

Weighing up the balance - some ways of overcoming the barriers to effective reflective writing.

**‘When I write my reflections they don’t appear as they do in my mind’
2nd year Flinders University education student.**

Widespread use of reflective journals

The literature promoting the use of written journal reflection for the professional growth of educators is already considerable (Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy, & Nosworthy, 2004), and recently electronic versions such as ‘blogs’ and e-portfolios are enjoying attention. However, despite the acclaimed virtues of reflective practice, it is also important to note the intrinsic and extrinsic difficulties that beginning reflective practitioners are faced with before they feel comfortable with this popular teaching/learning tool.

Constraints such as issues of time and personal motivation have a significant impact on reflective practice development and Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002) raise pedagogical issues such as how to introduce and deepen reflective skills, how to assess reflective writing, potential overuse and the debate around openness versus structure.

Reflective practice also requires continuous critical review so that the practitioner can avoid the pitfalls of unchallenged reinforcement of one’s beliefs and assumptions. According to Grimmet et al (as cited in Moran & Dallat 1995), an external perspective is an important factor in developing reflective skills and one which ‘significantly enriches the reflective process’ (p.22).

Time

‘Pick a quiet place and reflective time (e.g. early in the evening in your room) to do your journal entries’ is a typical recommendation of journal writing exponents (Loo & Thorpe 2002 p.134). However, finding the time to allow reflection is a constant challenge for professional journal writers and their students in most contemporary classrooms.

Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002) believe that time is a significant obstacle to reflection and suggest that school administrators and teachers need to find new ways of honouring the reflective process. Walkington (2005) suggests that mentor teachers should allow designated time ‘to consider the deeper implications’ (p.60) through ‘challenging discussion’ (p.60) with their student teachers.

Deep reflection is a difficult and complex task. It takes time and concentration, and dedicated opportunities are not always planned during university time or field placements to allow beginning teachers to develop such important professional skills. Understandably, student teachers find the expectation of professional reflection time-consuming and therefore onerous. (Maloney & Campbell-Evans 2002). However, if their writing is encouraged and reflections facilitated by the interactive process, they report greater commitment and motivation for the task.

Carr (as cited in Black 2003) takes the issue of time seriously by creating space for reflective thinking in her primary classroom. She writes 'In my own classroom, my greatest achievement has been giving students "fallow time" to explore and experiment - or just think - without pressure' (p.35). By setting aside 'fallow time' and reflection time we model the importance reflection on our actions for all students, whatever their stage of learning.

Motivation and commitment

Finding incentives and the personal dedication to reflect are also key issues in the literature on reflective practice, according to Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002) who quote the following honest response of one of their student teachers, 'If you didn't respond I wouldn't have written' (p.48).

Not all students feel as strongly as this though and the literature suggests that both initial reflective ability and provision of time and opportunity are important factors in its development. Therefore, recognition that deep reflection is not an automatic skill that student teachers arrive with at university is important for all those involved in their professional development.

The interactive journal partnership can act as a motivating factor for learner reflective practitioners, as can modelling of professional journal reflection. Ideally the partnership becomes a trusted and evolving dialogue between practitioner and beginning teacher where the lecturers or mentor teachers 'listen' sensitively and vary their response strategies as motivators for ongoing effort.

Graham and Phelps (2003) also identify the struggles inherent in the development of reflective practice skills. They write that initially students may 'balk at accessing assumptions, beliefs, values and attitudes that underpin action' (p.17). However, their research indicates that many students in the long run do maintain their commitment and motivation, writing reflectively about their learning and sharing their practice deeply with their peers and mentors and becoming part of the professional community of 'expert learners' (Ertmer and Newby as cited in Graham & Phelps 2003 p.20).

Building trust

Issues of trust and confidentiality also need to be acknowledged at the commencement of a reflective partnership, whether the tool is 'silent' as in written journal dialogue or through mentoring or group discussion. Some students also feel more able to trust their lecturer or mentor teacher with their reflections than their peers, so individual learning style and even personality style are issues for facilitators of reflection to take on board.

Individual differences

Recognition of individual learning styles can help to overcome some barriers to developing the skills of reflection. For instance, some learners are more likely to be comfortable with group and paired verbal reflection whilst others see the one-on-one interactive journal less threatening, so it is helpful for lecturers to provide opportunities for both experiences whilst professional reflective skills are developing in students.

Ramsden (1999) points out the fragility of deep learning approaches such as reflective practice and explains that previous experiences and individual characteristics may mean these deeper levels of reflection 'remain unexercised' (p.80).

One solution to the problem of learning style differences is to introduce the portfolio as a tool for deep reflection. The portfolio has broader categories for reflection such as websites, video and poetry and therefore assessment can access a greater variety of learning dispositions. Whilst a portfolio can also be time-consuming and may seem to favour the more 'creative' students, rubrics have been developed and panels of assessors can collaborate to overcome potential assessment discrepancies. (Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy & Nosworthy 2004).

Assessment

Assessment is another major issue attracting discussion in the arena of reflective practice and higher education. Teachers of reflective practice skills need to inform themselves of the debate and assess solutions for their consistency with the highest levels of critical pedagogy.

Bourner (2003) believes that one solution can be found in the nature of the questions that students set themselves to answer or demonstrate in the depth of their reflections. For instance, he claims that reflective thinking about an experience can be distinguished from unreflective thinking and he draws on the discipline of critical thinking and deep learning pedagogy to assess the level of student reflection and therefore proof of reflective thinking.

Poor reflective thinking, Bourner (2003) suggests, is indicated by descriptive and 'report' type accounts of an experience, whereas higher level reflection is characterised by 'the interrogation of material in conscious awareness by means of searching questions' (p.271). Bourner advises that objective reflective practice assessment, like assessment of a critical thinking exercise, is possible if we focus on the process rather than the content of the experience and he offers a list of questions that can be used as an assessment tool to gauge reflection as distinct from description (See Resources section on the Website).

Technical problems are also inherent in the assessment of online demonstration of reflective practice skills. Bowie, Joughlin, Taylor, Young & Zimitat (in Schwartz & Webb 2002) report on the difficulties with assessing on-line portfolios against the set criteria and declare that many questions remained after their first year of using e-portfolios as a tool for reflective practice. However, once an exemplar of 'best practice' for the process was established and available for the next round of students, they as reflective practice assessors were more confident that the reflective practice objectives had indeed been met by the participants.

Continuous growth

The skills of deep reflection take time and dedication to develop and typically, beginning practitioners experience a range of impediments to sustaining their reflections. Indeed at different times in our professional lives we all may encounter barriers and challenges to our commitment to reflective practice. This is when having a range of reflective tools as well as having significant others to dialogue with can reconnect us with our professional imperative to affirm and challenge our practice.

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