazy”.</i>	Difficult (5)	Etoro and Fabinu, (2017)
<i>“We had a lot of work and it was too much for first year student to write about ten chapters”.</i>	Workload (2)	

8 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present first year human resources management students’ feedback on their experience in a module by reviewing their narratives in order to help an academic identify areas of self-improvement. Student’s narratives regarding their experiences in a module were classified into themes. The main themes that emerged were motivator, lack of experience, enjoyment, and difficult workload. In terms of motivator, this means that the academic played an important role in motivating students to be positive about HR. With regard to a lack of experience, it was noted that the academic could not always explain difficult theoretical concepts. Most of the students enjoyed the module that could lead them to being more engaged with the module regarding human resources management. In contrast, a few students found the module difficult due to the heavy workload.

The present study is limited to a singular human resources management module. Therefore, students’ narratives were on their memorable experiences within one module. Future research on student’s experiences in educational settings beyond this module would be of great interest to identify further areas of self-improvement for other academics. However, it is recommended that the academic in this module should continuously reflect on her teaching practices for self-improvement, and especially with regard to explaining difficult theoretical concepts. Self-improvement of this nature may be achieved by consistent participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning in order to improve her teaching practice. Finally, continuous reflection of this nature by using the narrative experiences of students may indeed lead to an improved teaching practice that will benefit both the student, the academic and the university.

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