STAFF ACTIVE AND REFLECTIVE LEARNING (ARL) TO ENHANCE STUDENT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Staff Active Reflective Learning (ARL) is a new scheme designed to enhance student management though regular get-togethers of a group of teaching staff. It provides a platform for staff to share issues related to teaching, and seek solutions. This addresses current and future challenges faced in classroom management. The implementation of the Staff ARL is one of the recent initiatives taken under a new approach to shared learning within the School of Electronic and Info-Comm Technology. It provides a platform for mentors to facilitate in developing fellow staff members through the provision of professional support, helping existing staff to learn and grow professionally. Insights into classroom management techniques are provided for new staff to apply while waiting to attend the formal Pedagogic Certification in Technical Education (a compulsory component for all staff). The Staff ARL fosters good working relationships, as staff can 'chill out' and be rewarded through the enrichment of knowledge, sharpening of capabilities, building of confidence, and growth of mutual support. The scheme received good feedback as it resulted in the creation of a range of purposeful learning tools and strategies for the development of problem solving skills, reflective thinking skills and awareness of up-to-date classroom situations.

Key words: Active and Reflective Learning (ARL), Classroom management, Shared learning

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1. Introduction

Unpredictability of any outcome within and outside the classroom, instant or immediate responses to the needs of the students seem to be the norm. "Immediate" seems to be the main challenge for us today teaching the "GEN Y". Hence, it is often quite a challenge to select and use the best teaching tool appropriate to the situation. New teaching tools need to be constantly rediscovered and tried for better classroom teaching and management.

The Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL) scheme is an initiative that was introduced in late 2008 at the School of Electronics and Info-Comm Technology (SEIT) at the Institute of Technical College East (ITE/CE), Singapore. It aims to provide a platform for experienced as well as new teaching staff to come together to share, discuss and seek possible solutions and best practices in teaching-related issues and concerns in the classroom. Interest groups with mentors as facilitators are formed to look into classroom management issues so as to provide guidance to teachers dealing with these challenges. The sessions provide emotional and professional support with the goal of helping staff to be emotionally reliant through reflective practice while being professional in their interaction with students. It also hopes to address not only current but also future challenges in the classroom by utilising a framework of an evolving learning partnership between mentors and teachers.

The Staff ARL is a clear initiative where the learning and imparting of individual skills and experience can take place to prepare staff for the unknown challenges ahead. As teachers, no two days in the classroom are identical in nature. Each day in the classroom is a learning experience for tomorrow, and tomorrow requires a transfer of learning from yesterday. Staff members build on each other's strengths to enhance one's self in their area of weaknesses.

There are similarities between Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL) and Problem Base Learning (PBL). Both provoke inquiry, reflection, critical thinking and pedagogical strategies. However, the Staff ARL scheme applies proactive Reflection technique rather than passive reflection.

This paper aims to look at the trialing of the Staff ARL scheme and assess its effectiveness as it was implemented in the ITE SEIT, and thus provide recommendations for future similar schemes. As this paper looks at the implementation of the scheme and the subsequent feedback given in a Singaporean school, it may shed some light not only on the effectiveness of staff reflection and sharing, but also the effectiveness of Western teaching strategies in the Asian context.

2. Literature Review

Much research has already been done in the area of pedagogy and teaching excellence. The majority of the literature focuses on effective teaching strategies – interactions between the teacher and student within the classroom. Many papers have been written on the link between teaching and learning (Samuelowicz and Bain, 2001) with less emphasis on what the teachers can do to improve themselves while outside of the classroom. The Staff ARL scheme aims to address this gap in teaching excellence.

Published books on teaching identify problems such as the '*Circle of Defiance*" (Fay and Funk, 1995) and provide strategies for teachers to cope with it. Little is written, however, about the statistical effectiveness of these strategies when implemented. Furthermore a significant concern is that a large majority of the literature is written in the western teaching context, and its applicability in the Asian context may be called into question. This is especially because culture, values and the student-teacher relationship is likely to be different. This in part motivates our Staff ARL scheme which allows us to review regularly the effectiveness of strategies in our school.

Thirdly there has also been a general lack in policy recommendations for the improvement of teachers' skills besides the common recommendation that they are sent for regular training courses to ensure continued relevance. The Staff ARL hopes to act as a policy that can work to improve teaching within schools without the need for disruption of curriculum teaching time or the costs of external courses.

On the other hand, there is a body of literature that potentially supports the implementation of such a scheme. Academics have suggested that there is evidence that purposeful reflective teaching is a key component of teaching excellence (Kane, 2004). Neufeld and Grimett (1994) and suggested that reflection on *"the ordinary day-to-day experience of instructing students in classrooms ...... elevates the activity of instruction from the level of mundane drudgery to one that has the potential to educate practitioners, thereby changing and improving their practice"*. McAlpine (1999) goes further to say that *"knowledge (related to pedagogy) provides the basic structure* for enabling the process of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action to be effective". McKernan (2009) too advocates *"teaching that is not a knowledge-bounded set of competencies which are learned during student teaching, but on the contrary teaching that reflectively supports teacher growth and professionalism through the questioning of policies, problems and the consequences of actions."* A logical extension would suggest that a scheme such as the Staff ARL would yield a two-pronged benefit: first, teachers are given the platform to reflect on their own practices and assess their effectiveness, thus improving as teachers; second, different pedagogical strategies are shared at the same time for wider knowledge and subsequently constructive discussion. Cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham (2009) believes that it is good to *"Start a discussion group with fellow teachers... ... to give and receive social support... ... to serve as a forum for teachers to bring up problems they are having and get ideas for solutions from the group*"[7]. This supports our Staff ARL initiative in theory.

3. Methods

To assess the extent to which the Staff ARL was beneficial to staff, the sessions were organised and the survey method was subsequently employed to collect feedback from staff members who participated. This method was used as it provides opportunity to get a lot of data as needed in one go.

3.1. Organising the sessions: Six sessions of the Staff ARL were conducted over a period of nine months in the SEIT at ITE, shown below in Table 1. It was mandatory

for staff to attend at least 1 Staff ARL session. A total of 72 teaching staff attended the program, sharing a total of 32 different case studies.

Table 1: Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL) sessions 2008-2009

Session no.	Date	Topic/ Theme
1	25 Jul 08	Types of Learners
2	28 Aug 08	Mood of Learners
3	7 Nov 08	Understanding Classroom Management
4	30 Jan 09	Thinking Learners
5	13 Mar 09	Why Staff Reflection Sessions?
6	24 Mar 09	Channels of Communication - Mobile Phone

Each session lasted two hours, starting with ice breaking activities and a short sharing by the facilitators. This was followed by discussion involving the participants, as well as an interaction time with the theme. During each session, the facilitators brought up teaching strategies taken from books such as Education Psychology: A Practitioner-Researcher Approach (An Asian Edition) and Teaching with Love & Logic. These strategies included *"starting class on time, pacing throughout the lesson, and not ending early was associated with better student behaviour"* (Tan, et. al., 2003) and *"use more actions than words to convey values"* (Jay and Funk 1995) respectively. Majority of the resources used (refer to ANNEX A) were written in the western context, allowing for the results of the Staff ARL to act as a proxy indicator of the effectiveness of Western teaching models and strategies in the Asian context as well.

3.2. Gathering Feedback and Evaluation: The Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL) sessions were evaluated by participants after each session via a survey. A buffer period of 2 weeks (between the session and collection of feedback) was present so as to allow staff to test out their new skills and knowledge in the classroom and consequently gauge for themselves the usefulness of the ARL sessions. The collection of feedback allows us to understand what is most beneficial about the reflection sessions and to make modifications when necessary. In addition, by evaluating the reflection sessions, participants consider what they have learned through reflection, thereby enhancing the value of reflection.

The participants' survey mainly comprised 4 sections:

First, whether they felt that the scheme was beneficial. As a scheme that aims to help staff cope with classroom management problems and improve their teaching skills, the first indicator of the ARL's intangible effectiveness (regarding the goal of enhancing the pedagogical knowledge of teachers) would be the direct feedback of the teachers themselves.

Second, whether they had implemented suggested strategies in the classroom successfully. This would give an indication of the extent to which the Staff ARL brought about tangible improvements even in the short run.

Third, how often they felt the sessions should be conducted. This data was collected to be taken as a factor in planning future Staff ARL schemes.

Fourth, open-ended comments on the scheme. This would allow for more detailed feedback and possible recommendations on better ways to implement the Staff ARL.

Besides employing the questionnaire method, we also looked at the frequency of repeated participants to judge the reception of the ARL scheme. This would act as a second indicator as to the intangible benefits, for teachers, of the scheme.

Results

4.1. Staff Reception: The majority of the participants found the program helpful among which 15 participants (20.8%) implemented the solutions shared in their lesson/class. There was 5 staff who attended such session more than once.

Table 3: Participants in the Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL)

Session no.	No. of participants	Repeated participants	Cases shared	Similar subject matter	Suggested solution tested	Remarks
1	14	0	4	0	5	Late-comers record book
2	12	0	9	4	5	Late-comers record book
3	9	2	8	4	1	Late-comers record book
4	15	1	5	3	2	Flash card & whistle
5	11	0	5		1	Magic bag
6	11	2	1	0	1	Ice cream stick
Total	72	5	32	11	15	

4.2. Participants' Feedback: Two weeks after each session, the participants were asked to give their opinion as to whether they had found the session useful. 67 of the 72 participants gave typed / written feedback. The results are shown in the Figure 1: pai chart below:
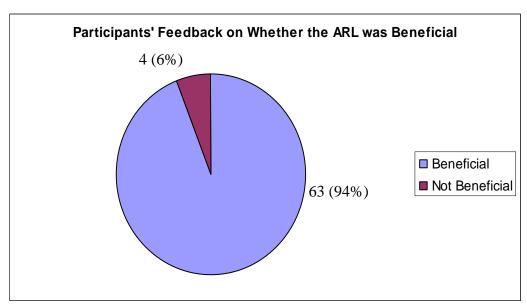
Participants' Feedback on Whether the ARL was Beneficial

4 (6%)

63 (94%)

- Beneficial
- Not Beneficial

Figure 1: Pai chart on participants' feedback

Most participants found the sessions useful. We were heartened to know that other staff shared similar challenges and felt the sessions provided were inspiring. Several participants indicated a change in behaviour as a result of the Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL). An example of positive feedback is as follows:

> *"Thank you so much to both of you for organizing this wonderful sharing session. It was tremendously helpful to me both as a venue to voice out my difficulties in teaching as well as to pick up useful tips from other experienced lecturers in conducting my lessons. I really like the informal setting and small number that attended (I might feel shy or uncomfortable to talk openly if the group is too big). As you all know I do not have much training and experience when it comes to teaching, but I felt a lot more inspired and confident after the session. I do urge all new staff to participate in such activities as it will help to make us feel more comfortable and at home. Keep up the good work guys, and I really look forward to the next session."*

In terms of preferred frequency of sessions, most participants felt that sessions conducted quarterly would be sufficient. The more experienced staff preferred a lower frequency of sessions. Some had suggested that such sessions should not be held near to the examination period while others suggested holding it during the term vacation.

Table 4: Preferred frequency of sessions

Session no.	Monthly	Bi-monthly	Quarterly	Half-yearly	Yearly	Open date
1	1		4		3	6
2		1	6	2	1	2
3				1	7	1
4	3		3	2	4	3
5			2	6	2	1
6	1	1	4	5		
Total	5	2	19	16	17	13

Discussion

One of the most challenging aspects of a teacher's vocation involves dealing with responsibilities other than the basic responsibility of imparting knowledge. Although these responsibilities may sometimes be frustrating, it is wise for a teacher to be prepared for other duties. The interests of the people who serve are also met when these people reflect on how their service work has had an impact on their own lives and learning. This impact involves one's growth and understanding in areas such as:

- intellectual pursuit
- public responsibility
- leadership development
- professional development

More often than not, this kind of proactive reflective practice is taken for granted. We tend to only pay attention to reflective practices on specific occasions when major incidents, which demand change, occur. Questions of career exploration only arise when life after college is contemplated. The kinds of structured reflection outlined in this paper are designed to link one's service experiences to personal as well as community development.

The ARL aims to address all the above. As a scheme that aims to help staff cope with classroom management problems and improve their teaching skills, the first indicator of the ARL's effectiveness would be the feedback of the teachers themselves. Besides the statistical evidence to suggest that majority of staff (94%) felt that they had benefited from the sessions, open-ended feedback supports the claim that practical effectiveness in the classroom followed. For example:

> *"I had gained valuable techniques in handling the students with rowdy behavior. I found that it is more effective to counsel these students individually, away from their peers."*

As stated earlier, a significant 20.8% of the staff who attended the session gave positive feedback of this nature. We thus believe that the ARL scheme should indeed be implemented in educational institutions at least for the benefit of the staff themselves, and consequently for the benefit of the students as well.

The good reception of the Staff ARL scheme and the possible feedback in terms of usefulness also suggests: <u>first</u>, that strategies discussed in Western Literature are still of some relevance to our Asian context; <u>second</u>, that despite the general conception that Asians tend to be less willing to share their reflections, the Staff ARL scheme can be implemented with benefits to the teachers.

Open-ended feedback also shed insights on the way in which sessions were, and should be, conducted. Some mentioned that sessions were best conducted in small groups where it would be easier for younger staff to share their concerns openly. Staff also gave feedback that the interactive nature of the session's activities was also a strong point. These 2 main features may thus be seen as essential to ensuring the effectiveness of the scheme.

Regarding the frequency of sessions, the data suggests that the preferred frequency would be quarterly or half-yearly. We would recommend that sessions are organised not necessarily at fixed intervals, but also when the need calls for it, especially if special situations arise – e.g. the SARS pandemic.

Conclusions, iImplications & Further Research

In short, the Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL) involve getting people talking about their experiences. Good facilitation ensures that this occurs in a safe and democratic way. The most basic form of reflection is the reflection circle. In this forum the tools of good facilitation are used and questions are raised that start participants thinking about their experiences and their learning in an interactive manner. The strengths of the reflection circle mirror those of good facilitation, and include providing space in which each participant has a right and an opportunity to speak. Every idea has value and can contribute to learning. Individual contributions are recognized and participants are responsible for their own learning.

Feedback has suggested that the scheme indeed has a degree of effectiveness and staff stand to benefit as they share teaching techniques, implement them, and both teach and manage students more effectively and with more ease. We recommend that similar schemes be implemented in other institutions, taking our model as a baseline from which one may start to plan a similar programme.

Further research may be done especially in terms of assessing the effectiveness of the sessions from the students' points of view in the long run. Ultimately this should be done given that, first and foremost, an educational institution's role is to effectively teach and nurture its students into brighter and better people. Such data collection and analysis, however, can only be done after the scheme has been in place for a long period of time – perhaps more than a year – as the attitudes and performances of students certainly do not change overnight. Other areas for further research may include an investigation as to whether such sessions benefit educational institutes of certain levels more than others.

Taking ownership and being proactive in making choices and decision in pedagogy is a challenge for all teaching staff. Teaching is a rewarding experience that allows growth in understanding and confidence, in taking responsibility for learning and

facilitating the learning process, to be more active in staff reflection. This initiative was supported by our Management team. I must qualify that any opinions, solution and findings and recommended suggestions are those of the authors, not the view of all educators.

In concluding, Mr. S.R. Nathan the President of Singapore said that "your success will be measured by your contributions to society, and by a selfless motivation to add value to the lives of the people around you." Therefore start to be a proactive reflective practitioner, to gauge your success. Tapping into your subconscious potential is the great gift which mutual reflection has to offer.

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ANNEX A

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ANNEX B

How we Conducted the Sessions: Our Roles as Facilitators

A facilitator should be a "neutral mediator" whose job is to provide information and accommodate the exchange of dialogue among participants. Facilitators should value and show respect to participants who share their life experiences and knowledge. Effective reflection sessions require that facilitators demonstrate an open-minded attitude, communicate appropriately, manage group dynamics, incorporate diversity, and provide closure. A critical component is the credibility of the facilitator and his ability to read and interpret the needs of the participants, making necessary adjustment accordingly at an instant.

We are not experts: We must keep in mind that our role in the reflection session is to moderate and guide communication, not make personal contributions to it, or push for our own agenda. By controlling the group, we threaten the open sharing of thoughts and feelings, and may close ourselves off from the group's feedback. Instead we should remain flexible and responsive to the group, and encourage evaluation of the process.

Everyone can learn: We should view Staff Active and Reflective Learning (ARL) as a learning opportunity and should communicate this attitude to the group. This means that as facilitators, we have a dual responsibility to lead and to learn. Thus we must ourselves remain open to learning from others, and treat everyone's contributions as credible and educational. This serves to validate group members and helps to avoid arguments between participants. Other qualities of an open-minded attitude include:

- be informal
- be empathetic
- maintain a sense of humor
- stay interested in group discussion
- be real, direct and genuine
- agree to disagree

Promote "active listening": Staying quiet and considering others' remarks can be challenging when controversial topics are discussed, but this is crucial to respectful communication. Doing so makes the participants who are talking feel appreciated. We discourage participants from professing their opinions without considering and responding to others' comments. We acknowledge non-verbal communication as an important aspect of silent listening as participants want to feel that you are really listening to them.

Encourage participation by all: We clearly communicate that each reflection session is a democratic process in which everyone has a right to choose to speak or not to speak. Group members who have not spoken should be encouraged to do so, if they wish. This can be accomplished by creating a space for more introverted members to speak. This can be accomplished by stating something like, "Let's give an opportunity to hear from some people who haven't spoken yet..."In order to promote full [3]participation, we guide the allocation of speaking time by queuing (e.g. using the ice-cream stick method).

This involves identifying and placing in some order those individuals who wish to speak. Another strategy is to list the names of the four participants who have raised their hands, invite them to speak in order, and then indicate that you will recognize others who wish to speak after the four participants have finished. Another technique is to simply give a nod to a person who wants to speak, acknowledging that he has been noticed and will be called upon soon.

Create a safe space: The key to an open and honest reflection session is an environment in which participants feel safe and comfortable. In order for participants to express their thoughts and opinions, they must feel that they can do so without fear of attack or condemnation. It is our job to create such an environment, to monitor participant's comfort levels, and to take the necessary steps to maintain safety. This includes understanding and planning for individual differences in needs, abilities, fears, and apprehensions. Participants who feel safe are more likely to make honest and genuine contributions and feel camaraderie and respect towards other participants in the group.

Manage disagreements: It has been said that "whatever resists will persist." We must be adept at recognizing tension building in the group, and respond to it immediately. Among the most useful strategies is to repeat the ground rules established by the group, including a reminder that criticism should pertain to ideas not to people. In addition, we should not permit any insults or form of disrespect and should clarify misunderstandings. It is important that negative behavior be handled immediately so that participants do not get the impression that the behavior is condoned by the facilitator.

Be mindful of power, and who has it: All groups have opinion leaders or people who most others look up to. Often, these opinion leaders will set the tone for a discussion, thereby limiting active involvement of the more reserved members. Identify who these opinion leaders are and if it appears as though their power and authority are dominating the discussion, ask them politely to entertain other opinions. Other keys to managing group dynamics include:

- know the group
- keep the group on track
- don't avoid topics
- reflect responsibility back on group
- be prepared for disagreements
- encourage challenging issues