Areas of Improvement in Classroom Teaching: A Professional Development Plan for Business Communication

Dilshad Akber Ali
Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities
NED University of Engineering & Technology
Karachi, Pakistan

Dilshat Bano
Assistant Professor, Department of English
University of Karachi
Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract:

Although there are many types of research that may be undertaken, action research particularly refers to a closely controlled inquiry done by a teacher with the intention that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future. This research is carried out within the context of the teacher's environment that is, with the students and at the university in which the teacher works on questions that deal with educational matters at hand. Teachers should be constantly researching and educating themselves about their area of expertise, this is different from the study of more educational questions that arise from the practice of teaching. This study was an attempt to discover and evaluate the needs of engineering students with the hope of providing suitable communication skills desired at the workplace. All two hundred and twenty five participants were required to give persuasive presentations to promote a project/ product or a service in class. The situations where students were responsible for their decisions provided a more active learning environment. The presentation activity greatly influenced the improvement of students' speaking ability and confidence building as well as enhanced their motivation for learning.

Keywords: action research; research cycle; reflection; motivation; communication skills; educational practice;

1. Introduction:

Classroom research is all about gathering evidence to answer questions that concern educators, whether they be about teaching methodology, learners' strategies, teachers' beliefs, or classroom material (McKay, S 2006). In today's classroom, students come to universities with a variety of academic abilities, learning styles, and multiple intelligences. It has become an immense challenge for teachers to meet every student's need in today's mixed ability classrooms. When students are not taught at their interest or readiness levels, disappointment and boredom increase causing a lack of motivation.

If a teacher tries to teach everyone the same thing at the same time in the same way at the same speed some students get even slower, some students get extremely bored, some show bad behaviour, some students stop trying and the teacher will have an unpleasant environment in the class. Sometimes teachers cannot control classrooms occupied by mixed-ability students. However, they can control how they manage their mixed-ability classrooms by using strategies that appeal to a wide range of learning styles and abilities. This task leaves some teachers feeling as if they are teaching multiple grades simultaneously. Educators carry the heavy burden of appealing to the vast learning ranges in their classrooms. These learning ranges cause problems during teaching and assessments. Each student favors one or more intelligences. Therefore, the "one for all" approach to assessment is not authentic (Kane 1995).

Active participation in classroom research can also facilitate teachers evaluate existing research. Once teachers develop an awareness of the challenges that they are likely to face in doing classroom research that range from formulating focused research questions to gathering

and analysing relevant data, they will become more critical readers of existing research. Keeping all these benefits of classroom research in mind, it becomes essential that novice teachers be introduced to the basics of classroom research methods and assumptions.

In today's global context, teaching and learning take place in a challenging environment. The quality of teaching and evaluation of its effectiveness depends upon feedback demonstrated by a wide range of students who bring diverse experiences in classrooms. Alsop, Dippo, & Zandvliet, (2007) focused on the teachers' role in bringing effectiveness to their classroom teaching. The teachers themselves should observe through their own understanding the problems in the teaching and learning process within their contexts and through their own research which can be used to closely examine their role as change agents and decision-makers specially when supporting the literacy needs of struggling readers. Keeping this in mind, the close examination of teaching and learning can surely improve teacher quality by analyzing teachers' assessment of their own practices and reflections about how their decision-making impacts student outcomes. Lewison, Leland, & Harste, (2008) emphasized the reflective practices accomplished by teachers in their classrooms which add to the literature on effective strategies because they provide a thick description given by Geertz (1973) of classroom practices. "Growing evidence shows that teacher quality and teachers' ability to reflect on their instructional practice critically affects students' learning outcomes" (Darling- Hammond, 2006).

This study describes how a teacher in an under-graduate classroom improves teaching and learning in her own classrooms through the use of action research. Although I hypothesized that the action research process would facilitate an opportunity for me to self-assess my practice and make timely instructional decisions based on student outcomes, I was also curious about how

other teachers conceptualize teaching and learning in their classrooms. I assumed that ***I could be a more effective teacher if I knew a wider range of teaching techniques*** I wanted to know, *(1) Does the use of wider range of teaching techniques improve level of concentration and motivation of all the students? (2) How can I design good and effective teaching material to improve my students' language skills? and (3) How effective is task-based learning?*

Harris & Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) and Nickerson (2005) found that the emergence of English as the leading lingua franca of business in recent decades as inevitably resulted in an increase of scholarly interest in the teaching, learning and use of English for business and professional purposes.

The expansion of research into English as a language for business suggests that as much as workplace communication is concerned, worldwide business activities require an international language. English has been playing this role for a long period of time. It has been used by both extensively, i.e. by native speakers as well as by non-native speakers who view English as a lingua franca. Teaching English to non-native speakers is a key business, both for building general proficiency and for specific purposes.

In an engineering university in Pakistan, business communication programmes aim at vocabulary-building, written business communication genres and oral activities like interviews, negotiation, meetings and presentations. Business English is considered as a form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), all these activities are linked with international business.

Engineering and science graduates are the most sought after graduates worldwide. In order to be employed by multinational firms, they need to be proficient in English. These graduates are highly qualified academically. To produce first-rate graduates to meet and surpass the demands

of the ever changing and competitive engineering industries and the awareness of the status of English as an International language and its significance as a communication tool brings about the teachers' efforts to explore ways to help and develop communication skills among engineering students. This is the need of today's world to understand the communication requirements of engineers in multinational companies which certainly makes it indispensable to ensure that the Business Communication course outline and classroom activities should be planned and implemented in the way that shape the engineering students as suitable professional global engineers.

This study examines the role of research in teachers' classrooms. Specifically, action research is defined as one form of meaningful research that can be conducted by teachers with students, colleagues, parents, and/or families in a natural setting of the classroom. Action research allows teachers to become the "researcher" and provides opportunities for them to be learners by improving instructional practices and reflecting about pedagogical choices as well. This type of research does not aim at producing new knowledge but to improve 'educational practice' which teachers are engaged in.

1.1 Reflection

Reflection is a significant component of self-study and action research (Mills, 2003) as it is a powerful way to know about the self in research and practice as well as to unpack the very self in teaching practice. Reflective practice in teacher education allows teacher educators to explore how teachers learn by including "I" in an epistemology of reflective practice (Whitehead, 2000). Reflective pedagogy helps teachers closely examine current practice and spearhead changes as teacher leaders (Reason & Reason, 2007). In other words, self-study means studying one's own

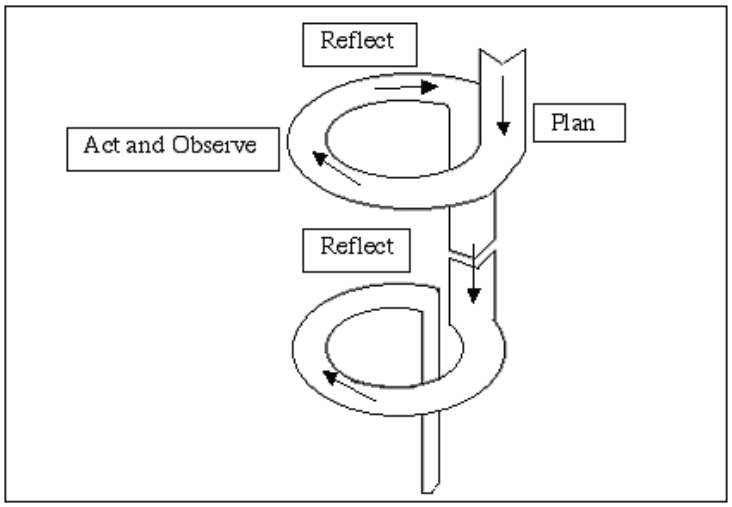
practice in its simple term, but its definition varies according to role, practice, and purpose (Smaras & Freese, 2006)—a process that lends itself to qualitative inquiry which uses narrative, descriptive approaches to data collection and analysis. While engaging in self-study, teachers examine and problematize their own teaching by reflecting on their practice (Schön, 1983). Fairbanks and LaGrone (2006) examined the ways in which the teachers constructed knowledge through the discourse of a teacher research group and found that teachers' learning and teaching is transformed through the talk about theory and practice to support their research efforts.

The action research framework is most appropriate for participants who recognize the existence of shortcomings in their educational activities and who would like to adopt some initial stance in regard to the problem, formulate a plan, carry out an intervention, evaluate the outcomes and develop further strategies in an iterative fashion (Hopkins, 1993). In short, action research is characterized by those constraints and strengths given a research methodology intended to be a workable technique for working classroom teachers.

2. Methodology:

There are four basic steps in the action research cycle followed by me, plan, act, observe/collect and reflect/review. At the initial stage in the planning, I found it appropriate to view the research using the cyclical model, as described by McTaggart et al. (1982), in McKernan (1996). This model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Action Research Cycle

(source McTaggart et al., 1982)

- develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
- act to implement the plan
- observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs
- reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages.

Action Research is a form of inquiry conducted by researchers who wish to inform and improve:

- Their practice.
- Their understanding and decision-making in their practice.
- The effect of their practice on the research.

The action research process itself has been characterized as a spiral or cycle of movements between action and research (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Burns (1999). These steps are repeated in sequence as work progresses, creating an upward spiral of improving practice. Action research on the part of language teachers has been seen as a way to bridge the gulf between researchers and teachers (Brindley 1990; Edge 2001) and to encourage teachers to adopt an investigative stance toward their own classroom practices (Gebhard 2005; Nunan 1989).

2.1 Participants:

Two hundred and twenty five undergraduate engineering students participated in this study. The research was undertaken in my classes of Mechanical Engineering Department of a public sector engineering university in Karachi, where I wanted to implement my plan. (Three sections A, B & C) There were seventy five students in each section.

The teaching/learning activity involved the use of classroom teaching. This section provides a brief background and context to the cycles of the action research process that I utilized in improving and understanding the effects of my pedagogical changes in effective classroom teaching using a wider variety of teaching techniques. I selected different activities to integrate into my 'traditional' course activities consisting of lectures, mini-assignments and exams. I chose a different activity for each class with the desire to improve the learning process facilitated by the action research process for evaluation and change. While all of these activities were experiential, they differed in the degree of practicality introduced into the classroom. Because of predetermined decision choices and competitive structure, simulation exercises offered the least amount of realism and a learning environment where students are less active in their learning (Smith and Van Doren 2004). The situations where students are responsible for their decisions,

and the competitive market changes with these decisions, were thought to provide a more active learning environment. This study, then, illustrates the action research process by describing the evolution of the more realistic of the experiential learning activities in the form of role plays.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Engineering education increasingly requires team work and group projects which need good communication, presentation and problem-solving skills. It also entails delegation and organization. We assume that after completion of their graduation students must become excellent engineers with the strong theoretical and practical background. They want to learn English because they need this language to interact with others once they complete their graduation. They get better opportunities of employment. They find more doors open for them and economically better prospects too if they have good communication skills in their specific field.

Industries need engineers who are good at dealing with diversified audiences. They can assure them maximum productivity with their professionalism. They can have better understanding of what is going on all around the world, so then can keep pace with the world. They are fully aware of the need of the time and are always ready to accept change. Through English language they also acquire better understanding of the environment in which they would be working as professionals, because of their command over the language they can easily interact with others and become good team players or team leaders and this team work better simulates industrial conditions. They also want good writing skills so they can express themselves through written words and prepare effective research reports, tenders, quotations, contracts, agreements etc.

It is a requirement in the university to teach these future engineers business communication to make them able to meet the demands and needs of the local and international industries that will employ these students after their graduation.

This course trains the students according to the demands of these recruiters because they not only want to hire engineers but also engineers with good communication and leadership skills and with excellent team work ability. The ability to work effectively in teams is considered by many to be an essential skill required of today's engineers This is the main reason for the university management to initiate this compulsory course for the future engineers.

The goals I really want to meet after the completion of the Business Communication course are:

After completion of the course my students will:

1. be able to make a ten minutes persuasive presentation regarding the technical aspects of a product/project related to their major discipline to persuade and express their opinions

2. be able to write research / scientific /project reports in their third year and final year of engineering, they will improve their writing skills to a level where they can communicate in a clear, logical and precise manner.

3. be able to get basic theoretical knowledge and comprehension about contracts, agreements, quotations and tender notices. They will be able to write them in future in a work environment.

I chose the first goal as part of my current study and planned my action research about the specified area in my mind:

I could be a more effective teacher if I knew a wider range of teaching techniques. I wanted to know the answers to the following questions:

1. *Does the use of wider range of teaching techniques improve level of concentration and motivation of all the students?*

2. How can I design good and effective teaching material to improve my students' language skills?

3. How effective is task-based learning?

According to Jon Mueller authentic assessment is a" form of assessment in which students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills". I have chosen the task oral presentations for which the objectives are as follows that lead to the target performance goal:

Working in a pair, the students will be able to present ideas logically, persuade the audiences using AIDA strategy and handle the question/answer session to show team work with 90% accuracy.

The students got ten minutes to speak in the presence of an audience on a given technical topic (product/service/project). The students were told that the purpose of the assignment was to work on the professional and creative presentation, which included convincing arguments, as well as to help them adjust their delivery style to include another person. Therefore, both the partners should have spoken for approximately the same amount of time. They would receive the same grade for the assignment. Their delivery ought to have included vivid and appropriate language and the presenters be supposed to strive to make meaningful eye contact and engage

with the audience. They were required to persuade the class to accept their idea; they would use the Motivated Sequence pattern to:

- Gain the audience's attention
- Convince the audience that there is a need for action
- Offer the audience a proposal that will satisfy this need
- Help the audience visualize the results of the proposal
- Ask the audience to take action by "buying" (accepting) the proposal

I selected the criteria for the task which covered all the characteristics of good criteria given by Jon Mueller. The criteria believed to be a) clearly stated b) brief c) observable d) statement of behaviour e) written in language students understand. After selection of criteria I created the following rubric to judge the performance of the students separately for each criterion.

Rubric: Oral Presentation

Criteria	Poor	Good	Excellent
The introduction was effective (presenters gained my attention, convinced me to listen, established credibility, and previewed).			
Need was clearly stated and evidence was offered to prove the need			
The solution was appropriate and creative			
The presenters helped me visualize the solution			
The presenters made a clear call to action.			
The presenters worked as a team.			
The presenters responded to all the audience questions effectively			

The students will listen to the presentations and then will be given the evaluation forms for their feedback using the above mentioned checklist with the following instructions:

This is the **Peer Feedback for the presentation**. Please complete evaluations for the speakers assigned to you and turn them in at the end of class. The completion of these evaluations is reflected in your class participation grade. Please adjust your response according to the given score and make comments for each.
1=poor, 2= good, 3=excellent

Holistic Rubrics:

Excellent presenters

- have included very effective introduction
- have stated proper support
- have provided creative and appropriate solution
- have made the audience visualize the solution
- have made the audience ready for action
- have worked perfectly as a team
- have responded effectively to all audience questions

Good presenters

- have included not very effective introduction
- have stated a few proper support
- have provided a solution which is not very creative and appropriate
- have made the audience visualize the solution with difficulty
- have made the audience ready for action but need more persuasion
- have to practice more as a team
- have responded to some of the audience questions effectively

Poor presenters

- have included ineffective introduction
- have stated improper support
- have not provided creative and appropriate solution
- have failed to make the audience visualize the solution
- have failed to make the audience ready for action
- have failed to work as a team
- have failed to respond to audience questions

Students were divided into teams of three and were directed to select and prepare a type of role play that would be targeted toward the students of their class. (Planning stage) To mimic a more "real-world" scenario, the sales representatives were brought together in a classroom, where each group displayed their product/project and relevant information, including specific features and pricing information with comparative market analysis. (Implementation stage) The

upper level class circulated among the teams evaluating the products/projects using a scoring rubric developed by the teacher (The observation stage). Student teams then followed the format for creating a marketing plan and submitted the finished plan at the end of the session based on their knowledge of what was learned throughout the session and through the role plays.

The last stage (The reflection stage), involved models, videos, graphics and photos of the products and displays, instructor observation, informal student feedback, peer evaluations, and structured course evaluations supplemented the results of the marketing plan evaluations and exam performance to form the primary data for evaluating and reflecting on this activity. A common final exam and course evaluations were used among the instructors which allowed comparison and stimulated reflection on student performance given the different experiential activities. This initial experiential learning activity was judged as having provided an interesting product in a format that did generate student involvement, collaboration, and did allow detailed information. I also observed during class discussions that students saw the connections between the project and course concepts. However, an examination of the marketing plans showed the majority of teams did not incorporate course concepts in the plans but rather wrote the plans as narratives of the activity using persuasive strategy AIDA. It also revealed that instructor feedback, provided students the opportunity not only to reflect upon the experience as well as instructor feedback but also, for each experiential learning model, to revise and resubmit.

For every action research model, cycle 2 allowed the process of observing student learning and evaluating and reflecting upon the outcomes to be revised and improved upon. Thus, the second phase of the action research cycle/ learning activity focused on restructuring the activity in several ways, one of which was to enhance the marketing plan aspect of the project.

Faculty observation and reflection on the classroom data suggested that the revised format did help students to relate the experiential activity to the course concepts. Requiring students to choose a product category; develop, manufacture and sell specific products; and generate actual sales data was seen as creating a more "real-world" experience and increased participation in classroom discussions. Simultaneously requiring teams to submit sections of the marketing plan, when they revised and resubmitted allowed corrections and enhancements so the end marketing plans were much more in line with expectations. Classroom discussion and individual student feedback also revealed the activities students found enjoyable and motivating.

Allowing some class time to work on the plan/project also generated peer pressure for team members to attend class which improved attendance and participation as compared to my previous regular classes As is explained in this section, classroom data, observations, and faculty data, along with additional insights from the literature on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and additional articles of experiential activities (e.g. Helms et al., 2003 "The Benefits of Trade Shows for Marketing Students and Faculty"; Smith and Van Doren, 2004) guided the next revision of this leaning activity.

In the present study, first, discussions among the instructors reviewed what was learned from the first cycle in order to ensure that students learn from each of the stages. Specifically, it was desired that students initial experience lead to observing and reflecting on the outcomes (feedback from instructor), and that the students correctly incorporated the AIDA strategy and motivated sequence plan into their marketing plans (abstract conceptualization), forming the foundation for their active experimentation (incorporating what they learned from the role play into the actual sales pitch).

Second, this regular discourse and critical reflection among the instructors not only focused on modifications to this learning activity but also shared and compared observations, survey data and other information on what was and what was not working in the learning activities being arranged in the other sections. These cycles of action research continued to evolve and improve each of the instructors' learning activities.

Finally, a common final assessment also indicated that the sale activity helped student performance during their presentation sessions.

The purpose of this example was not to demonstrate that this learning activity is universally effective or to confirm a particular learning theory. Rather, my objective was to demonstrate the action research process that facilitated the continuous improvement of this classroom activity and to document how the faculty carried out their educational responsibility. I feel confident in the merits of this experiential learning activity and want to share it with other faculty who may wish to incorporate it into their own classroom and continue the action research process to modify it for their own unique setting.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

As per the requirement of the local and multinational companies, the purpose of the course of Business Communication is to prepare and train qualified candidates to achieve effective communication skills and improve the students' personal effectiveness by being self-confident at the workplace and building better working relationships with clients and foreign suppliers. Engineers generally use English more frequently with colleagues and clients.

As for the purpose of the institutional authority, it aims to provide a training program to enhance students' competitiveness to satisfy the local job market demand and makes it easy and fruitful for employers to recruit qualified candidates from students.

Engaging in self study can have significant benefits on teachers and teacher educators who want to gain insights about practice through the teacher research process (e.g. Fairbanks & LaGrone, 2006; Mohr et al., 2004). Action research is an appropriate paradigm for improving everyday classroom practice. Explicitly incorporating faculty's' practical goal of improving their current practice and at the same time improving their understanding and contribution to theory can help dissolve the differentiation between teaching and research. Stephen Corey (1953, p70) profoundly states: "We are convinced that the disposition to study…the consequences of our own teaching is more likely to change and improve our practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered of his teaching."

Action research examines the learning process, as well as, learning outcomes. Depending exclusively on typical learning outcomes such as exams, projects, written cases, assignments etc provide the teacher with trivial means for improvement. When students perform low there can be many reasons for that, it can be due to lack of motivation and enthusiasm or inadequate knowledge and skills. To develop a deeper understanding of the learning outcomes, I recommend that teachers should be completely aware of the evaluation of the learning process.

One way to increase teacher quality is to ensure that teachers reflect on their practice to learn from and improve it through continuing reflections and interactions (Schön, 1983). Although there is a possibility for some biases, teacher researchers can use regular methods to conduct action research in their own classrooms. The concept of teacher as a researcher is central. It is

critical to the growth of professional knowledge. It is a refinement of the intelligent engagement in an 'educational practice'.

Continuous improvement in our teaching and learning techniques remains a basic faculty educational responsibility that requires an efficient research process that is consistent with our everyday classroom practice. It is not necessary that action research always produces the same empirically generalizable results as the traditional research does; however, the sharing of teaching and learning experiences with each other provides faculty with innovative ideas that may be modified and adapted for effectiveness in one's own classroom context using the action research process itself. Collaboration, dialogue, open communication, critical analysis, reflection and classroom practice are foundation of what the teachers should try to infuse in their students.

References:

Alsop, S., Dippoa, D., & Zandvliet, D.B. (2007). Teacher education as or for social and ecological transformation: Place-based reflections on local and global participatory methods and collaborative practices. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *33*(2), 207-223.

Brindley, G. (1990). Towards a research agenda for TESOL. *Prospect: An Australian Journal of TESOL*, 6(1), 7-26.

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corey, S.M. (1953). *Action research to improve school practices.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing twenty-first century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *57*(3), 300-314.

Edge, J. (2001). *Action research. Case Studies in TESOL practice series.* Alexandria: TESOL

Fairbanks, C. M. and LaGrone, D. 2006. Learning together: Constructing knowledge in a teacher research group. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(3): 7–26.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Harris, S. and Bargiela-Chiappini, F. 2003. Business as a site for language contact. In M. McGroarty et al. (Eds), *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics:* 23. Language Contact and Change (pp. 155-169). New York: Cambridge University Press

Hopkins, D. (1993). *A teacher's guide to classroom research* (2nd edition.). Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

Kane, M. B. (1995). Assessment reforming: A work in progress. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 77, 30-32.

Kolb, D. A. (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development,* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Lewison, M., Leland, C., & Harste, J.C. (2008). Creating critical classrooms. In M. Lewison, C.

Helms, M. M., Mayo, D. T., & Baxter, J. T. (2003), Experiential Learning: The Benefits of Trade Shows for Marketing Students, *Marketing Education Review*, 13(3), 17-26

McKay, S. L. (2006). *Researching second language classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McKernan, J. L. 1996. Action research: historical and philosophical background. In *A handbook of methods and resources for the reflective practitioner*, pp. 3-34. London: Kogan Page.

McTaggart, R. et al. 1982. *The action research planner* (rev. ed.). Geelong: Deakin University Press.

Mills, G.E. (2003). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher, 2nd Ed*. Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mohr, M. et al. (2004). *Teacher research for better schools.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Mueller, J. (2005). The Authentic Assessment Toolbox Online. Retrieved March 25, 2011 from http://jfmueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/

Nickerson, C. 2005. *English as a lingua franca in international business contexts*. English for Specific Purposes, 24. 367–380

Reason, C., & Reason, L. (2007). Asking the right questions. *Educational Leadership, 65*(1),36 40.

Samaras, A. P., & Freese, A. R. (2006). *Self-study of teaching practices primer.* New York: Peter Lang

Schon, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner : How professionals think in action. New York: Basic Books.

Smith, L. W., & Van Doren, D. C. (2004), The Reality-Based Learning Method: A Simple Method for Keeping Teaching Activities Relevant and Effective, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 26(1), 66-74.

Whitehead, J. (2000). How do I improve my practice? Creating and legitimating an epistemology of practice. *Reflective Practice*, *1*(1), 91-104.