

The Shoebox activity: a powerful tool for learning

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Abstract

This article explores an activity that has been used in many different training contexts from Initial Teacher Training (ITT), Advanced Learning Coach (ALC) training through to different 'in-house' training sessions and explains how it has been adapted by other teachers for their own contexts and how the learners themselves experience it. The activity is explained in practice and then linked to the theory of reflective practice to show how it can support and extend learners' thinking about themselves, their different roles and their individual teaching. Different perspectives have been drawn on as reflections on the activity and the work includes both tutor and learner comments about undertaking the activity. Their contributions together with personal reflections show the power of the idea from a simple icebreaker to something more profound that contributes to personal development and learning.

Key words

Reflective Practice; Icebreakers; Coaching; Artefacts; Analogies and Metaphors in Teaching.

Introduction

The activity concerned in this article is called a Shoebox activity and the following scenarios provide examples of contexts in which it can be effectively used.

- It is week two of a Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) course; the Teacher Educator has covered all the paperwork and induction processes for the course and now needs to get the group gelled and working together. Clearly an icebreaker is required.
- It is the first day of a team training session with members from different departments that work together but who don't really know each other; the trainer needs some sort of activity that will get the group talking.
- It is the first day of the second year Certificate in Education/Professional Graduate Certificate in Education and the group consists of most of the Year 1 learners with some new additions who had gained Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) from other teacher training courses; the group needs to bond as a whole before moving onto the taxing Year 2 assignments. The Teacher Educator needs an effective activity in order to move the learners on in their thinking about theory and practice.

These are real examples of how a Shoebox activity has been used as a powerful and sometimes emotive means of developing learning and as an initial icebreaker within teacher education. This article goes on to illustrate how this activity can be adapted in different ways and within different contexts in order to show how effective it can be in both bonding groups into cohesive wholes and as a means of reflection through the use of metaphors and analogies.

The Shoebox activity

The Shoebox activity idea was 'borrowed' from another Teacher Educator who was more experienced and who passed her ideas to a new team at the Further Education (FE) college where she was an External Verifier on behalf of an awarding body. This was as long ago as 1994 when the teacher training courses were based on the competence-based approach to assessment methods. Since then the activity has been used regularly as an icebreaker on the second week of the course as it has proved to be extremely effective and can *'help overcome the natural nervousness when meeting new people'* (<http://www.imaginal.nl/icebreakertheory.htm> [accessed 21 February 2011]).

Since 1994, teacher education has undergone many changes and iterations with a 'Stage One, Stage Two' awarding body model followed by a Certificate in Education/PGCE run through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), from the Further Education National Training Organisations (FENTO) to the Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) Professional Standards with both full-time and part-time courses. Throughout all these changes the Shoebox activity has survived intact but has also been adapted for different contexts as well as moving beyond being merely an 'icebreaker' towards a powerful tool for developing reflection on practice.

The Shoebox as an icebreaker

As an icebreaker, the trainee teachers are asked at the end of the first session to bring to the following session a shoebox, or any other suitable container, into which they are requested to place six items that reflect their personality or other relevant items that they are willing to share with the rest of the group. In the next session the trainees need to be prepared to talk about each one of the items in turn and to explain its significance to the rest of the group. The only ground rule is that none of the items should offend the rest of the group.

During the following session the Teacher Educator goes first by revealing each of his/her items in turn and explaining why it is significant thereby revealing a bit about their own personality and experiences. Having personally undertaken this

activity for over 15 years it has been found that the first five items remain constant; a small shoe, a passport, theatre tickets, a book of cats and a crystal to illustrate in turn the love of fancy shoes and being a shoemaker's granddaughter, an ardent traveller who works to go on holiday, a thespian and art lover, an ardent reader and cat lover, and finally someone who believes in the power of crystals as healing agents and energy sources. The final item changes every year and 'finds' its way naturally into the box at the last moment and usually represents the 'person' at that particular moment in time. For example, one year it was a set of leaving cards following a job change, another year a rock to represent the loss of a parent and another a bound thesis representing success at doctoral study. Next time round it will inevitably be different, reflecting changes in life experiences gained along the way.

Following the tutor example, each trainee takes turns to reveal their items and to talk about each one of their objects. There are photos of loved ones, both past and present, a myriad of items ranging from books, CDs, paintbrushes, computer mice and lipsticks through to bottle openers and corkscrews. Each one is considered, looked at by the trainee, reflected upon and it is clear from this process that each one means something to the person concerned. The order of revealing items is left to the group, and sometimes the whole activity takes up the entire lesson. However it is worth it because the result is a bonded group, who know a little about each other, can see similarities and differences, and who can form and reform alliances with each other based on some form of trust and shared understandings. A word of caution however; the activity can cause tears as an expression of the emotions that relate to the object in question. It is the role and responsibility of the Teacher Educator to deal with these very personal and deep self-reflections within a group situation.

The shift to reflective practice

Reflective practice is an overarching theme in teacher education with many definitions ranging from Schön (1983), Dewey (1910) and Kolb (1984). Recent work describes reflective practice as remaining a '*matter of debate*' (Parsons and Stephenson, 2005: p. 96), whilst Williams and Grudnoff (2011) claim the concept '*is used somewhat loosely to embrace a wide range of concepts and strategies, and is informed by diverse theoretical and philosophical orientations*' (p. 281). Reflective practice is also about conscious control over individual learning, (Gunstone and Northfield, 1994) and it is argued that in this Shoebox activity the process of reflecting on items representative of personality begins the process of self-analysis and evaluation that Gunstone and Northfield believe is needed as a key feature of reflective practice. Here, the process of reflection is practical and focused on self but the sharing of items engages the trainee teacher to see different perspectives and, as noted above, develop '*shared understandings*' which Chambers notes involves a process of shared understandings that rests on the premise that the learners are involved in the '*construction of such narratives as not merely "component parts" but "shapers", enabled through experience, in using story as a medium for facilitating understanding and generating new knowledge*' (p. 403). Through the process of sharing narratives therefore, the Shoebox could be perceived as a powerful tool for enabling reflective practice. To support this premise, Chambers describes narrative as a conception of reflective practice which manifests itself both through the narrative and the subsequent reflections on that narrative. This idea sits well in the Shoebox activity as the learner must explain in narrative why the item is so significant to them. They are also asked to write a reflection on the activity and hence the process of reflection is reinforced through writing about the experience of revealing the objects chosen. It could also be argued that the activity takes the process of reflection one stage further by allowing the learner space to reflect on which items are to be placed in the box and why these were significant.

Further 'shift' and deeper learning

Knowles (1993) notes the value of life-history accounts in pre-service teacher education but comments that writing these may present a partial perspective that the writer has some control over. The concept of '*personal internal dialogue*' (Knowles, 1993: p. 78) that is ingrained and results from long-held beliefs about teaching and their own experiences can, according to them, remain private and hidden. It is argued that the Shoebox activity could be one way of overcoming some of these constraints to reflection if it is adapted as a form of structured reflection on practice. With this in mind over the years the Shoebox activity has been adapted and revised to suit different learners. For example when faced with a new second year Certificate in Education/PGCE group, the activity has been adapted so that the trainee uses the box to represent items that reflect their teaching. This time the focus for the Teacher Educator is aimed at deepening the trainees' reflection based on practice which can then be linked to theory in a more grounded way. As Kubler LaBoskey notes in Calderhead and Gates (1993), '*Pre-service teachers need to be encouraged to reflect on as many domains as possible...in ways that embrace both practical and theoretical content*' (p. 35). She defined trainee teachers as Alert Novices or Common Sense Thinkers based on their spontaneous reflectivity and whilst these terms are not applicable here, her comment regarding moving them on as Pedagogical Thinkers is appropriate to the way that the Shoebox activity has been developed. With more advanced trainees, the aim is to allow reflection on their growing practice and to link the item to some aspect of theory covered in teacher training. At this stage of their experience, interesting items appear that reveal a lot about the way that the individual trainee operates in the classroom. For example, during one session a trainee brought out a Barbie doll which was used as an analogy for teaching the concept of buying and selling commodities within a Business Studies Curriculum, Barbie being a representation of the 'oldest trade in the world', prostitution. Another revealed Russian dolls as a means of explaining how she perceived teaching to consist of 'layers' with the learner at the heart. Here the learners are using their own metaphors and analogies to illustrate their teaching and hence produce self-created examples derived from practice through which they were able to illuminate theory. Gunning (1996) argues that self-created analogies are generally more effective than those made up by others and in the example above the illustrations are powerful as an insight into their personal world of teaching. Within teacher education it could be argued that this process of developing self-analogies aids the process of self-reflection on

practice that the concept of reflective practice implies. It could be seen as one way to adopt 'alternative interpretations' about practice that Calderhead and Gates (1993: p. 7) advocate.

In addition, this activity has another dimension; that of the artefact or visual representation of feelings and experiences that are personal in nature and which can stir other reflections and emotions. It is possible that the use of such an artefact in some way illustrates what Chambers describes as the way that *'the metaphor acts as a bridge for understanding a new situation in which some aspects remain consistent whilst some change'* (p. 406). These ideas also have resonance with the thinking of Vygotsky (1978) on mediation, sign use and tools, where Vygotsky notes that the use of signs and gestures can be a form of internalisation, where this is the *'internal reconstruction of an external operation'* (p. 56). By using the Shoebox it is possible that personal teaching events are reconstructed and internalised in different ways with the artefact being the outward sign that is used to communicate this process.

Once the practical activity is over it can be linked to reflection on practice and hence to the theoretical models that demonstrate this concept. For example, the learner can be guided through Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle where the Shoebox becomes the concrete experience; the reflective observation comes via the reflection on the activity both as a class and as an individual, with the active experimentation and abstract conceptualism following their teaching practice, observations and feedback as well as the theory that is taught alongside this. In this example, the reflective process takes place over time and can be reinforced at intervals through revision of the Shoebox activity through different lenses such as the learner perspective and peer feedback, and at different points in the learners' learning about teaching. In addition, this process can be linked to the concept of deep and surface learning where deep learners are *'reflective about what they learn and how they learn; it is double-loop learning'* (West-Burnham and Coates, 2005: p. 37). It is argued that the process of learning about teaching is enhanced through reflecting on the objects chosen to illustrate that teaching, and that the reflection on why each item represents that teaching is an important part of deeper learning about the process. Feedback and questions from their peers also serve as another layer of interrogation of that practice, a process of collaborative learning which is also vital to teacher development.

The Shoebox and coaching

The examples used so far are from within a teacher training context; the following is an example of where it has been adapted for different training needs and for a different purpose. A year out of teacher education presented an opportunity to develop the Shoebox within a National Training Initiative instigated by the Learning and Skills Improvement Agency (LSIS) in 2005. The opportunity came about through involvement in the ALC training between 2008 and 2010 which was designed to allow development from the Subject Learning Coach (SLC) training established in 2005. The idea behind this ALC was one of sustainability with ALCs in organisations within the Learning and Skills Sector, who had successfully completed the SLC training, training other SLCs in-house. The SLC training was based on the work of Joyce et al (1996) who noted that peer feedback and coaching was essential for effective staff development and the training used coaching models informed on established theorists such as Boyatzis (2000), Whitmore (2005) and Goleman (1998) with principles such as 'Intentional Change', the 'GROW' (Goal, Reality, Options and Will) model of coaching and Emotional Intelligence to demonstrate the coaching process. The first ALC training session in December 2008 was designed to be a pilot and it was this that provided the opportunity to adapt the Shoebox activity within a different context. Here the trainees were requested to place six items into their box that reflected their work as an SLC and as a coach in general and during this session the activity was undertaken in small groups due to time constraints.

In this context the items revealed a range of images that showed the power of coaching and the effects on teaching and learning that coaching can have. Items brought out of the box here included a revolving head that illustrated the way that a coach has to use many faces in supporting a coachee, magnifying glasses and mirrors to illustrate the way that a coach has to reflect and focus on what the coachee says and 'bendy dolls' that illustrated the way a coach needs to be flexible and stretched during the coaching process. The aim of the Shoebox here was to reflect on coaching practice and to review the SLC coaching models in order to move on with the new role of being an ALC. In terms of reflective practice this sits well with Parsons and Stephenson's (2005) definition that *'reflection is a process of dynamic action and learning that will enable students to develop their practice in the light of their analysis and evaluation'* (p. 97), since the activity attempts here to link learning undertaken on the SLC training to the process of being a coach. Evaluations about the activity were positive hence its place in the subsequent training over 2009 and 2010 was assured with over 600 ALCs using the activity within the training session.

The Shoebox as a means of staff development

During the ALC training between 2008 and 2010 the team involved in the delivery of the training underwent restructuring and this provided an opportunity for the Shoebox activity to be adapted for in-house training. Within this context it was used effectively as an icebreaker with a group of people who worked together but who did not really know each other well. The session was designed to be an 'away day' following the restructuring and here the activity was adapted so that the participants of the training put in three items that reflected their different past working experiences and three items that reflected their personalities. The aim here was to recognise strengths and experiences that can remain hidden in a working environment but which can influence the way that people behave. In some respects the box was a form of Johari Window (Luft and Ingham, 1955) that allowed participants to show a little about their private self and hence increase the potential for change and development. One participant of this training comments that she was *"a little unsure of the relevance to the content*

of the day” and that it was “challenging to identify the number of items and whether I would be able to articulate their meaning”. This same participant goes on to note that within the work context the activity gave her “insight into some of the priorities that colleagues gave to ‘items’ in their Shoebox and how this affected the way they behaved in the workplace and also identified some of the values that they held close to them”.

Other contexts/other teachers

One of the joys of teaching is seeing other tutors adapt resources to suit other contexts and this section outlines how the Shoebox has been adapted by different colleagues within different training contexts. One scenario presented here involves building a team for a new project based on the National Leadership Programme (NLP). Here the tutor concerned used the activity as a means of getting participants to reflect on their strengths and to consider how the Shoebox items could illustrate what their own particular values could bring to the team. In this example, shells were used to illustrate listening skills and elastic bands to represent flexibility. During the session one participant was so taken by the activity that she intended to include it in the NLP training itself as the activity had been met previously and was perceived then as a ‘powerful activity’. This was subsequently reinforced by undertaking it some time later within a different context. This is an example of how the Shoebox activity can illustrate the concept of Emotional Intelligence with the potential to display and reveal emotions and feelings.

Other examples showing the use of the Shoebox as a means of displaying emotional intelligence come from a ‘Coaching at Work’ training session accredited by the Institute for Leadership and Management (ILM) where the focus was on the participant’s values as a coach and the characteristics that the participant thought they would bring to enhance their role of a coach. In this instance the developing coaches were provided with a choice as to what the Shoebox items could represent. Items emerging frequently were, for example, maps to represent a journey and of particular significance for one learner was an expensive porcelain cup and saucer. This was used to explain that the coach wanted to create the “best environment for the coaches”. Here the analogy was the supportive ‘cup of tea’ in an expensive and delicate drinking vessel which revealed a great deal about the individual’s values and beliefs about the process of coaching.

An ALC who experienced the Shoebox for the first time during the pilot training comments that she has since used the activity within several scenarios herself. She explains:

“When I delivered the SLC PTP [Professional Teaching Programme] in college to internal staff and from other providers I used it for my introduction session as I thought this a good way to identify those who were creative and would be good with active learning. It helped me then to pair up those with good ideas and those who initially came with lots of paper such as schemes of work and lesson plans. I much prefer the objects to demonstrate the person, one brought some wine and another pills for the many headaches we experience in the classroom”.

(ALC Respondent, 2010).

She notes that she had also used the Shoebox activity in staff development as a means of raising standards in teaching and learning in FE and with students “for employability purposes – getting them to identify what skills they needed for a job and how they could represent some of the qualities”. Here, the activity was adapted yet again since this tutor used her own Shoebox to show items that could and should not be used during interviews. This example is an interesting development that highlights how, with an element of creativity, the Shoebox can be used as a powerful means of learning as well as reflection.

Conclusion

It is not the intent of this article to explore in detail how the theory of the Shoebox can inform reflective practice through reference to the use of metaphors and analogies; this has been explored extensively in more authoritative works. Rather the intent here has been to suggest practical activities that link the concept of reflective practice and the professional development of teachers within a teacher training context. It has also attempted to look beyond this and to illustrate how, with creativity, it is an easy exercise that can cross boundaries and contexts and one that can be used as an effective learning tool as well. As such the Shoebox has the power to evoke emotional intelligence since it can be a tool for ‘learning from practice which is affective as well as cognitive’ (Chambers, 2003: p. 412) as the NLP example shows.

Furthermore, it can be used as an icebreaker to gel groups and to get groups working together through revealing thoughts and feelings to others within a supportive and collaborative framework. It can be used within different contexts and adapted to serve many purposes depending on the context of the training. It can also be used to create a stable and coherent group dynamic within lessons and break down preconceived ideas and possible prejudices that can exist in groups if left unchallenged. Trainee teachers are trained to do group work but sometimes are not provided with an effective framework for how to do this effectively. Experience using the Shoebox since 1994 has indicated that if this framework is established early on through icebreakers such as the Shoebox it can be a powerful means of sharing experiences through metaphors and analogies which can lead to tolerance, empathy and cohesiveness which then lead to group learning based on trust. As such it is a powerful tool for inclusion and profound learning that also enhances reflection on practice and the reasons for such practice.

The argument for the use of the Shoebox activity therefore rests on its use as a repository for different artefacts, mirrors and facets of personality and experiences which are metaphors which can then be used through narrative as a means of

verbalising self-concepts. Studies of student teachers suggest that there is a 'close relationship between the personal and the professional in teachers' work' (Calderhead and Shorrock, 1997: p. 15) which is based on their past experiences and that metaphors can be used as a means to conceptualise the self. The early use of the Shoebox as an icebreaker goes some way to support this thinking. These authors also note studies by Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1991) who found that these metaphors can change over time and become more 'stable professional metaphors' which can influence the students' thinking about themselves. The later use of the Shoebox as a means of illustrating teaching is an example of how these metaphors can develop and form powerful narratives of teaching practice. Finally the various adaptations of the activity show its potential as a tool for exploring values, beliefs and skills as well as a learning tool within a myriad of contexts other than teacher education.

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