

Peer tutoring and the study of psychology: Tutoring experience as a learning method*

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Peer tutoring' refers to a variety of ways in which learning takes place through interaction with peers. This paper describes the development of a module (called Peer Assisted Learning and the Study of Psychology) through which third-year psychology undergraduates participate as peer tutors in a foundation-level module on study skills for psychology students. This third-year module was intended to enrich the experience of the students taking the study skills module and also to use peer tutoring as learning method for the third year students - this second aim is the focus of this paper. Firstly, we report on the design of this module, providing a brief review of some relevant literature and explaining how we chose to develop a module which includes peer tutoring experience alongside seminars on the psychology of adult learning and learning through participation. Secondly, we outline some issues which arose in the practical implementation of the module. Thirdly, we summarise our understanding of the peer tutors' experience by drawing on their participation in seminars and on the practice reports through which the module is assessed. Finally, we identify some issues raised by the module and key points which arose in implementing it.

PEER ASSISTED LEARNING and the study of psychology' is a module in the undergraduate psychology programme in the School of Human and Life Sciences, Roehampton University. In this module third-year psychology undergraduate students take a series of seminar sessions on teaching and learning in higher education and also participate as peer tutors in workshops being taken by first-year students as part of a foundation course on study skills for psychology students. The peer assisted learning module aims to enable students to develop an experiential and intellectual understanding of the processes involved in tutoring, including an understanding of first-year students' learning needs. However, in addition to these learning aims the module aims to meet other objectives. In particular, it aims to enhance the learning experience of first-year students by providing some peer tutoring and also to encourage students to see one another (and not just lecturers) as learning resources. This article

reports on the development and operation of the module. In this report we focus on the experience of the peer tutor rather than on their tutees. As with any innovation, setting up and conducting this module was largely an exercise in making an idea work in a setting with its own constraints and opportunities; we have tried to report on this here.

Designing the module

Learning from peers in higher education

Any learning context where learners have the opportunity to communicate with each other provides the opportunity for some form of learning from, or through, peers. Institutional arrangements can constrain or facilitate this opportunity in varying ways. In extreme cases, responsibility for teaching is handed over to pupil-teachers, as in Lancaster's 'monitorial system' (Kaestle, 1973) or, to take a non-academic example, to get army recruits to train each other, as in Poore's 'Jhansi system' (done in order to cope with a shortage of instructors

*This is a slightly revised version of an earlier unpublished paper (2000) which aimed to be an initial communication of the initiatives taken in this new module. Although there is scope for a much more extensive discussion now that the module has been taught six times over the last seven years, the present paper is substantially that earlier report with some updating where necessary.

(Lonsdale, 1992)). By contrast, even highly teacher-centred learning contexts are probably dependent to varying degrees on student communication – e.g. for the dissemination of information about institutional arrangements. Interest in peer tutoring has been increasing over the last few years in a number of learning contexts especially in primary and secondary schools (e.g. Topping & Ehly, 1998) as well as in higher education (e.g. Falchikov, 2001). Because peer tutoring may provide social and emotional support as well as instruction and advice (for a review, see e.g. Cowie & Wallace, 2000), peer support amongst adolescents has been a focus of particular interest (see e.g. Cowie, 1999). Whilst there is clearly more than a little expediency in Lancaster and Poore's arrangements, current advocates of peer tutoring argue that peers have considerable potential to help each other in a way which non-peers cannot.

In preparing for a revalidation of our BSc/BA Psychology programme some years ago we noted, in the course of a number of informal discussions, that 'becoming an effective student' involves developing competence in a range of areas often not explicitly included in any syllabus. In addition to obvious academic skills such as note-taking, using libraries, knowing how to approach reading lists, etc., it occurred to us that undergraduates who stood out in our minds as highly effective students had a sense of how academic institutions work which enabled them to engage fully and productively in the learning process. Not only did they know 'how to write good essays', they were able to make judgements about such things as their own learning needs, such that, for example, relative weakness in a task or discomfort about something was seen as a challenge requiring action. In other words, they tended to see the curriculum and assessment tasks as challenges about which they had choices and as opportunities which they could actively explore and act on rather than as problems which they had to endure or seek help with.

Reflecting on our own learning as university-level students, we noted that positive learning experiences had often occurred in interaction with peers. We also noted that a considerable amount of practical know-how about the workings of the universities where we studied came from interactions with senior peers. Reflecting on our own students' experience we felt that pressures on them (such as the increased need to do paid work to fund study, more frequent assessments) probably reduced the scope for interaction with peers. We wondered whether an opportunity for such interactions could be designed into the curriculum. It seemed relatively easy to create a space within the first-year foundation programme when senior students could be present to talk to them. The psychology foundation module was designed to consist of a series of weekly lectures followed by workshops/discussions. Senior students could be present during these workshops/discussions as a resource for the foundation students. This model was partly suggested to us by arrangements that we had come across such as in a 'proctoring' system used in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Leeds. In terms of the typology of peer tutoring provided by Falchikov (2001) this is 'cross-level peer tutoring'.

One obvious question this sort of system throws up is 'What's in it for the peer tutors?' We were keen to avoid a version of the monitorial system with students working as unpaid tutors. From the outset it was clear to us that working as a peer tutor would be a valuable learning experience in its own right and one that could legitimately earn course credit. An enquiry to our educational development office confirmed that there are precedents (at other institutions) for such arrangements and provided encouragement in this direction.

Experiential learning

Numerous academic programmes have sought to introduce an element of experiential learning. The advantages are providing students with a deeper grasp of the

phenomena under study chiefly through providing them with direct experience which they can interrogate authentically (see e.g. Kolb 1984). In considering different models of experiential learning we were particularly influenced by two approaches: the service learning module, which was already operating within our university (e.g. Jackman, 1999), and the reflexive modules, again already operating within our school on the programme in psychology and counselling (e.g. Moran, 1999).

Our experience of students keeping learning journals (see Baillie, 1998) gave us confidence in the value of reflective journaling as a resource for learning, in particular for developing students' depth of engagement with the issues under study (Baillie, Porter & Corrie, 1996). From this point of view, critical involvement with peer tutoring is an extension of students' observation of their own learning processes and experience to observation of their peers' experience. We felt that an attitude of open-minded inquiry and sensitive awareness could be encouraged by engagement with ethnography (e.g. Rachel, 1996; Toren 1996).

We decided we could design a course which would be a psychology course, that is the syllabus would involve engagement with psychological concepts/theories and that students would develop an understanding of psychological processes through taking the course. At our university, courses are made up of modules, each module consisting of 10 credits. Full-time students typically take 120 credits per year (i.e. 60 credits or six modules per half-year semester). We chose to make our course a 10-credit module which would run in the autumn semester (i.e. the first half of the academic year).

We decided that the module would include psychological theories of 'adult learning' and that the peer-tutoring sessions would provide an opportunity for students to check out the depth and value of the theories. Tennant's (1997) book, *Adult learning and psychology*, recommended itself as a key text because it has an accessible yet

critical and probing treatment of key theories. We decided that whilst the students would be engaged in peer tutoring, maintaining the focus on adult learning in general, rather than on peer tutoring in particular, would be more appropriate. Therefore, rather than referring students to texts such as Topping and Ehly (1998), we chose classical discussions of teaching (e.g. Plato's *Meno*) and recent discussions of teaching and learning in higher education (e.g. Entwistle, 1997; Gibbs, 1981; Race, 1994; Ramsden, 1992). Discussions about teaching from *The Psychologist* are a particular useful resource for stimulating discussion (e.g. Gale, 1990; Schwartz, 2004).

Nevertheless, we argued that consideration of different paradigms of *learning through participation* would help students to think critically about how learning occurs, and so we included reference to such topics as the development of practical cognition in social contexts (Rogoff & Lave, 1984) and peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as well as more 'practitioner'-related discussions such as Schoen (1987) and Tripp (1993).

We also happen to have an interest in skilled practice (e.g. Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991) and felt that this would be useful in sensitising students to looking at studying (and tutoring) as skills which are picked up in diverse ways and applied as practical accomplishments requiring here-and-now know-how (rather than calculative ability).

As the module which we envisaged involved a departure from standard learning arrangements, we tested our confidence in the proposed module by conducting a survey of second-year psychology students. The results of the survey showed that the students felt that they would have found involvement from peer tutors useful in their first year and that about 25 per cent of students would be interested in taking the module in their third year.

In accordance with our institutional validation arrangements, we prepared a course

description (see Appendix 1 for an extract of the validation document). We planned that peer tutoring would be a learning method in itself and presented the teaching/learning methods as follows:

- a. preparation for and participation in workshops for Foundation level students (run as part of the Foundations in the Study of Psychology module(s))
- b. seminars providing a context for the discussion and examination of the literature, theoretical and practice issues, personal stances, reflection
- c. workshops designed to support the practice of tutoring and the written formulation of workshop preparations, the technique of reflective journalling and the writing of a practice report. Students would be expected to keep a practice journal throughout.

We planned that assessment would be wholly through a 2000-word practice report which critically reviewed the tutoring experience, highlighted the lessons learned, both intellectual and personal, and made connections between theory and practice. Two thousand words is the typical length of a written assignment for 10 credits. In order to ensure that students were tested on the learning outcomes which we planned, we specified that the practice report must consist of three sections, laid out as follows:

1. Review of developments in the peer tutor's understanding of the learning needs of first-year students.
2. Review of the student's own work as a peer tutor.

3. Outline and evaluation of the conceptual model/approach which the student believed to be the most useful for analysing and understanding peer tutoring.

We stipulated that each section must be at least 750 words long and that the thinking and analysis that underly each section should draw upon both students' practical experience as a peer tutor and relevant literature, and aim to inter-relate the two wherever possible.

Not surprisingly, because it is somewhat unusual, this module caught the attention of the validation panel and it was discussed in detail as part of the validation process.

Practical implementation of the module

When it was begun, the module consisted of a series of one-and-three-quarter-hour sessions (the standard institutional weekly timetable slot) on Tuesdays in odd weeks of term. During even weeks of term, peer tutors attended the first-year foundation module. As the foundation module is repeat taught, students attended this on either Tuesdays or Thursdays and were assigned to specific groups of first-year students. This alternate-week arrangement meant that we could discuss peer tutors' contribution to the following week's first-year students' activities and reflect on the preceding week's experiences. With the exception of the first session, each odd-week session followed the framework shown in Table 1.

The seminars/workshops covered the following topics: Week 1 Introduction:

Table 1: Structure of seminar/workshop sessions.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 0900–0915 | <i>Peer discussion</i> of experiences and setting of agenda for discussion with tutor (students only) |
| 0915–0930 | Discussion with tutor |
| 0930–1015 | <i>Seminar</i> : presentation and discussion of the literature or workshop: skills of writing practice reports; reflective journalling |
| 1015–1045 | <i>Discussion</i> of the next peer-tutoring session |

module aims; Week 3 Adult learning and higher education; Week 5 reading week (no session – to allow time to read/re-read the literature in the light of their experience); Week 7 Paradigms of learning through participation; Week 9 Understanding skilled practice; Week 11 The practice report.

Students were told in the course booklet ‘Generally you will be contributing to the students’ learning process and you will not be expected to act as either an expert on psychology or as a monitor. Your expertise really lies in your being an experienced student of psychology’. We discussed the limitations of the students’ roles as peer tutors and drew their attention to sources of support to which they could direct students in their tutor groups. We made it clear that there was no expectation that they would meet their peer tutees outside the timetabled sessions.

We discussed with students the idea of keeping a journal of their experiences in order to process their experiences and to have material for their practice report. The final seminar session was devoted to discussing the practice report.

In the first year in which the course ran, 14 students completed the course. This was a convenient number for seminar discussions, though it meant there were relatively few tutors per first-year students (of whom there were about 200). Our solution to this was for each tutor to be assigned to two or three separate groups of about six first-year students, but a number of problems were presented by these arrangements. A particular problem for some of the peer tutors was that since the foundation course is taught on two different days of the week, some peer tutors had to attend on different days for their peer tutoring seminars sessions and their work as peer tutors with the first years. When an opportunity arose to redesign the first-year psychology programme we decided to replace the workshop component of the foundation module with an optional module on study skills for psychology students. Timetabling the peer

tutoring module and the study skills module to take place on the same day and at the same time greatly facilitated the practical arrangements – it was also useful to run the modules in rooms which are close to each other. We have subsequently found that although a high degree of interleaving of the two modules is useful, the odd/even pattern mentioned above (despite its administrative appeal) is not the best way of working. We have found that holding the initial peer-tutoring session in Week 3 is helpful.

Concerning the allocation of tutors to tutees, we have found that it is congenial for the tutors to work in pairs: this allows them to support each other and provides for the sharing and discussion of experiences. This thus establishes the number of groups of tutees that are required; then dividing the number of first years on the study skills module by the number of groups thus gives the number of first years required for each group. Usually we have had around 18 students on the peer tutoring module and around 36 first years on the study skills module: hence this makes nine groups consisting of two peer tutors and four tutees. These groupings mean that there is likely to be some continuity despite some level of absenteeism.

Our model uses timetabled-slots when first-year and third-year students meet. We have found that within these slots some peer tutors have shown a preference for unstructured, open-ended activities which give them a lot of freedom in what to work on with their tutees; however, others have expressed a preference for structured activities. We have sought to address this range of preferences by providing specific tasks for these sessions (which are introduced in plenary phase by a lecturer and then subsequently discussed in a concluding plenary) but which provide tutors with a choice about how they approach these tasks. Examples of such tasks are discussing a checklist about different styles of learning; reading some sample research articles; discussing essay drafts; discussing feedback received on essays.

Peer tutors' experience

We have found the *seminar* discussions with the peer tutor students to be rich in fascinating insights into their own lives as students. As we expected, much of the discussion involved examining how peer-tutoring sessions had gone, with students sharing experiences and reactions. For example, one discussion concerned the progress of a workshop on note-taking. The peer tutors noted that some first-year students had initially shown some resistance when asked to attend the workshop, but that when they saw examples of other students' approaches they had realised how they could improve their own practice. Moreover, the peer tutors also found that they themselves were learning about note-taking through this process and drew attention to how their own first-year experience would have been different if they had had workshops such as this. In general, students spent a lot of time processing their own past experience, and it was clear that the seminars, stimulated by the peer-tutoring experiences, were providing an opportunity for them to reflect on and re-examine their own learning process.

Students' *written* evaluations showed that the tutoring experience was stimulating. When the module initially ran, their main criticism was about the organisation of the peer-tutoring groups. The chief problem here was that (first-year) students did not always attend the workshop activities scheduled for their course. As a result; meeting with tutor groups was not the effortless task that we anticipated it would be. Incidentally, amongst the first-year students, mature students' attendance was better than standard-entry students. The peer tutors generally recommended more structure and guidance for the tutoring sessions. (In the practice reports it was evident that their satisfaction was greatest when there was a specific job for them to do, e.g. showing their tutees how to use a computer-based literature searching system.)

As mentioned previously, assessment was through a practice report with a specified

three-part structure. We chose to weight these three parts 30:30:40 respectively. We indicated that they would be marked with respect to the following issues: (for sections one and two) level of detail in reconstruction of tutoring experience and activities; (for all three sections) degree of self-reflection and insight; evidence of relevant psychological and educational literature; evidence of being able to inter-relate relevant literature and tutoring experience. (We have subsequently made some minor changes to the titles of these sections and to what they should contain: Appendix 2 shows the current marking scheme).

Space prevents a detailed analysis of students' practice reports, but some general points can be made briefly (a more detailed analysis is in preparation).

Review of development in my understanding of the learning needs of first-year students

This heading proved useful in directing students to examine how their understanding of students' needs changed – and how their own expectations were relevant and how they were challenged by experience. Students' accounts showed great variation. Some started from sketching their initial feelings about their role (generally a balance of trepidation and excitement) and proceeded through concrete experiences to reach a conclusion. Conclusions typically noted and focused on a need which first-year students showed to know how a lecture topic (or other learning activity) *fits* into the overall picture. It was noticeable that peer tutors approached the tutoring role with quite a lot of reverence.

Review of my work as a peer tutor

Some students chose to articulate their initial feelings about being a tutor under this heading. Again, an important element was apprehension. Most students reported giving little academic help in contrast to talking more about their experience at university – especially beyond the first year, or sharing experiences, or promoting the idea that

engagement with the syllabus material should be fun. Generally students reported a development in their confidence as tutors.

Outline and evaluation of the conceptual model approach which I believe to be the most useful for analysing and understanding peer tutoring

Students typically showed a preference for humanistic models but tended to see this as a starting point and developed a discussion of models which articulate the following features: engagement; experiential learning; the learner's relationship to their environment, practice orientation; the learner's active agency.

This 'outline and evaluate' task is a familiar academic exercise, but we were interested in how students' discussions might be informed by their practical experience. Most students did include details from their peer-tutoring experience in their discussion. These took the form of reporting what they felt happened when they adopted a particular model or of outlining specific observations on students' learning. For example, one student noted that although they felt that perhaps they should smooth their tutees' path, it was clear that 'getting it wrong' could lead to rapid learning. One peer tutor outlined how some first-year students who encountered note-taking techniques which they saw as superior to the ones they had been using thus far became enthusiastic exponents of these techniques in subsequent whole-class discussion. All reports were positive about the value of peer tutoring to tutees.

Implications of the module and of this type of teaching and learning method

Peer-tutoring arrangements are typically intended to meet a need for tutoring or other kind of support. Whilst our module was intended to enrich first-year students' learning experience it was at least equally intended to provide a learning experience for peer tutors. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to report on the impact that the peer tutoring had on first-year students,

though there is some evidence (e.g. from subsequent research exercises carried out by students) that it was positive. Clearly there is scope for a more systematic evaluation of what the first-year students got out of the exercise.

We were also concerned with encouraging the idea of the school as a learning institution. By this we mean that we wanted to move away from the impression that the school operates by dispensing knowledge (from lecturers to students). We believe that the module encourages the view that everyone (staff and students) are there to learn in several ways:

- a. first-year students find out that there is more to learning than reading literature and attending lectures;
- b. first-year students find that their own learning processes are interesting in their own right (i.e. third-year students are interested in how they learn);
- c. first-year students, third-year students and staff find that first- and third-year students have of valuable insights into accomplishing learning;
- d. third-year students find out – through the open-ended nature of their tutoring experience – that a predefined syllabus is largely an administrative convenience and that deeper learning resists narrow circumscription.

In our first examiners' report we noted that: 'The reports and the class discussions overwhelmingly show deep engagement with the peer-tutoring task. All attempts showed a capacity to report on the tutoring task and to write on this in relation to the relevant literature.' However, we also noted that despite their merits, the reports were not as rich or deep as the class discussions, which had been much more exciting. There is, of course, a learning issue about how to approach the genre of a practice report. We aim to make this clearer for future cohorts by attending to the practice report at an earlier stage in the module. Students have other concerns earlier in the module than what the assessment will be like, but we have learned that

we have to point out that articulating and examining those concerns is relevant for the practice report.

A particular feature of our module was the principle that tutors could earn academic credits through their work as tutors. As part of a psychology programme it was convenient for us that theories about how people study and learn – phenomena which can be observed as a peer tutor – can be part of a recognisably psychological syllabus. There is widespread interest in peer-tutoring schemes across many disciplines. Could our kind of module be used in other disciplines? It is likely to be the case that most social sciences will have the reflexive potential to bring student experiences to bear on discipline-defined topics, but it is less likely to be the case for many other disciplines. Nevertheless, responsibility for training (as well as for staff development and appraisal) in most disciplines/occupations/professions falls to practitioners within those disciplines. Therefore: (a) insight into how people learn within those disciplines is a valid concern of those disciplines; and (b) there is likely to be an indigenous training literature which could serve as a syllabus for a version of the present module.

Falchikov (2001) provides very valuable guidance on designing and implementing peer tutoring arrangements. Here are some specific points which we feel it is important to be aware of:

- Many students find it hard to integrate their tutoring experience and reflections on teaching and learning with literature.
- Discussion of tutoring experiences and teaching and learning issues can bring up strong feelings which some students may have (e.g. about teaching styles, resources). (This has implications for the size of the class, how discussions are conducted and how the room is arranged).

- Discussion of the students' role as peer tutors, including boundaries, is important.
- A clear and effective organisational context in which peer tutoring can occur is important.

We have tried to indicate how this module was largely a response to a practical concern (enriching first-year students' learning experience even when opportunities for contact with third-year students are diminishing) and how practical constraints (devising a curriculum, devising assessment tasks) helped guide the development of the module. Rather than attempting to list recommendations or encouraging readers to copy what we tried, we hope that these details might serve as a resource for readers' own explorations such that they can decide what might be appropriate for their own circumstances.

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Appendix 1: Extracts from the original course module description

1. Course rationale and learning outcomes

Rationale

In recent years there has been a notable shift in higher education from passive, didactic methods of teaching toward methods (such as problem-based learning and profiling) designed to encourage students to develop clearly defined competencies, engage actively in their own learning, and to take responsibility for it. Peer evaluation and peer tutoring are part of this trend. Race (1994), in particular, argues the need for 'flexible learning' which involves students 'taking some control regarding how they learn' (p.92). In addition, both psychologists and educators are recognising more and more the crucial role practical know-how (tacit skills) and personal style play in adult learning and skilled performance (e.g. 'apprenticeship' models of learning). All of these developments argue for the value of peer tutoring, both as a means by which more experienced students can help the less experienced by passing on some of their 'know-how', and as a source of learning for the peer tutor in its own right. A survey in May 1997 of second-year students indicated a clear interest in a module of this type, from both the point of view of students willing to act as peer tutors and a desire for additional tutorial support in the first year.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course, peer tutors will:

1. have both an experiential and an intellectual understanding of the tutoring process;
2. have a clear understanding of students' learning needs;
3. be able to describe the key features of tutoring as a skilful practice and point to the tensions that exist between domains of practice such as this and technical-rational knowledge;
4. be able to reflect in a disciplined manner on their personal experience as a tutor.

2. Syllabus and teaching and learning methods

Syllabus

Approaches to adult learners: humanistic, psychoanalytic, behaviourist.

Approaches to teaching and learning in higher education. Learning styles and approaches to study. What is higher education for? Programme/Course evaluation.

Paradigms for learning through participation: action research, experiential learning, service learning, reflective practice, apprenticeship, Guru & Sishya.

Skilled practice, situated action and tacit knowledge. Knowing how and knowing that.

Journals and fieldnotes as research documents.

Teaching and learning methods

The module draws on students' knowledge of being a student; learning occurs through:

- a. Their preparation for and participation in workshops for F-level students (run as part of the Foundations in the Study of Psychology module(s)).
- b. Seminars providing a context for the discussion and examination of the literature, theoretical and practice issues, personal stances, reflection.
- c. Workshops designed to support the practice of tutoring and the written formulation of workshop preparations, the technique of reflective journalling and the writing of a practice report. Students will be expected to keep a practice journal throughout.

3. Assessment

Practice report: which critically reviews the tutoring experience, highlights the lessons learned, both intellectual and personal, and makes connections between theory and practice.

Appendix 2: Practice report: Marking/feedback form

1. Developments in my understanding of the learning needs of first-year students (30 per cent)

Provide a review of how your understanding of first-year students' learning needs changed through the module

- Use of tutoring experience. *Do you provide appropriate detail?*
- Use of relevant psychological and educational literature. *Do you provide appropriate examples? Are the citations and references in the correct format?*
- Evidence of inter-relating relevant literature and tutoring experience.
- Length, structure, clarity, critical thinking, self-reflection and insight.

2. Review of my work as a peer tutor (30 per cent)

Provide a review of what you did as a peer tutor. E.g. What skills/ideas informed your work? Did any changes occur in the way you worked?

- Use of tutoring experience. *Do you provide appropriate detail?*
- Use of relevant psychological and educational literature. *Do you provide appropriate examples? Are the citations and references in the correct format?*
- Evidence of inter-relating relevant literature and tutoring experience.
- Length, structure, clarity, critical thinking, self-reflection and insight.

3. Which conceptual model/approach is the most useful for analysing and understanding peer tutoring (40 per cent)

Identify which conceptual model or approach is the most useful. Provide a critical discussion of at least one model or approach.

- Use of tutoring experience. *Do you provide appropriate detail?*
- Use of relevant psychological and educational literature. *Do you provide appropriate examples? Are the citations and references in the correct format?*
- Evidence of inter-relating relevant literature and tutoring experience.
- Length, structure, clarity, critical thinking, self-reflection and insight.