The enactment of metalearning capacity: Using drama to help raise students' awareness of the self as learner

S C Ward (a), R. Connolly (b) J. H. F. Meyer (c)

(a) School of Education, Durham University, UK; (b) Drama Department, University of Sunderland, UK; (c) Faculty of Engineering, Architecture and Information Technology, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia.

Postal address:

Sophie Claire Ward
School of Education,
Durham University,
Durham, UK

This paper reports on a study that investigated understanding of learning amongst a cohort of students entering higher education by engaging them, via drama-based activities, with the process of their own learning (metalearning). The study combined Meyer's (2004) Reflections on Learning Inventory (RoLI) and Performance Based Research (PBR) in order to raise students' awareness of the self as learner and encourage them to become researchers into their own learning. The aim was to discover how the cultivation of students' understanding of their own learning might aid them in developing learning strategies suited to the demands of undergraduate study, and to help formulate study support mechanisms to enhance students' learning experience. Findings are (1) that the metalearning activities stimulated students to interrogate and move beyond previously unconscious approaches to learning; (2) the metalearning activities enabled educators to understand how they might facilitate students' development as independent learners.

Keywords: metalearning; Reflections on Learning Inventory; Performance Based Research; study support

Introduction

This paper reports on a study of the understanding of learning amongst a cohort of ten students entering a BA Honours Drama programme at a university in the north of England. The project was funded by PALATINE (the Higher Education Academy's Performing Arts Learning and Teaching Innovation Network) in recognition of the need to help students adapt to the demands of higher education. Within the UK, various studies (Greenbank, 2007; Reid, 2005; QAA, 2005) have highlighted the disjunction between school/community college education, which places emphasis on memorisation, replication and classroom study, and university education, which places emphasis on the higher level skills of analysis, critical evaluation and independent study. The difference between these learning cultures makes the transition from school/college to university problematic for many students. For example, in 2006 a survey of 250 UK university staff revealed that 'lecturers are forced to postpone courses to the second year of undergraduate degrees to make time for remedial teaching

and to develop students' independent learning skills' (Shepherd, 2006). Although not all students enter university unprepared for the demands of higher education, the problem is longstanding and is not confined to the UK. For example, Vermunt (2005, p. 229) identified 'reproduction directed learning' amongst students in the Netherlands who came to university straight from school, and found that such learning compromised students' academic performance. The present study therefore aims to explore how university entrants might be helped to interrogate their learning engagement and adapt themselves as quickly as possible to the requirements of higher education in order to succeed academically.

In previous studies of students' learning, Meyer's (2004) Reflections on Learning Inventory (RoLI) has demonstrated the capacity to help students adjust to undergraduate study by developing their metalearning capacity; defined after Biggs (1985) as the individual's awareness of learning in a given context and control of learning in that context (see for example Norton, Owens & Clark, 2004; Lindblom-Ylänne, 2004). The RoLI introduces the 'awareness' aspect of metalearning by asking students to respond to 80 statements concerned with their beliefs about learning and study practices in a specific context, and then presenting them with a summary of what they have disclosed in the form of a bar chart containing 16 ranked observables. The RoLI 'operationalises motivations, intentions, conceptions and processes of learning that traverse an accumulative (surface)-transformative (deep) emphasis (Lucas & Meyer, 2004, p. 460), and a non-evaluative guide explains what the observables in the profile represent conceptually (for a sample profile, see www.rolisps.com). The RoLI thus provides a basis for increasing students' awareness of how their learning strategies correspond, or fail to correspond, to those strategies considered to be effective in higher education.

In the present study, the RoLI was embedded in a week-long series of metalearning activities that utilised Performance Based Research (PBR) to further interrogate students' conceptions of learning. PBR is rooted in the tradition of Participatory Action Research, and employs drama as 'a way of creating and fostering understanding' about everyday life (Pelias, 2008, pp. 185-6). Using PBR, knowledge is not simply called up and 'expressed in discursive statements by informants' but represented through 'action, enactment or performance' (Fabian, 1990 in Leavey, 2009, p. 168). The present study made use of PBR in such a spirit, deploying students as researchers into their own learning (Lincoln, 1995); allowing them to 'create their own knowledge from their own experiences' (Llamputtong & Rumbold, 2008, p. 18), and providing a means for them to bring into focus ideas that may otherwise have been difficult to explore. In combining the RoLI and PBR, the present study builds upon, and extends, the methodology of research into metalearning (see for example Ward & Meyer, 2010; Meyer, Ward & Latreille, 2009).

Data collection

During 'Welcome Week' in autumn 2009, data were gathered from a cohort of ten students entering a BA Honours Drama programme. The students (identified as S1-S10) varied in their age; experience of the performing arts, and experience of academic study. The research method employed provides a model of how a given discipline might be used to interrogate itself.

• Day one: The students were presented with a series of propositions about learning based on the subject area's benchmark statements and level descriptors, and were invited to take part in a seminar discussion in which they interrogated the dynamic between their assumptions about higher education and the requirements of their new learning environment. The students were split into groups and exchanged ideas about their conceptions of learning, and gave poster presentations about these conceptions. As a homework task, the students were asked to think about their learning experiences prior to entering university and to complete the RoLI with these experiences in mind. The students were asked to reflect upon their RoLI profile, and write a short monologue about a learning experience that had been particularly meaningful to them.

• Day two: The students were asked to share their monologues with the rest of the group and to begin the process of taking on roles and acting out incidents; telling new stories or sharing ideas that the monologues provoked. Via this strategy, the students were asked to develop both a form and content for the enactment of their reflection on learning. The students were assigned a tutor to support them in their work: when asked for advice, the tutor told the students to exchange ideas and reflect upon their RoLI profile. This part of the process lasted for two days.

• Day four: The students enacted their dramas (circa 20 minutes each), which were video recorded. As a homework task, the students were asked to write a 1,500 word reflective essay about what they had learnt about their own learning strategies during the above activities.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted on three data sets: video of the enactments; reflective essays; RoLI profiles.

The enactments combined storytelling, monologue and dramatisation, and focused on experiences of learning in the classroom, within the workplace and through social encounters. In most cases, they were constructed around a 'triumph over adversity' arc, with students enacting the journey from being trapped in a situation to overcoming their problems in one fashion or another. The enactments and reflective essays dramatised and/or made reference to such things as motivation for learning, study strategies, attitudes towards feedback, and emotional engagement with learning. The enactments and reflective essays were examined in conjunction with the students' RoLI profiles, which had stimulated the students' reflection on learning and provided the springboard to their creative work.

The data were analysed qualitatively, using a method devised by Meyer et al. (2009) based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A range of themes emerged from the data (for example, 'reference to influence of peers'; 'reference to influence of school teachers'; 'reference to success'). The data were analysed for evidence of potentially effective or ineffective learning engagement in the context of higher education, using Meyer's (1991) concept of 'study orchestration'; defined by Lindblom-Ylänne (2004, p. 406) as 'how students direct their resources in a specific learning context'. According to Meyer (1991; 2000), study orchestration can display both 'conceptual consonance' and 'conceptual dissonance'. Put simply, students who display 'conceptual consonance' demonstrate an approach to learning

that is consistent with the demands of the learning task/environment, while students with 'conceptual dissonance' display an approach to learning that is inconsistent with the demands of the learning task/environment (Meyer, 2000, p. 9).

Evidence of conceptual consonance is displayed in Table 1, and evidence of conceptual dissonance is displayed in Table 2:

Table 1. Conceptual consonance

ID	RoLI profile	Enactment	Reflective essay
S1	Foregrounds: 'Seeing things differently'; 'Rereading a text'; 'Knowing about learning'	Juxtaposes memories of conversations with his father and 'Googling' in order to discover more about his ancestral homeland. Describes the 'Festival of Lights'; the divide between light and dark, and the partition between his life and his father's life. States that he 'was on a journey' to learn about his heritage.	Claims the RoLI enabled him to 'really focus on my learning pattern, which I had never thought of. I think once you have learned what are your strengths and what are your weaknesses, you can really open your heart and broaden your horizons, start thinking outside the box, welcoming things you might have not even thought of'.
S2	Foregrounds: 'Seeing things differently'; 'Relating ideas'; 'Memorising after understanding'	Recalls her first encounter with Boal's 'mirroring' during rehearsals for a play. She describes this experience of learning as 'communication' and the 'breaking down of barriers', and claims that learning is about 'getting rid of fear'.	Reflects upon the metalearning activities: 'Having been inspired by the others' work I was able to focus on making my own piece and use the issues that were brought up from our discussion to help in rewriting my own piece...By using these new strategies throughout the rest of my education I will be able to achieve goals set to me with more ease'.
S3	Foregrounds: 'Relating ideas'; 'Seeing things differently'; 'Rereading a text'	Recalls a maths lesson, feeling like 'the idiot in the class'. Her teacher explained things to her, one-on-one, and she discovered she *could* understand maths. She came to realise that 'communication is key to my learning' and that if she cannot understand something 'I will swallow my pride' and ask for explanation.	States: 'If I was learning any other monologue, I have always used repetition to learn it, but have often struggled. Reflecting back now I can see that perhaps I need to try a different learning strategy'.
S4	Foregrounds: 'Rereading a text'; 'Repetition aids understanding'; 'Memorising with understanding'	Recalls working with the David Glass ensemble and being asked to 'put away the script' and 'play with the characters'; an experience she describes as 'liberating'. As a result, 'gone were all the preconceived ideas' about the characters; replaced instead by 'solid knowledge of real people'.	States: 'On reflection, when I now look at my own methods of learning, I realise that though these methods might have worked for me in the past, I may be stuck in a rut, and should not discount trying new methods in the future...Whatever happens my philosophy will be that when you stop learning, you stop living'.
S5	Foregrounds: 'Seeing things differently'; 'Knowing about learning'; 'Relating ideas'	Explains that she decided to recite a quotation, given to her by someone, which taught her about herself. The quotation referred to the 'queer, divine dissatisfaction' that artists feel with their work', and the importance of being 'open to the urges that motivate you' and of not 'holding back'.	States: 'I am aware, that in the in the past, my pursuit of perfection has proved on occasion to be my own undoing. Placing far too high an expectation on myself has only served as a block to learning, and has ultimately been demoralizing... My aim therefore would be to not become complacent, but to relax a little, embrace the experience yet remain focused, not to question but to keep the channel open'.
S9	Foregrounds: 'Seeing things differently'; 'Memorising with understanding'; 'Relating ideas'	Recalls being afraid prior to a job interview and sitting up late at night reading a book, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway.* The words 'clicked' in her mind: she felt empowered. Although the interview was not wonderful, it did not matter, 'I'd done it; I'd taken a risk'.	Recalls a history teacher who 'asked more questions than he answered and would always end the day with something thought-provoking and inspiring'. As a result, 'My work became my own, rather than other people's thoughts re-hashed to form an essay... I think that to give people the tools to learn and for individuals to reach their own conclusions is a far more powerful way of learning than to bombard them with facts to learn'.
S10	Foregrounds: 'Seeing things differently'; 'Relating ideas'; 'Memorising after understanding'	Recalls suffering a back injury during her final year at Musical Theatre college. As a result of the injury, 'I realised that for a long time I had been playing safe and was afraid of making mistakes' and that 'my potential stretched beyond the restrictions that I had subconsciously put in place'.	Focuses upon the issue of feedback, stating: 'Although some people see criticism as fault finding, with no purpose other than to be a personal insult, constructive criticism is altogether dissimilar...Learning to take constructive criticism is probably one of my biggest learning breakthroughs to date'.

Table 2. Conceptual dissonance

ID	RoLI profile	Enactment	Reflective essay
S6	Foregrounds: 'Learning is fact based'; 'Memorising as rehearsal'; 'Rereading a text'	Recalls studying biology at school and feeling 'too stupid to understand it', and thinking 'Maybe I'm un-teachable, maybe there's something wrong with me'. She attended a study support session in which the teacher used comparisons: it was like a 'like switching on inside me' and I could 'think outside the box…It's all about finding a new perspective'.	States: 'At school although I realised I was influenced by visual learning I was also a passive learner as a lot of teachers teach that way, so for me that was the instinctive way for me to learn and all the other ways are just to help me get a better grasp of what is going on'.
S7	Foregrounds: 'Learning is fact based'; 'Memorising before understanding'; 'Fragmentation'	Recalls feeling intimated by the work of Stanislavski, whose words held 'no meaning for her' and who seemed to be mocking her 'creative exploits'. The situation was turned around through the intervention of a teacher, who 'tore my eyes open to the theory of Stanislavski'. As a result, 'I got it'.	S7 describes feeling 'confused' and being unable to 'think outside the box', and blames her rigid approach to learning for this, stating 'my brain automatically went into academic mode' when she was told that the Welcome Week activity was 'about learning'.
S8	Foregrounds: 'Rereading a text'; 'Fragmentation'; 'Learning by example'	Recalls working in a part-time job and writing songs. She identifies her learning breakthrough as the moment she discovered that the audience liked her music: she had been 'so nervous' beforehand and was thrilled that 'people had enjoyed my song'.	S8 identifies mixed feelings about her learning, saying on the one hand that she does not need to 'change my learning strategy', and on the other that she should 'let go' of learning strategies that are holding her back.

Findings

The triangulation of methods (RoLI; enactment; reflective essay) yielded similar findings in terms of how the students positioned themselves as passive or proactive learners. Thus, students who displayed evidence of reproductive/passive learning engagement in their RoLI profiles (foregrounding behaviour such as 'Memorising before understanding') enacted dramas in which they were 'rescued' from ignorance by teachers, and wrote about being frightened and/or confused by learning. Meanwhile, the students who displayed evidence of deep learning engagement in their RoLI profiles (foregrounding behaviour such as 'Seeing things differently') enacted dramas in which they took control of a learning experience, and wrote about feeling empowered by conquering their fears. Overall, the students who demonstrated conceptual consonance identified the value of independent learning; appeared confident about their learning, and were receptive to feedback. In contrast, the students who demonstrated conceptual dissonance appeared to be detached from the learning process; appeared to lack of control over their learning, and displayed evidence of vulnerability in the learning environment. The validity of the findings was confirmed by the performance of the students in their first piece of assessed work in drama following the metalearning project: the students who displayed conceptual dissonance produced essays that were weaker than those of the students who displayed conceptual consonance (that is, they did not display as much evidence of the higher level skills of analysis, critical evaluation and independent study).

Most students produced RoLI profiles that indicated that they had entered university with a good predisposition to undergraduate study, a discovery also made in studies using larger

samples (for example, Ward & Meyer, 2010). Notwithstanding this good predisposition to undergraduate study, students in the present study claimed, in their reflective essays, that the metalearning project had inspired them to adopt a new perspective on learning that was better suited to the demands of higher education. For example:

S10: I think [the metalearning project] has made me aware of just how pro-active I need to be over the course of the year and how I should open my mind to new ideas and perspectives, which will broaden my knowledge and enable me to progress in all aspects of the programme.

S3: We learn throughout our whole lives and I felt that this was a stepping stone in the right direction and would help me start to think about my learning in a more active way. I will no longer use the basic learning techniques that have now become stale and will open my mind to a fresher outlook on learning.

S1: This exercise has really enabled me to learn more about me. The learning inventory response graph made me aware of how I work. What my strengths are and what I need to work on, even if I got a bit confused! The monologue tells me that I can indeed put pen to paper if the occasion arises. It felt great to be part of an ensemble again and working on something which is important in everyday life.

These comments echo those made by students in studies conducted in Hong Kong, Australia and the UK (Ward, Meyer & Shanahan, 2006; Meyer et al., 2009), and further confirm the value that students attach to the RoLI.

In the present study, the enactment provided a dynamic perspective for developing metalearning capacity that was personal and meaningful for the students, and which went beyond the bounds of the RoLI. The quotation from student S1 (see above) indicates how his reflection on learning, which was stimulated by the RoLI, was made personal by the enactment. Through performing his reflection on learning, abstract ideas became a lived experience that student S1 valued as 'important in everyday life', and this experience enabled him to 'learn more about me'. Other students also discussed how the enactment enabled them to explore their identity. For example:

S2: Having been inspired by the others' work I was able to focus on making my own piece, and use the issues that were brought up from our discussion to help in rewriting my own piece. I focused more on how the learning breakthrough affected me as a person rather than how it was significant in my educational career.

This finding resonates with Gallagher's (2007) claim about the utility of drama in research:

I would suggest that to expressly create ethnographic scenes from classroom-based research, to use theatre as metaphor in order to make explicit the performances of identity in these charged environments, is to put the "once removed" frame around these "data" but also to keep alive the immediacy of the discourse and the tensions and theatrical turns of everyday life. (Gallagher, 2007, p. 106)

It would appear, then, that the RoLI made manifest the students' learning engagement, and that this knowledge became 'real' when it was applied to writing monologues and embodied

through enactment. This finding is consistent with Barab et al's (in Jackson, 2004) account of knowledge:

Knowledge is not some ontological substance that lies in people's heads (or in the pages of text books) waiting to be actualised through cognitive processes. Instead...it is a term that delineates a person's potential to act in a certain fashion. (Barab et al, cited in Jackson, 2004, p. 398)

Thus, through the enactment, the students did not simply reflect upon their learning strategies, they experienced these strategies, and in so doing incorporated them into their 'potential to act'.

The three students that displayed conceptual dissonance displayed evidence of insecurity and lack of enthusiasm during the project. For example:

S7: Our next exercise was to write a monologue, to perform for the group the next day. I struggled with this exercise, because it was based on how we learned, I immediately saw it as an academic document, I think this is just because of the years of reflective writing drilled into my brain and I had connected this monologue with that type of writing. When it came to performing them in front of the group, I was honest with them in my feeling uncomfortable with the piece I had written and was glad when [S1] read through his monologue first. He had written a beautiful piece that made me look down at mine almost in disgust.

Although S6 offered a reasonable critique of metalearning, this was arguably undermined by her determination to stick with her 'instinctive way' of passive learning:

S6: I don't feel that people should have to define their learning strategies. As long as they are made aware of the majority of different ways to learn and allowed the time to experiment with these ways to see what they respond best to and what comes naturally to them then why should anyone have to define it?...At school although I realised I was influenced by visual learning I was also a passive learner as a lot of teachers teach that way, so for me that was the instinctive way to learn and all the other ways are just to help me get a better grasp of what is going on.

The enactments and reflective essays indicated that S6, S7 and S8 were dependent upon teachers for guidance, yet were defensive and sensitive to criticism. They did, however, identify the value of group work with their peers. For example: '...whilst having a group discussion about [learning] I felt that suddenly I had become conscious of the way other people learned' (S6); 'When given our first [metalearning] exercise I was at first baffled by the idea. However upon discussing with my group, the understanding of the exercise began to sink in' (S7); 'By working in a group I am naturally pressed to explain my ideas and thoughts therefore this leads to critical thinking which helps me access what I want to achieve' (S8). The students that displayed conceptual consonance also identified the value of group work in this project.

Study support

The final stage of the project involved holding one-on-one study support sessions, in which the students' metalearning materials (RoLI profiles; enactments; reflective essays) were

discussed. According to Langellier and Peterson (2006, p. 155), a 'contract of mutual risk taking and responsibility between performer and audience' is established during performance based research, and this contract was very much in evidence during the study support sessions. Each student had made public his/her reflection on learning, and the tutor exercised sensitivity and confidentiality when discussing the student's metalearning materials, as it was apparent, from the enactments and reflective essays, that some students experienced anxiety when confronted with feedback. Together, the tutor and student completed a Discussion Sheet that detailed issues raised by the metalearning project and identified ways in which the student might improve the consonance between his/her learning strategies and the learning context. The students were given a copy of their Discussion Sheet and were asked to contact their tutor for further discussions about their study strategies throughout the academic year. All of the students welcomed the study support sessions, and in spite of their initial reservations about the significance of metalearning, the three students who displayed evidence of conceptual dissonance were keen to discuss how their learning engagement might be improved. Student S7 took a leave of absence due to personal reasons, but the remaining students passed their end of year examination in drama.

Conclusion

As noted previously, most of the students displayed evidence of a good predisposition to undergraduate study in their RoLI profile, prior to the enactment and reflective essay, and it is not possible to attribute the students' academic success to any one aspect of the metalearning project. However, it is possible to discern the value that the students attached to the project: their reflective essays reveal that they gained insight from the RoLI; benefited from group work, and learned more about themselves in the process of discovering how they learned. Many students commented on the novelty of reflecting on learning, for example: 'Before this week I had not given much thought to how I learn' (S6). In the space of just four days, the students went from never having consciously interrogated their learning to developing an ongoing, critical perspective on learning. Student S10 illuminates the students' attitude towards learning on Day One of the project:

S10: It was interesting to see that the class was divided between two predominant opinions [on learning], either that it was more or less entirely down to us as students to ensure that we fulfil our potential as individuals, or, the alternative view that we can only develop as far as the teacher is willing to go with us, as a class.

Without the metalearning project, the students with the 'alternative view' might have persisted in the belief that the scope of their learning is delineated by educators. The metalearning materials provided a means to foster dialogue between staff and students that raised consciousness of the responsibilities of both parties during undergraduate study: the students' responsibility to take control of their learning, and the tutors' responsibility to support this process. At the ideological level, the metalearning activities (RoLI; enactment; reflective essays) contributed to promoting a learning culture in which students' perspectives and preconceptions were not viewed as 'irrational, unreasonable or something to be "overcome", but as something to be "acknowledged" within the classroom' (Lucas & Meyer, 2004, p. 467). The metalearing project encouraged, (to paraphrase Garoian, 1999), the

creation of a space for students and educators to re-learn the curriculum of academic culture from the perspective of the students' experience, and to co-create a learning environment of critical reflection and personal growth. In her reflective essay, student S9 offered a quote from Galileo that arguably summed up the ethos of the metalearning project: 'You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him to discover it for himself'.

Notes on contributors

Sophie C. Ward is a lecturer in the School of Education, Durham University, with research interests in creativity, the arts in education, education policy and metalearning.

Roy Connolly is programme leader for Drama in the School of Arts, Design and Media at the University of Sunderland, with research interests in twentieth century theatre.

Jan H.F. Meyer is a professor in the Faculty of Engineering, Architecture and Information at the University of Queensland. His research interests include helping students to develop their metalearning capacity within disciplinary contexts.

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