

Reflection on my Foundation Degree in Inclusive Education so far, using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Introduction

For me, starting a Foundation Degree in Inclusive Education has been a journey fraught with self-doubt, and challenges but also transformative personal growth. To reflect on my experience so far, I will use Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, using the six stages of description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan as my framework to examine my expectations, emotional responses, and difficulties, as well as the skills I have developed and how these experiences have shaped my learning (Gibbs, 1988). This reflection will explore the insights I have gained in my resilience, self-compassion, and growth mindset in overcoming previous barriers while embracing new opportunities. This process will highlight my personal development and inform my future education practices.

Description

Reflecting on my academic journey, I recognise that a multitude of experiences have shaped my understanding and perspective. I started this degree with trepidation as I was acutely aware of my past struggles. I had previously found transitioning from a structured school environment to college challenging, resulting in achieving grades well below what I was capable of. This "transition distress" was exacerbated further when I moved away from home to university, avoidance behaviours led me to completely disengage from lectures and completely abandon my studies after three months (Hughes, 2016). Due to anxiety, I was a student who "expected to be happy with university life but instead found it to be the opposite" (AlKandari, 2020).

After leaving university, I entered the workforce, and I thrived in this environment. Whilst in employment, I was given the opportunity to pursue another degree but once the initial excitement had worn off, I felt overwhelmed with a fear of failure. However, before I had a chance to fully address this feeling, my life took an unexpected turn causing me to withdraw from my studies again. At the time I tried not to dwell on it too much, even though it was another blow to my self-esteem, I knew I was not the

only mature student drop-out. In 2016-17, 15.2% of mature undergraduate students did not continue in higher education after their first year, this is almost double the number of younger students (Hubble and Bolton, 2021).

After a brief hiatus from working and academia, I re-entered the workforce in a role that fitted in with family life and then finally embarked on a degree in Inclusive Education, again I was excited but questioned whether I could complete the course. However, after attending the induction event with the lecturers of the course and meeting some of the other mature students, I also felt a glimmer of hope.

Unlike the other degrees I had embarked on, the lecturers spent time actively listening and normalising any worries I had, they familiarised me with the campus and the course expectations. I also found comfort in hearing similar concerns from other mature students. This type of induction process can help new students settle in quicker to the “alien” university environment, positively impacting student retention and future success; indeed, it made an enormous difference in helping me feel a sense of belonging (Hughes, 2016). On the contrary, “contextualisation adds another element to the learning experience and can spark interest, curiosity, motivation and engagement with content” (Osika *et al.*, 2022). Over the past two years, I have engaged with a wide range of modules that have covered theories of learning and inclusion, as well as practical strategies for supporting diverse learners. Being able to link what I am learning with my employment as a Learning Support Assistant has allowed me to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world context, emphasising the importance of adaptability and creativity in a learning environment. However, it is also possible that my “adverse experiences” have fostered a “subsequent resilience” which has allowed me to thrive (Seery, Holman and Silver, 2010).

Feelings

Feelings of inadequacy marred my prior experiences with higher education. So, when I initially signed up for this degree, I felt an overwhelming sense of nervousness and self-doubt. I constantly questioned my capabilities and wondered if I would be able to stick with it; as students who are unable to manage their anxiety “may not follow through with their academic studies” (AlKandari, 2020). However, “quick and effective familiarisation with the new environment” can help to reduce

negative feelings quickly (Hughes, 2016). Similarly, Rogers (1951) states “that the individual, when free from forces which he believes are a threat to the self or the self-concept, will actualize the positive and constructive forces within him”.

Attending the course induction, I engaged with my lecturers who ensured my academic needs were met upon starting the degree, so I felt safe and secure. Like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, it created a solid foundation for me to build on, I felt a sense of belonging which increased my self-esteem; this enabled me to get involved in class discussions and competently complete my assignments, I started to feel capable of reaching my potential, experiencing a feeling of self-actualisation (Maslow, 2017).

The moment I realised that my experiences could contribute to my understanding of inclusivity in education was pivotal; I felt a sense of purpose and connection to the material. I found myself deeply interested in several topics, which encouraged me to explore further literature and audiobooks; it sparked curiosity and enjoyment in learning again.

Despite these positive developments, I still grappled with the fear of repeating past mistakes and anxiety. When I gained good marks from my lecturer, praise for my coursework or if a peer acknowledged my contribution to a lecture, I was simultaneously uplifted and paralysed by the fear of living up to their expectations. It was only through practising self-compassion and acknowledging my feelings that I began to address these issues. Recognising that I should not be overly critical of myself and that it was okay to make mistakes was crucial for my emotional well-being and academic progress.

Evaluation

Evaluating my experiences, I recognise several strengths and challenges. On the positive side, I have shifted my focus to learning from setbacks rather than being discouraged by them. After all, developing a growth mindset allows students to reach their full potential (Dweck, 2017). Similarly, through being critically reflective of my experiences and exploring my beliefs, I have engaged in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997).

I have developed a deeper understanding of inclusive education through my ability to engage with literature and seek out additional resources. Primarily, this has enhanced my potential to succeed further as “reading plays a vital role” in achieving higher marks in assignments (St Clair-Thompson, Graham and Marsham, 2018). Engaging in discussions and actively listening to feedback has enabled me to reflect on the importance of empathy and support in teaching, it has also highlighted my own personal learning needs. Being able to relate my learning to my work supports the view that education is a part of life (Dewey, 1963). Furthermore, my recent interactions with the career advisor opened my eyes to the breadth of job opportunities beyond traditional teaching roles, this has given me confidence in the versatility of this degree and future career possibilities.

Conversely, even though I have made great progress with engaging with the course material, I have found it difficult to develop consistent study habits and manage my time effectively. However, I have become more self-aware and know that my negative habits stem from occasionally feeling overwhelmed, which sometimes leads to procrastination. Additionally, my tendency toward perfectionism and avoidance of confronting my feelings sometimes hinders my progress. Embracing self-compassion and letting go of the fear of making mistakes, as well as seeking support when needed has been an essential lesson. I have learned that while striving for excellence is important, the need to be perfect is not. Indeed, as Socrates believed that “the life which is unexamined is not worth living” (Bates, 2019).

Analysis

Through this reflective process, I have identified several key themes that have influenced my journey in inclusive education. One of the most significant is the development of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017). Embracing a perspective that challenges are opportunities to learn has allowed me to reframe my understanding of setbacks. For example, rather than seeing a poor grade as a failure, I now view it as a chance to improve my study habits and seek additional support.

My initial fears were rooted in a history of academic challenges, which had fostered a belief that I was not capable of succeeding in higher education. This belief was further exacerbated by anxiety akin to imposter syndrome, a common phenomenon

among students, particularly those with non-linear educational paths (Clance and Imes, 1978).

Furthermore, the importance of self-compassion cannot be overstated. Learning to forgive myself for mistakes has been liberating and has fostered a more positive academic experience. This aligns with research indicating that self-compassion is linked to greater resilience and academic success (Neff, 2003).

Recent discussions with the career advisor have shifted my perspective on the potential of my degree, it has encouraged me to envision a future career in which I could use my skills in various other contexts other than teaching; such as policymaking, advocacy, or educational consultancy. “Mature students currently have better progression into highly skilled employment or further study than young students” (Office for Students, 2021).

Conclusion

As I continue this journey, I am committed to continuing this reflective practice, as I recognise the importance of learning from experiences and adapting my approach as I navigate new challenges. Dewey (1963) acknowledges this, with the belief that education should be a part of life and that the best learning occurs when students can relate the knowledge they have gained to the experience.

Gibbs (1988) model of reflection has proven effective in evaluating my experiences, but I am also open to exploring other reflective frameworks, such as Schön (1983), to enhance my ability to reflect in real-time during complex projects as this is something the Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle lacks. I will focus on refining my skills, nurturing my interests, and preparing myself for the diverse opportunities that await in the field of inclusive education. This degree is not just an academic pursuit; it is a testament to my resilience, determination, and belief in my capacity to achieve my goals. With each step forward, I am proving to myself and my children that persistence pays off, and that with the right mindset and support, we can overcome any obstacle in our path.

Reflecting on my journey so far in this Foundation Degree in Inclusive Education, I am heartened by the progress I have made and the lessons I have learned. While my initial trepidation and anxiety were significant hurdles, they have also contributed to my self-development. By facing my fears and adopting a growth mindset, along with seeking support and fostering self-compassion, I have begun to dismantle the barriers that have previously held me back (Dweck, 2017).

However, it is important to note that some people with a history of prior lifetime adversity are the least affected by more recent adverse or stressful events; which suggests “that, in moderation, whatever does not kill us may indeed make us stronger” (Seery, Holman and Silver, 2010).

Action Plan

Going forward, I intend to focus on several key areas to continue my development.

- I will create a reminder on my calendar for regular review of my CV and accompanying cover letter, updating them as required, ensuring that I am prepared for future opportunities.
- I will actively seek feedback from peers, lecturers, and my current employer to utilise their insights, so I can build my confidence and refine my personal brand.
- I will continue to use reflective practice to critically evaluate my thoughts and experiences constructively. Using this information, I will look to make small, consistent changes in my daily habits to help reinforce my growth.
- I will embrace challenges rather than shy away from them, recognising that they are essential for my personal and professional development.

In summary, my journey in Inclusive Education is just beginning, and I am optimistic about the future. By employing Gibbs Reflective Cycle, I have gained valuable insights into my experiences, allowing me to acknowledge the progress I have made and the steps I need to take to continue along this path (Gibbs, 1988).

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