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The psychological experience of resource-based learning (RBL) within the South African higher education context

Summary

South African higher education is currently characterised by massification, globalisation, an increase in non-traditional students entering the system and a paradigm shift from lecture-based to resource-based education (RBL). During the transformation of the South African higher education system, RBL was proposed by the education ministry and in various policy documents as a mode of delivery which could meet the challenges of learners' expectations, the realities of the work place, and the need to maintain a high standard of graduates. Such an experience of change is difficult, due to its complexity and pace. In this article attention is focused on facilitators' and co-ordinators' psychological experiences of higher educational change in an RBL programme.

Die psigologiese belewens van brongebaseerde leer in die konteks van die Suid-Afrikaanse hoër onderwys

Die Suid-Afrikaanse hoër onderwys word tans gekenmerk deur massifikasie, globalisering, die toename van nie-tradisionele studente asook die paradigmaterskuif van lesinggebaseerde na brongebaseerde onderrig. Gedurende die transformasieproses van die sisteem her die onderwysministerie asook verskeie beleidsdokumente brongebaseerde onderrig aanbeveel as 'n toepaslike metode om te voldoen aan die verwagtings van leerders, die realiteit van die werkplek en om die hoër standaard van gegradueerde studente te handhaaf. Die belewens van verandering is moeilik as gevolg van die kompleksiteit en tempo van verandering in die meeste hoëronderrig-inrigtings. In hierdie artikel is die fokus op die psigologiese ervarings van fasiliteerders en koördineerders as gevolg van hoëronderrigverandering in 'n brongebaseerde kursus.

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The trend towards new modes of delivery such as resource-based learning (RBL) in higher education has a significant impact on staff (facilitators and co-ordinators). The sudden changeover to RBL has complex consequences, since it brings about various cognitive and affective experiences for facilitators. Clarke (1982: 153) argues that educational change can be unpopular or even potentially traumatic for the staff involved, but that it can also be stimulating or potentially rewarding. It is evident that individuals can respond differently to the same event. Mahoney (1991: 20) notes that human experiences are affected by three domains (see Figure 1).

Plug *et al* (1993) define these three domains as follows:

- Cognition: all the processes through which the human being achieves knowledge regarding an object, or becomes familiar with the environment, for example by observation, recognition, reasoning, judging, learning and thinking (Plug *et al* 1993: 181).
- Behaviour: anything that a human being does, which could refer to a specific action resulting from a response to or action in general (Plug *et al* 1993: 112).
- Affect: an emotion that leads immediately to observable behaviour (Plug *et al* 1993: 7).

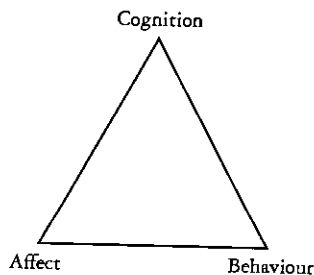


Figure 1: The three domains of human experience

The relationships among these three domains have been vigorously debated. Mahoney (1991: 20-1), stating that behaviourists have favoured behaviour as the primary force in human experience, argues that changes in motoric activity produce changes in attitudes

and affect. Cognitivists take thought as the primary force of human experience while humanists assert that the primacy of emotionality drives the other realms. Cognition, affect and behaviour are the core aspects of the psychological functioning of an individual. Furthermore, there exists an interrelationship between these domains in any human experience. When change takes place (higher educational change for instance), it has an effect on all three domains within a human being (including facilitators and/or co-ordinators) and it will therefore affect an RBL programme.

The success of educational projects depends primarily on the calibre of the staff involved. The World Bank's (1994: 10) view is that good quality staff and a supportive professional culture are essential to a successful educational programme. This emphasises the need to investigate the psychological experience of higher educational change among facilitators and co-ordinators, which could possibly lead directly to the improvement of the functioning of the staff and indirectly to the improvement of the RBL programme. This article also strives to demonstrate how to enhance chances of success through an RBL programme.

1. A paradigm shift to facilitation

Brown & Smith (1996: 10-21, 38-48) argue that staff and educational developers play the key roles in any successful implementation of RBL. Thus, facilitators and co-ordinators may be regarded as crucial to the successful implementation of an RBL programme. According to the Open University (1995: 23-7), the task of the facilitator can be outlined as follows (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 indicates that the facilitator has the task of facilitating learning — a very complicated task, due *inter alia* to individual differences, for instance the preference for a particular learning method (Robson & Beary 1995: 2, 9). Traditionally, the responsibility for learning has been given to the teacher, but a much more fruitful approach (such as RBL) allocates responsibility to both the facilitator and the learner/student (Brown & Smith 1996:). Boud *et al* (1993: 53-69) refer to the task of the facilitator as that of a planner, evaluator, resource and instrument for action/change. As an

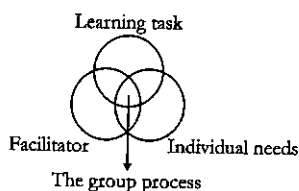


Figure 2: The facilitator's task

instrument of change, the facilitator is seen as particularly helpful in professional education.

It seems imperative that the training of facilitators should receive attention. First, the facilitator's role is central to the learning process. Secondly, facilitating tends to be a more powerful method than generalised learning, and therefore one should ideally tailor one's approach to the specific learning needs of an individual (Robson & Beary 1995: 10). This may be demonstrated in a situation where the facilitator, as a practitioner, has the role of identifying the learning need, planning an experience to meet that need, assisting learners to comprehend and learn from the experience and, finally, working in collaboration with learners to assess the learning that has been achieved. The Open University (1995: 26) claims that this leads to a continuous training cycle of facilitators (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Training cycle

Thirdly, Robson & Beary (1995: 187-91) admit that the management of the group process (as identified in Figure 2) is fundamental to success, since 95% of the problems encountered are due to a lack of understanding of group dynamics. They further argue that, since facilitators have an interest in their learners' achievement of the learning task, expert facilitators will utilise the reservoir of knowledge, tools and techniques that have been developed to assist people to comprehend the way a group works and to improve performance. Fourthly, what is fundamental to the effective performance of the facilitator's role is the notion of helping (Figure 2). This implies that the ownership of the agreed actions, the actions themselves and the credit for them lie with the learners – not with the facilitators.

According to the Open University (1995: 23-6) learning is a transformational journey in which one adapts to the world around one. In addition, a South African university (Academic Development Bureau 1998: 13) noted that, in order for facilitators to succeed in RBL, they must:

- be well-organised;
- be positive and enthusiastic;
- be empathetic;
- have high, but reasonable expectations;
- establish a facilitator-student relationship of trust and respect;
- have good facilitation skills such as listening, questioning and responding.

As a consequence of the paradigm shift to RBL, as Brown & Smith (1996: 20) note, academic staff, library and support staff have to comprehend the nature of RBL before they will be able to reconceptualise their roles. Thus, the success of the facilitators' role depends on regular training and support in order to enable them to implement RBL to the best of their ability and for the good of institutions and academics.

Bitzer & Pretorius (1996: 1) as well as Brown & Smith (1996: 49-50) identify the new roles of lecturers as facilitators rather than of transmitters of knowledge. The change to the facilitator's role implies an increase in learner-centred strategies as well as in flexibility in teaching methodology (Dixon & Woodhouse 1996: 15-22). The paradigm shift to RBL also has various other implications for the

role of the facilitator, as is demonstrated in Table 1 (Bailey 1992: 983-91).

Table 1: The paradigm shift from teacher to facilitator

Teacher	Issue	Facilitator
Key relationship is with specialist knowledge Defined role	Locus of control	Key relationship is with the learner Open-ended role
Works with a transmission model of learning Emphasis is on theoretical knowledge Focuses on cognitive domain and skills Talks most of the time	Learning method	Works with a developmental, transformative model of learning Helps the integration of theory and practice Focuses on the experiential approach (cognition, connotation, affect)
Classroom-focused Works within relatively fixed pace and timetable Mainly face to face	Context and media	Works flexibly Possibly mixed-mode and multi-media
Institution-centred		Learner-centred

From Table 1 it can be deduced that a sharp difference exists between the role of the facilitator and that of the teacher. It is also evident that the facilitator operates within a learner-centred approach where the emphasis is on learning rather than teaching.

In RBL programmes the tasks of the facilitator are summarised in his/her job description as being a subject expert, being willing and available to undergo appropriate training, as well as being well prepared to meet learning needs effectively, regardless of learners' stage of progress, etc. According to the SAIDE (1997: 2), facilitators tend to lack clarity regarding their job descriptions (what is implied by managing learning requirements effectively, and so on). This lack of clarity may have a psychological effect on facilitators, and may well be due to the fact that RBL is a recent innovation.

2. Dilemmas of facilitating

In the shift from teaching to RBL, facilitating is the new learning method (for both facilitators and co-ordinators). This new approach

has been introduced in an attempt to overcome deficiencies such as students being unable to retain knowledge for future use, or not being skilled enough to apply theory in practice, as well as other higher educational problems of the South African context such as massification, globalisation, and internalisation. In spite of the advantages of RBL, its implementation is fraught with various problems:

2.1 Student-led versus professional-led learning

The central objective of RBL is to facilitate the independent and interdependent learning that defines student learning (Heron 1989: 77-90; Robson & Beary 1995: 9-12). The main concern about RBL is that the "checklist" approach may be too prescriptive and therefore risk dictating what and how to learn (Robson & Beary 1995: 187-91; Taylor 1997: 5, 51, 81). On the other hand, when facilitators leave everything in the hands of students, the possibility exists that the students will not achieve their aims. The facilitator thus plays an important role in encouraging different learning methods, as well as providing students with an overview of the course as a whole and explaining how it links with the profession (Robson & Beary 1995: 9-12; Taylor 1997: 77-90).

2.2 Facilitating personal, process or propositional learning

Taylor (1997: 77-90) states that the facilitating role is important because it enables students to form links between personal, process and propositional knowledge. He also emphasises that, in order for facilitators to manage competing demands, they have to:

- establish a climate of trust,
- contain difficult feelings, and
- link the various fields of knowledge.

It can thus be deduced that the socio-emotional context of learning is vital (Boud *et al* 1993: 53-60). In order to establish a climate of trust, the facilitator has to lay down "ground rules" for working together (Brown & Smith 1996: 20). They must also provide students with a vocabulary of feelings with which they can

describe personal experience (Taylor 1997: 38-56). Robson & Beary (1995: 99) add that creating empathy is an important facilitative behaviour, putting the facilitator on the same wavelength as the student and fostering a feeling of comfort and confidence. In order to link the various fields of knowledge, facilitators assist group members to comprehend an experience and make sense of it (Brown & Smith 1996: 24-37).

2.3 The facilitator as supportive or critically reflexive

Only if students feel supported and valued by the facilitator will they be able to express their own needs and interests (Taylor 1997: 82, 177-8). Robson & Beary (1995: 96) refer to this as genuineness. The importance of giving critical feedback within a supportive learning climate has also been emphasised (Taylor 1997: 35, 89, 117-8). Robson & Beary (1995: 97) note the importance of being precise and specific when giving feedback.

Diversity within a group can lead to tension and conflict. In such circumstances the role of the facilitator is to take responsibility for normalising the process and to have strategies at hand to deal with the conflict (Brown & Smith 1996: 20). Robson & Beary (1995: 15-7) add that a facilitator has to be able to highlight muddled, dishonest and inappropriate thinking and confront it without provoking defensiveness or a loss of ownership.

2.4 The expertise of facilitators

Taylor (1997: 29-30) states that the norm in higher education has been to view the teacher as an expert who spoon-feeds the subject expertise to students. It has also been argued that in independent learning the focus will be on facilitating experts rather than on subject expertise (Brown & Smith 1996: 54). Robson & Beary (1995: 95-8) and Taylor (1997: 88-90) point out that the two main concerns of staff are the high levels of anxiety caused by facilitators' uncertainty as to whether students are on the right track and the risk of withholding subject expertise, which students experience as "playing games".

Having discussed the dilemmas of facilitating, the focus of this study will now move to the psychological experience of higher educational change among facilitators and co-ordinators in an RBL course.

3. The psychological experience of higher educational change: facilitators and co-ordinators in a resource-based learning course

According to the Gestalt theory of psychology, all human beings are able to meet their physical and psychological needs (Knight & Scott 1997: 120). The same writers emphasise that this can be demonstrated (see Figure 4) when physical and psychological needs are met within the Gestalt cycle.

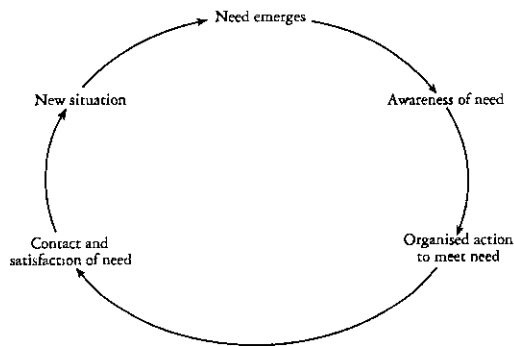


Figure 4: The Gestalt cycle

All facilitators experience emotional and psychological needs such as those for approval, love, recognition, companionship, stimulation, interest, acceptance and communication in their facilitative relationship (Knight & Scott 1997: 121). These writers also argue that, if a need is not met, it remains unsatisfied and disturbs the healthy pattern of emerging needs, which may restrict the development of the facilitator's practice and interrelationships. This emphasises the

importance of investigating the psychological experiences of facilitators and co-ordinators.

Educational change in South Africa became a reality with the introduction of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996) and the Higher Education Act (RSA 1997) promoting RBL as a new mode of delivery. For most role-players in education the implications of these developments are unknown and alarming, since change implies entering unknown territory. The following psychological reactions to higher educational change (both positive and negative) have been identified:

- Higher educational changes which involve job losses are potentially traumatic or a threat to survival (Beswick 1977: 50; Clarke 1982: 15-36).
- Changes in higher educational practices are unpopular and/or may cause resistance (Clarke 1982: 19-22).
- Higher educational change can be stimulating, challenging or rewarding where it improves learning methods (Clarke 1982: 27).
- Higher educational change causes participants inner conflict concerning the positive or negative outcomes of the process (Stenhouse 1975: 189, 220; Robson & Beary 1995: 12).

According to Basil & Cook (1974: 1-7) the following psychological and economical threats were identified as resulting from change:

- Insufficiency, both economical and psychological, where the skills required to keep an existing job or to find a new one, are absent.
- A lack of development opportunities, when access is denied due to inappropriate qualifications.
- The loss of a job, with consequent economical and psychological impact.
- A lack of self-worth that may lead to depression and possibly to carelessness and recklessness.

Change, especially in higher education, causes various emotions in different individuals, because some will associate it with anxiety and fear, whereas others will view it with hope, as a solution (Kirkpatrick 1985: 10).

According to Owen (1992: 184-237), the concept "change" can mean positive, negative or neutral emotions, attitudes, reactions and

behaviour. The present authors take issue with Owen as regards the existence of neutral emotions, attitudes, reactions or behaviour. In deciding to be neutral, an individual has already made a decision/choice. Change usually proceeds through a series of stages, and higher education is no exception (Halpern 1994: 277-88). By implementing the RBL innovation, higher educational change also causes facilitators and co-ordinators to experience the stages of change. Halpern (1994: 280-7) notes that the stages of change are often in line with Kübler-Ross's (1969: 38-138) stages of reactions to grief, namely:

Denial

In this first stage, the participant's level of involvement will fluctuate between the advocate ("That sounds good – in theory") and the adversary ("You can't make me") on the continuum. Feelings of uneasiness and ambivalence are present during this stage.

Resistance

Kübler-Ross (1969: 50-82) calls this the "fussing and fuming" stage. It appears that initial efforts towards change tend to be disorganised. Participants feel at risk at the outset of the innovation and start questioning it ('Why should I change?', 'What is in it for me?', 'Who's behind it, anyway?'). Feelings of diffuse, unfocused anxiety precipitated by a perceived threat or by anger are often expressed in terms of not having the time or resources to engage in the innovation.

Understanding

This is when the energy of resistance moves in the more positive and affirming direction of understanding the potential development of the innovation. Although still sceptical, the individual becomes more positively inclined towards the innovation (eg promoting/planning).

Campaign

This is the stage of Kübler-Ross's paradigm where the individual starts demonstrably letting go of the past and moving towards the

future. The attitude fluctuates between an eagerness to move ahead and reluctance/uncertainty about the action.

Collaboration

Acceptance is the main characteristic of this stage. The participant is now confident that the innovation can work well.

Institutionalisation

In this stage, the general opinion of the innovation is one of consensus. Supporting the innovation enables the individual to participate in conversations and activities.

The above-mentioned stages must be individualised to some extent. Kübler-Ross' paradigm allows for variations, yet captures the commonalities of the psychological experiences of change in higher education. Such change involves certain concerns, as with an innovation such as RBL. The Kübler-Ross stages also describe certain cognitive and affective experiences relating to the following feelings and attitudes: uneasiness; ambivalence; diffuse, unfocused anxiety; resistance; acceptance; consensus, and so on.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that the paradigm shift to RBL does trigger psychological experiences among facilitators and co-ordinators. However, these experiences are complex and individual. In order to ensure successful implementation of RBL within the South African context, policy-makers/managers have to take into account the specific problem areas of South African education which complicate RBL implementation.

Identifying the psychological experience of RBL among facilitators and co-ordinators is not only valuable in preventing certain adverse psychological reactions, but in developing strategies to cope more effectively with the RBL innovation.

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