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*Published in:*

Proceedings for the European Conference on Reflective Practice-based Learning 2021

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Tougaard, H., & Bækgaard, M. (2021). Enhancing Reflective Practice-based Learning with Peer Feedback. In L. H. Horn, & L. N. Vetner (Eds.), *Proceedings for the European Conference on Reflective Practice-based Learning 2021: ECRPL 2021* (pp. 13-21). UCN. <https://www.ucn.dk/samarbejde/arrangementer/ecrpl-2021/conference-proceedings>

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# Enhancing Reflective Practice-based Learning with Peer Feedback

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## Abstract

One of the great challenges as a professional is to be able to scrutinise one's hidden and underlying assumptions. An essential part of being a reflective practice-based learner is the capability to challenge and discuss these underlying assumptions and hypotheses of the profession and one's way of handling the profession. Students at the Communication Studies at the Danish School of Media and Journalism are very good at composing solutions to challenges of communication on the basis of theory and method. But the students find it challenging and lack the capabilities to challenge and discuss the underlying and hidden assumptions of their doing.

Using peer feedback in other educational settings has taught us that students more easily find the blind spots of peers than their own. Hence, the objective of this project is to examine:

*How may peer feedback be used as a method to enhance reflective practice-based learning?*

Based on Mezirow's reflection levels and Bloom's taxonomy, we conducted an intervention in a class of second year students who had just returned from half a year in internship. All the students were asked to keep a learning journal in which they reflected their tasks in the internship in the light of new theoretical learnings. The task of the peers was then to ask for explanations whenever a statement was unsupported.

Although, we cannot conclude that peer feedback in itself enhance the capability of students to challenge assumptions preliminary results show that peer feedback with the right guidance could enhance Reflective Practice-based Learning.

## Keywords

Reflective practice-based learning, Peer Feedback, Taxonomy, Critical reflection, Double loop

## Introduction

In the context of Reflexive Practice-based Learning (RPL) reflection is about "(...) that students learn to act in certain ways in the professional practice and at the same time learn to be able to argue for their bases of action" (Horn et. al. 2020, p. 14). To be able to argue for one's own basis for action, we interpret partly as the ability to be able to choose between alternatives, and partly as the ability to be able to assess the appropriateness of given actions. This is especially the last part we are interested in in this article.

Students at the Communication Studies at the Danish School of Media and Journalism are very good at composing solutions to challenges of communication on the basis of theory and method. However, their ability to motivate their choices of inclusion and exclusion rarely extends beyond the immediate and the known, and they challenge neither their own nor others' fundamental assumptions in a critical discussion of the concepts of the profession.

We are therefore interested in examining how we may facilitate this process pedagogically, and as we use peer feedback in other contexts, we find it obvious to examine whether the students may enhance, through peer feedback, their ability to verbalise and challenge the hidden assumptions that they are not aware of. Our investigative question is as follows:

*How may peer feedback be used as a method of enhancing reflective practice-based learning?*

## Theoretical basis

We understand basic reflexivity as a linguistic cognitive activity. Verbalisation of one's own actions and experiences does in itself entail reflexivity. This has the consequence that actions in themselves cannot be reflective, but that they can be made on a reflective basis, just as they may initiate reflection. Moreover, reflections may take various forms and be based on various modes of expressions, e.g. visuality, but our starting point is the linguistic aspects. Our interest in reflection goes beyond mere descriptions of experiences, and we have a particular interest in the learning processes referred to by Chris Argyris (1977) as double loop as well as the reflection level referred to by Jack Mezirow (1988) as critical reflection and by Steen Wackerhausen (2008) as the second order reflection. To Argyris, double loop is about the ability to make a critical assessment of the criteria for given actions, whereas single loop is characterised by being the optimisation of given patterns (Argyris 1977, p.116).

Mezirow mentions critical reflection as a type of reflection where one reflects on the assumptions of one's basis of action (Mezirow 1988), whereas Wackerhausen distinguishes between the custom-affirming and the custom-challenging reflection. Custom-affirming reflections are first order reflections where the practitioner reflects based on his or her own customary concepts or theories, whereas custom-challenging reflections are second order reflections where the practitioner challenges and discusses the established success criteria. According to Wackerhausen, this kind of reflection requires that you make "(...) the well-known transcend the obvious, leave the periphery and become the very focus" (Wackerhausen 2008, p. 18). In theory, alienation may be achieved if one can establish a perspective not originating from customary circumstances.

The basic theoretical and methodical question for us is whether we can create room for this type of reflection in our teaching. The second important question is whether, and if so, how we can distinguish between various levels of reflections? When do we know that a reflection is in fact made at a higher level?

The first question is based on the assumption that peer feedback may be a method to establish a stranger's view on the student's own practice.

Feedback may have various purposes, and John Hattie et al. (Hattie & Timberley 2007) perceive the usual function of feedback in an educational context as a way of making the student aware of the aim of a particular activity, giving the student an assessment of the performance of a particular activity or helping the student identify ways to strengthen, maintain and adjust her way to the aim (ibid, p. 86).

In this context, though, the function of the feedback is a way for peers to help each other examine the underlying pre-understanding of their own professional practice and an attempt to spot the obvious untold of and the assumptions in the text.

In relation to the question of identification of different levels of reflection, we combine Mezirow's types of reflection (content, process and premise) with Bloom's taxonomies of educational objectives (Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D. R., & Bloom, B. S. 2002). In other words, we try to identify where in the text the student describes specific experiences (this is what I did), where she analyses experiences (this is what I could have done) and assesses the experiences (why did I actually do that) Below, we present the specific method design.

## Method

We carry out a three-step intervention in a team of second-year communication students. All the students were asked to do a learning journal in which they should reflect on their tasks during the internship considering new theoretical insights. Hereafter, the task of the peers was in written form to ask for explanations when a statement was unsupported. The peers were not anonymous for each other but randomly selected.

By means of the introduction of the task (step 1), we hope to bring the students up to a level of analysis which is indeed a deeper form of reflection but may still to be considered a single loop or first order reflection, see above. In step 2 and 3 we hope to see the students reach an even higher level of reflection. The three steps are illustrated in figure 1.

**Figure 1:**

Step 1	Individual reflection: <b>How could you have used what you have learnt so far during the campaign in connection with one of your tasks in the internship?</b> <b>How could the knowledge you have now gained have helped you solve the task differently?</b> <b>How has what you have learnt so far during the campaign contributed to developing your skills as a communicator?</b>
Step 2	Feedback on three randomly selected peer reflections: <b>Please provide feedback on the text by asking questions about all views/rationales expressed in the answer.</b> <b>Phrase one question to your fellow students which you find particularly interesting to have elaborated.</b>
Step 3	Individual reflection: <b>Choose one of the three questions and reflect in more detail on the view/rationale expressed.</b>

In the first part of our analysis, we use an inductive analytical strategy as we make an open descriptive coding (Saldana 2014, p. 593) of the 15 case reflections from step 1, based partly on our theoretical conception of reflection and partly on the linguistic markers of the students' perception thereof. The purpose is to let data speak and generate codes for a code list uncovering the students' assumptions. The code list is grouped into a number of categories which, in combination with Bloom's taxonomic and Mezirow's reflection levels, result in: "description", "analysis" and "assessment" – illustrated in figure 2.

**Figure 2**

Examples of codes – step 1	Bloom's taxonomy	Mezirow	Categories
<b>Theory review</b>	<b>Knowledge/understanding</b>	<b>This is what I did</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Project description</b>	-	-	-
<b>Conclusions</b>	-	-	-
<b>Considerations</b>	<b>Use/analysis</b>	<b>This is what I could have done</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
<b>Puzzlement</b>	-	-	-
<b>Discussion</b>	-	-	-
<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Synthesis/assessment</b>	<b>Why did I do so</b>	<b>Assessment</b>
<b>Critical view</b>	-	-	-
<b>Recognition</b>	-	-	-

In the second part of our analysis, we use a deductive approach in a closed coding based on the three categories of the answers at step three. Below, we present our preliminary results.

## Results

Basically, we are interested in examining whether the students are able to identify their own and their co-students' communicative assumptions? Therefore, we examine how:

- 1) the students verbalise their own assumptions and reflect on their meaning
- 2) they as feedback providers notice their fellow students' assumptions

3) they as feedback providers challenge assumptions through questions

4) the challenge chosen by the peer feedback provider makes the individual students reflect more deeply on their own realisation and, possibly, to pierce the veil of professionalism of an assessment.

### Verbalising own assumptions

In general, our analysis shows that all but a few students use an analytical approach in their reflection and succeed, based on the theoretical qualifications they have now, in verbalising the recognition that a given task during the internship could have been solved in a more expedient manner. They analyse and reflect on the process, focusing on how they can now carry out an activity more expediently:

*"With this knowledge, I could have created more well-defined target groups, content themes and messages that may have led me in a completely different direction than the one I followed at that time." (Student 1)*

*"I now realise (...) that we could have benefitted from looking deeply into the behaviour of our target group (...) to reach as many people in the target group as possible (...)" (Student 2)*

*"I clearly remember how I argued that it was a damn good idea using such words as: After all, it is a matter of getting the recipients to associate us with our values.... and in the situation I should have (...) asked myself: Whom am I doing this for?" (Student 3)*

*"A barrier analysis in the initial phase of the campaign had shown us that the purpose of the campaign to collect signatures to lower VAT on fruit and vegetables would probably not have had much effect..." (Student 4)*

### Noticing and challenging peers assumptions

The picture is more fragmented compared to whether the feedback providers are able to spot and challenge fellow students' assumptions in steps 2 and 3. The analysis shows that the feedback questions may be divided into three categories:

*"How could it have been possible to examine whether a Black Friday campaign was required (..)?" (calls for a description)(student 5)*

*"Why would you ask that question? How would this question help you understand the knowledge?" (calls for an analysis)(Student 6)*

*"How did you gain a broader understanding? And what impact will it have on your future work as a communicator?" (calls for an assessment) (Student 7)*

- and the feedback providers particularly ask about alternative ways of solving the task without challenging the assumptions and habitual perceptions

*"How would nudging and your new knowledge gained from campaign planning have helped you enhance communication? What could you have accomplished with the new knowledge? How does the new knowledge differ from what you knew before?" (Student 8)*

*"Why is it especially interesting to work with campaigns with a social purpose? Will you be able to transfer some of the knowledge you have gained about campaigns with a social purpose to your fund-raising project?" (Student 9)*

### Piercing the veil of professionalism

Our analysis further shows that instead of piercing the veil of professionalism and being critically reflective about the theoretical basis of the campaign, the students, at step 3, confine themselves to describing the new theoretical approach as the solution to communication challenges.

*"I consider this knowledge of system 1 and system 2 thinking as a very special key that I have obtained to the human brain." (Student 10)*

*"During the campaign, it has become clear to me how important the evaluation phase is in all types of communication work." (Student 11)*

*"In this respect, the campaign has also provided me with a number of tools, e.g. Morten Münster's barrier analysis, or an understanding of how target groups perceive messages through their network (...)." (Student 5)*

Thus, the results of our intervention show that the students achieve a level of analytical reflectivity by considering, from a new perspective, tasks from the internship, and that they are also extensively capable of spotting these assumptions in their fellow students when they challenge each other's view through feedback. However, we must also conclude that, with this intervention, we do not manage to get the students to reflect on their new theoretical knowledge compared to practice at an assessment level and, thus, to bring the students into a double loop (Argyris 1977) or in a second order reflection (Wackerhausen 2008).

## Discussion

First and foremost, it is our experience that it has been motivating and meaningful for the students that this task has created a bridge between practice and teaching. We have not examined this systematically, but the students have expressed the view that it has been beneficial to reflect on the experiences gained from the internship based on the new theoretical recognitions. This is in line with the first fundamental principle in UCN's Whitepaper on Reflective Practice-based Learning, which stresses the importance of inductive teaching processes where the lecturer takes his or her starting point in the students' own experiences (Horn et. al. 2020, p.17).

In this context, we find that our study contributes to the further efforts to understand and use various levels of reflection. Generally, it is a pedagogic challenge to get the students to reflect at a taxonomically deeper level than purely descriptive level. The reasons for this are multiple, but in light of this study, it is obvious to us that it is important for the teacher to define clearly not only what the student is to reflect on, but also the tools to be used in the reflection (e.g. Wackerhausen 2008). In an educational setting – and in the efforts to educate reflecting practitioners – it is important to help the student spot what he or she should look for without providing the answer. In our understanding, this correlates with the second fundamental principle of reflective practice-based learning, which stresses the importance of organising teaching and learning activities to include appropriate disturbances (Horn et. al. 2020, p.18), and it may be one of the reasons why, in this task, the students reflect at a deeper level than purely descriptive.

Unfortunately, we must conclude that there is no evidence for claiming that peer feedback served the function intended. There may be several reasons for this, which we will revert to below, but we would like to point out that peer feedback should not only trigger something in the feedback receiver, but that it also has an effect on the feedback provider. Accordingly, studies show that the feedback provider achieves a higher level of thinking skills than the feedback receiver. (Walker 2015, p. 245). In our view, the strength of peer feedback in this context is the possibility for a student providing feedback to compare his or her own experiences with those of others and, thus, potentially to become aware of the multiple issues that may arise in a communication practice. In this respect, it is possible that critical reflection may materialise in the meeting between the material and the one providing feedback and asking reflective questions to someone else. That aspect did not form part of our study. However, it would be interesting to change or broaden our perspective from the feedback receiver to the feedback provider.

One of the reasons why we did not manage to create room for a custom-challenging reflection is that peers may not be able to create a new room of experience for the feedback receiver. Although the students have gained different experiences from their internship, they are all influenced by the same professionalism and the same traditions, and, therefore, they will typically use the same types of questions, see Wackerhausen's conclusion that second order reflections often require that you "embark on adventures into the unknown" (Wackerhausen 2008, p.18). Consequently, the question might be whether the students are sufficiently "alienated" from each other to be able to ask difficult and peculiar questions requiring the individual not only to address the solution of a particular problem, but also to the assumptions as to whether it is a problem at all?

Moreover, it is also worth considering whether we have asked the right questions – we could, for example, increase the awareness of the purpose of the reflection through our way of asking questions – and whether we had prepared the peer reviewer well enough. For example, it is worth considering whether the peer feed-

back provider and the teachers have the same conception of what it means to ask questions about assumptions. A question to which this preliminary study does not provide an answer, but it is a relevant methodological reflection.

Finally, it may be discussed whether we had too high expectations in terms of the nature of the reflections and thus the taxonomic level of reflection. As mentioned, the participating students were second-year students having completed their first internship, and the question is whether they do not meet the conditions for being critically reflective practitioners at a sufficiently high taxonomic level when they can argue what a new, acquired theory could say about the experience in the internship process? It may be argued that the students actually did achieve reflexivity at a higher level than that of description and statements of facts. In any case, both the wording of the reflective question, the students' expectations as to what the lecturer would like to hear and the students' ability to assess professional reasons for conducts will have an impact on the level of reflection they can achieve.

This is a key consideration because it highlights the need for us as educators to be conscious of the purpose of a reflexive activity.

## Implications

One of the challenges of this type of studies is that it is based on the assumption that we can categorise different types of reflections and recognise them in textual productions. We maintain that this is possible, but it is a system of concepts that we would like to see developed.

Moreover, the question is how it is possible to identify whether the reflection works. There seems to be a need for us to improve – as envisaged by the concept of reflective practice-based learning – the efforts of using, more continuously and systematically, a pedagogic approach to reflective-based teaching processes so that reflection is not perceived as something that takes place in continuation of practice, but that reflection does in fact become an integral part of practice.

Finally, it is our hope that we will increasingly succeed in focusing on the feedback provider in feedback processes. How can posing questions about another person's experiences, based on one's own experiences, constitute the foundation of deeper, critical reflexive thinking?

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