Reflective practice and action research: A holistic view in distance education teaching learning environment

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Abstract

Reflective practice and action research have captured the attention and imagination of educational community in the recent times. Both are considered to be inevitable and critical dimensions of professional development of teachers. Similarly, distance education is gaining popularity day by day, thus increasing the sense of responsibility for teachers as well as students enrolled. Educational institutions are dedicated to cater to diverse need of enrolled students by providing high quality education through emerging technologies. This article explores the critical part action research can play in enhancing reflective practices of teachers which may lead to their ultimate professional development. The article challenges the perceptions of distance education teachers about reflective practice and action research. It takes into account holistic view of both constructs as considering them inseparable elements for improving distance education teaching learning environment. This research suggests that distance education teachers are well aware of the importance of both, but process and practical implementation of action research as effective tool for reflective practice is need of the day. This target may only be achieved through administrative support, on-line sessions, monetary and non-monetary incentives for teachers and personal commitment. Practical implementation of conduction of action research in the domain of distance education may go a long way in improving the whole instructional environment.

Key words: Reflective practice, action research, perception, holistic view, distance education

1.Introduction

1.1 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is the ability to reflect upon one's own actions in order to engage in the process of continuous professional development. The process of reflective practice involves paying attention to every day actions and assessing practice reflexively and reflectively. Reflective practice can be an important tool for self-development in professional settings specially such settings where people learn from their own professional and personal experiences rather than formal system of knowledge transfer. A reflective person not only looks back on past events and actions, but also takes conscious look at experiences, actions, emotions and responses and then use this information to add to his/her existing knowledge base and ultimately reach a higher understanding level (Loughran, 2002). In reflective practices the teacher thinks and focuses on his/her daily teaching and as well as on educational structures in which teacher and student work (Joyce, 2015)). The reflection is a process in which teachers experience those troublesome

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event and difficulties which are solved immediately. Reflection starts from when a teacher examines his /her experiences and relevant knowledge so that he/she can find importance in his or her beliefs. Teachers are enabling by reflection to direct and plan their activities with full consideration (John Dewey, 1933). By reflective practices teacher practitioners are able to develop a greater level of self-awareness. This self-awareness is related to their nature and awareness about the impact of their performance. This awareness generates opportunities for teacher practitioners for the professional development and growth(Ahmed, 2013).Teacher gives attention toward what is happening in teaching learning situation and thinks about those alternatives that are helpful for achieving educational goals aims.

Reflective practice for teachers is a process of reflection in which teachers experience those experiences, difficulties and troublesome events that are not resolved instantly. Reflection starts from when a teacher examines his /her experiences and relevant knowledge so that he/she can find importance in his or her beliefs. Teachers are enabling by reflection to direct and plan their activities with full consideration (John Dewey, 1933) Reflection includes skills those are observation, self-awareness, critical thinking, self-evaluation and taking other's perspectives. And integration of these skills result understanding for future planning and for goal setting (Mann et al, 2009). Reflection is a source of continuous personal and professional growth. Reflection gives opportunities for professionals to renovate and refresh their practices. Teachers get information related to their teaching through their own observation of themselves; combine with their own reflections (Paulson & Kenneth cited in Sweigard, 2007).

1.2 Action research

Action research is an organized inquiry where teachers assemble information relevant to school functions that how teachers can teach and how learning can happen for students in a better way. The information is gathered with the goals of attaining approaches, developing reflective practices, valuable positive change in educational practice, school environment and brings improvement in students' outcomes (Donato, 2003). It is a tool that helps teachers and educators to discover new strategies to improve teaching practices (Sagor, 2004).In teaching for the purpose of making improvement and development, research is needed for teachers to conduct in learning environments. Action research is performed by teachers and also for teachers' as well. It is necessary for teachers to know what is really happening in learning environment. Action research can make teachers aware about their practices and gives power to them to play leadership roles in their on teaching environment. Through action research teachers become more responsible, answerable and self-directed (Day, 1987). For school managerial staff, stakeholders and teachers, action research is remarkable opportunity to think about it in the teaching and learning situation (Mills, 2011).

Action research provide new knowledge and understanding to practitioners about how they can bring improvement in educational practices, and how they can determine significant problem in teaching learning settings (Mill, 2011; Stringer, 2008). As action research is relative to a limited small area, and its only aim is to discover, develop and monitor changes to practices (Donato, 2003). Action research provides bridge to cover gap between research and practices. The theoretical works support action research practices, these theoretical works are used to help teacher practitioners to consider and monitor what is happening in classroom environment. At that time, the practitioners have best practice in

mind, these collected data helps in understanding or telling theories and researches that are relevant to best practices (Johstan, 2005). Action research makes teachers habitual to become continuous learner for the improvement of the professional temperament of teachers with in the productive learning environment.

Action research further gives confidents to teachers' practitioners to examine the dynamics of their teaching practice, think over the actions and interactions of the students. Action research also persuades teachers to conform and challenge the existing practices, and immediately take risk in the process (Mills, 2011). These actions are similar to those actions which are daily and regularly practiced by teacher. Action research encourages teacher practitioners everywhere to examine and assess their teaching work. Teachers ask to themselves, what am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it? These descriptions of practices show that how teachers are trying too much to get improvement in their own learning and others' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006).

1.3 Role of action research as effective tool for reflective practices in distance education

Reflective practices and action research have same concept of bring improvement in teaching practices and student learning process, and also bringing improvement in student motivation. Both engage teachers in a series of actions that are found in the action research spiral; however to solve a particular problem action research includes some specific strategic actions that are corresponding to purposeful planned attempt (McMahon, 1999). Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry which is undertaken by participants in order to improve their own practices.

Distance education or on-line education is gaining popularity day by day, thus increasing the sense of responsibility for tutors as well as students enrolled. Educational institutions are dedicated to cater to diverse need of enrolled students by providing high quality education through emerging technologies. Distance education serves large number of students who cannot attend formal system due to financial, social, time or geographical constraints. On line tutors or teachers catering to the needs of students enrolled in distance education have to perform multiple roles such as facilitator, subject expert, knowledge disseminator, coach and assessor. On-line tutoring enables to build up a virtual environment in which learners and teachers are separated by space & time but connected through emerging technologies and internet. Distance education reflects and respects diversity through practising various approaches for distinct learners. Reason, 2001 suggested that action research can be an individual inquiry into one's own practice, or can be an enquiry involving wider communities or larger groups where participants may or may not have face to face interactions or be known personally to each other.

Action research is authentic and significant to the distance education teachers, because it helps them for self-reflection. Action research permits teachers to get ownership over their teaching. Action research is an alluring alternative for distance education teacher researchers, school and administrative staff, furthermore, different stakeholders in the teaching and learning situations to consider (Mills, 2011). In reflective practices, teachers involves in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation so that to understand those action and reactions that are theirs' own they prompt themselves and in learners (Brookfield 1999; Thiel 1999; Cunningham 2001). The different model suggested by different authors.

Figure 1. The seven steps in action research (McBride 1989).

There are seven steps in conducting action research, identifying a focus of interest or a problem, collecting data, analyzing data/generating hypothesis, planning action, implementing action, collecting data to monitor changes, analysis and evaluation (McBride 1989). The basic aim of action research is to make improvement in practices instead of produce knowledge. It is ensure in improving practices that practitioner end values are realized in concrete forms of action. Consequently reflective practices in action research aims to improve the realization of process values (Elliott 1991). Action research makes improvement in practice by bringing development in practitioner's capability for unfairness and judgment in exacting complex human situation. It unites inquiry that includes the performance's improvement and development of persons in their professional role. Elliot (1991) conceives two techniques ofperformance that how distance education teachers reflectively develop their practices. Firstly, they identify a practical problem and then take decision to do research on this problem. So here teacher first efforts to recognize the problem related to teaching and learning before bringing changes in teaching learning process-"reflection initiates action". Secondly, after understanding that there is sensible problem the teacher then brings change in some aspects of her/his teaching using a newer on-line strategy. Teacher examines the effectiveness of change and resolves it. During assessment the teacher realizes that the problem is modified and changed. The teacher's decision to take on a change strategy consequently leads the development of

understanding here ; action initiates reflection (Elliott 1991). Action research in to teaching practices for distance education teachers is a major source of learning and improvement in on-line settings. For action research is relative to a limited small area, and its only aim is to discover, develop and monitor changes to practices. A key question arises that, are AR and RP the same thing? Elliott's (1991) argues that "action research in the kind of reflective practice which aims to improve the realization of process values". The significance given to how reflective practice is completed will decide if what is occurring is action research. Action research therefore can't happen without reflective practice. Reflective practice and action research have often been recognized as synonymous, and the term are sometimes used interchangeably (Johnson, 2005; McMahon, 1990). Both concepts have the same aim to make improvement in practice and student learning and motivation. Both involves the teacher in series of action that are found in the action research spiral; on the other hand action research includes "strategic action" which leads to purposeful and planned efforts to solve a particular problem (McMahon, 1999). Even though teachers are engage in reflective practices may sometime take decision to act upon reflection by taking definite actions, reflections on practices are not followed by action research.

1.4 Statement of the problem

Distance education has gained popularity in these times. Learners have a flexibility of time and space while opting for distance learning. Similarly teachers involved in this mode of teaching and learning are facing challenging situation due to higher student expectations from them as a result of exposure to latest technology and information through internet. Teacher needs to constantly research on pedagogy and curriculum. Some other responsibilities of distance education teachers include motivating students towards research, evaluating their progress and reporting results. Improvement in distance education is inevitable through research and reflection. This study aims at finding out role of action research as an effective tool for reflective practices in distance education teaching learning scenario.

1.5 Objectives of the study

Objectives of the study were to:

1. To investigate the concept of reflective practices among distance education teachers.
2. To explore the perceptions of distance education teachers about action research.
3. To assess the role of action research as effective tool for reflective practices for distance education teachers.

1.6 Research questions

1. What are distance education teachers' perceptions about reflective practices?
2. What are distance education teachers' perceptions about action research?
3. What is the role of action research as effective tool for reflective practices for distance education teachers?

1.7 Significance of the study

This study will be helpful specifically for teacher educators and tutors engaged in on-line/ distance education for their continuous professional development. The results of this study may provide an insight into current reflective practices and use of action research in professional development of teaching faculty engaged in distance education. Similarly, the master trainers engaged for professional training and development of

distance education teachers may get a guideline about implementing action research as one of the most effective tool in enhancing reflective practices in teaching learning environment.

2.Methodology

This study constituted of descriptive survey quantitative research design. A self-constructed 5 point Likert scale questionnaire built upon 20 statements and two sub sections; one for exploring perceptions regarding reflective practice and other for assessing perceptions about effective use of action research among distance education teachers was used to collect required data.Pilot testing of the research tool confirmed its reliability at $r = 0.86$, whereas construct validity was taken from two experts of the field. Respondents were asked to mark their agreement or disagreement against each statement. This study was delimited to COMSATS Virtual Campus Islamabad only.

2.1 Population and Sample

Population included all the distance education teachers serving in COMSATS Virtual Campus Islamabad. It comprised of 65 teachers serving in four faculties namely, Humanities, Management Sciences, Computer Sciences and Mathematics. 100% of the population was taken as sample of the study. Total responses received on the questionnaire were 57 (87.69%). Statistical treatment of the research instrument included calculation of frequencies and mean scores for data analysis.

3.Results and discussion

Data analysis was done on the basis of responses given by respondents on the self-constructed 5 point likert scale questionnaire. Descriptive statistics was calculated using mean scores on the statements and the results as follows:

Section A: Perceptions about Reflective Practice		
S.No	**Statement**	**Mean Score**
1	I make decisions about events as they happen.	3.45
2	I think about events and reasons for actions afterwards.	4.01
3	I research/investigate issues to solve problems.	3.56
4	I write notes which I review (e.g., diary, journal).	3.65
5	I talk with others about events / issues.	4.76
6	I explore theories, models, etc., relating to my issues.	3.54
7	I seek/get feedback from others about events/issues for action research.	4.78
8	I make image/sound record of events/issues.	4.02
9	I question my own ideas and beliefs.	4.79
10	Reflective practice helps in continuous professional development	4.89
Section B: Perceptions about use of Action Research		
11	Action research is done by all teachers in their own teaching context.	3.02
12	Action research brings changes in teaching and learning practices.	4.89
13	Action research is an effective tool for reflection.	4.06
14	Action research can be carried out easily in distance education.	3.72
15	I am quite familiar with action research processes.	4.79
16	Action research is problem focused.	4.73
17	Action research helps to improve distance learning procedures.	4.12

18	Action research helps to improve teaching practices.	4.09
19	Action research is not related to solving problems of distance learning.	2.00
20	I can improve my instructional design through action research.	3.36

The changing roles of students and teachers in distance education are influencing classical education standards and pedagogy. According to research findings, distance education teachers are aware about reflective practices being carried out by them in instructional domain. Reflective practice demands that teachers investigate issues to resolve teaching learning problems. Similarly, writing reflective journals help teachers to recall the events/ problems and then critically reflect upon them for further application inaction research. Distance education teachers are catering to a wide diversity of students with less geographic boundaries, so their problems of teaching are unique also. These research findings are consistent with the previous researches (Paula, 2009 and Marina, 2016).Research provides data to compare effectiveness of the teaching and learning in a great variety of situations in distance education. Distance learning in a high-tech, global environment presents new roles and responsibilities for both teacher and learners of distance education. In addition; there is a radical change in construction and delivery of course content in distance education. Media to facilitate interaction between and among learners, teachers, and content increases the opportunity for in-depth and meaningful learning. Distance education teachers can follow the model given below to incorporate action research as effective tool for enhancing their reflective practices.
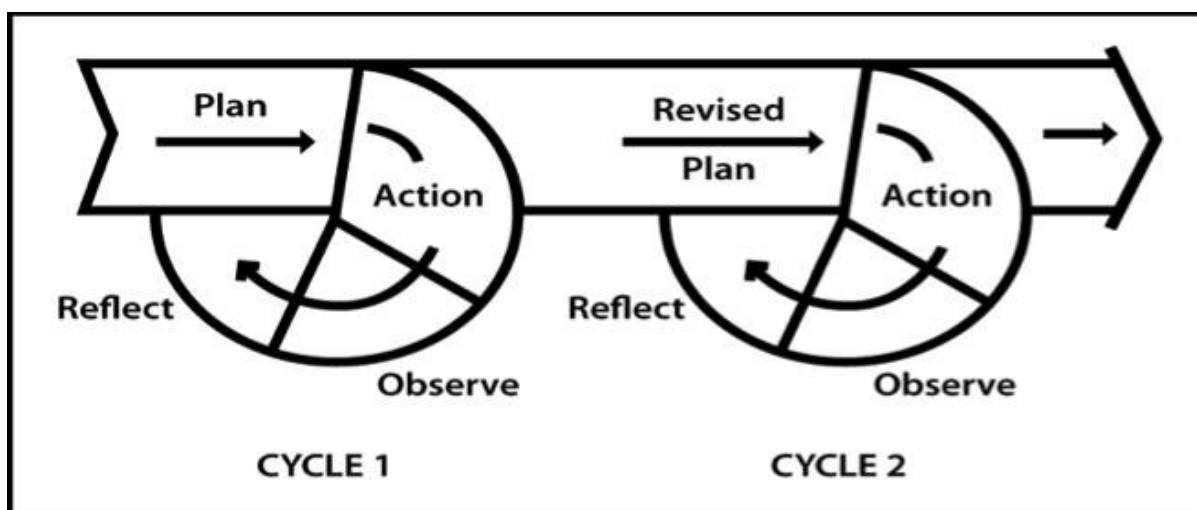
Source: (Santally, Dorothy, Noel & Caroline,2015)

4.Conclusion

On the basis of research findings, following conclusions were drawn:

1. Majority of the distance education teachers (86%) strongly agreed that they reflect upon events and incidents for actions afterwards. They agreed that critical events in their teaching situation are starting point for doing action research.
2. Majority of the teachers (89%) strongly agreed that talking about teaching learning events with their colleagues help them to find avenues for action research.

3. Majority of teachers (79%) agreed that they questioned about their own ideas and beliefs which helps them to move forward towards higher levels of reflection.
4. It was concluded by majority of distance education teachers (82%) that reflective practice paves a way to observe teaching deficiencies. This can be helpful in providing a strong foundation for action research.
5. Distance education teachers (88%) were familiar with the concept of action research but they were not familiar with the process and practical implication of action research in distance education.
6. It was concluded that majority of the teachers (72%) agreed that they did not have tradition of conducting action research for active problem solving and improving instructional practices.

4.Recommendations

On the basis of research findings and conclusions, following recommendations are suggested:

1. In the first step, distance education teachers may be motivated to carry out short reflections on their teaching sessions. These reflections may start by writing down what went well in on-line tutoring or what could have been improved in the session.
2. Teachers may be informed about importance of action research for reflective practice through awareness seminars, e-sessions, blogs and networking. On-line discussion forums may be created to carry out awareness campaign about inevitable importance of action research in improvement of instructional environment.
3. Administrative bodies managing distance education may create a supportive and positive environment for distance education teachers to conduct action research, reflect upon it through preparing written reports and draft a road map for self-development.
4. On-line teachers' training workshops may be arranged to train and guide teachers in using action research effectively and efficiently for critical self- reflection.
5. Monetary and non-monetary benefits may be given to those teachers who integrate theory into practice by applying results of action research for professional development.

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