Tools for Reflective Practice

With the benefits of reflecting upon my professional journal I was able to observe and review my learning and progression of development over the semester.  
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Reflective journals
The tools most frequently used to assist the development of professional reflective practice in the teacher education context include reflective learning journals, autobiographies, portfolios, critical group audience and mentoring. However, micro-teaching or video reflection and the use of web based journals called ‘blogs’ are more widely regarded now as valid tools for on-line learners in particular.

According to Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002), a reflective journal involves learners in ‘self-assessment, collaborative critique, self-reflection and goal setting’ (p.1). Reflective journals vary in the way that they aid the reflective process. For instance, a journal may become a shared dialogue between a trusted lecturer, or mentor teacher in the classroom or it may be used for an individual journey of professional self-reflection and supported by the use of a framework for self assessment at specific times throughout the journal keeping project.

Reading response journal
One type of journal commonly used in teacher education programs for professional learning is the reader response journal where learners read recommended content in the form of written text or view a film and then record their responses in their journal.

These responses may then be used in different ways but usually they are shared at some stage with their lecturer and often orally with their peers in order to make further meaning from the text and to ‘articulate connections between new information and what they already know’(Kerka 1996 p.2).

Kerka (1996) claims that writing is a critical aspect of knowledge processing and that the learner’s journal can become a text in itself for later metacognitive learning and community knowledge building.

Double entry journal
Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy & Nosworthy (2004) recommend the double entry journal which involves a statement of context or quote from a reading on the left hand side of the page and reflections and proposed actions on the right side. Their model is based on Smyth’s (1989) four phase model of ‘describe, inform, confront and reconstruct’ (p.227).

Whitton et al (2004) also remind student teachers that it is important not to restrict reflections to the theory/classroom interaction but to feel free to refer to related issues in the media as well.
They suggest that reflection can be in the form of poetry, drama or music as long as it fulfills the requirements of critical analysis and future action.

**Interactive journal**
Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002) have written extensively on the use of *interactive journals* in their work with pre-service teacher education and believe that the interaction between journal writers and their audience ‘provides opportunities for student teachers to make practical theory explicit’ (p.39). The relationship that can develop between the lecturer as a trusted ‘interested party’ in encouraging and deepening reflection and the student teacher is a unique and valuable outcome of interactive journal work.

**Dialogue journal**
At Flinders University, lecturers teaching the course Reconciliation Education use a *dialogue journal* to support:

> the process of deconstructing and reconstructing how they [pre-service teachers] perceive Australia’s Indigenous history, Indigenous peoples and the provision of education to Indigenous students and communities.

> They can begin to engage with the topic and the historical and contemporary analysis of Indigenous histories, Indigenous education, the construction of knowledge and theoretical underpinnings. (Rigney, Rigney & Tur 2003 p.142)

This approach to journal work creates a ‘culturally safe space’ where undergraduate student teachers can make personal sense of the conceptual and theoretical understandings relevant to education and Indigenous education and share their thoughts and feelings with their lecturers in their journals.

**Narrative journal**
Reflection upon the values and beliefs which ‘form the essence of teaching practice’ (Bain, Ballantyne, Packer & Miller 1997 p.3) emphasised in the above Reconciliation Education topic is also developed through the use of the *narrative approach*. Bain, Ballantyne, Packer and Mills (1997) state that this approach provides opportunities for students ‘draw inferences from their own experiences thus creating personal pedagogical principles’ (p.3).

**Practicum reflections**
Journal entries for pre-service teachers are often in response to guided questions about teaching practice from their lecturers or mentor teachers and through this structure, important professional discoveries about teaching goals and strategies and the needs of classroom students are facilitated.

According to Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002), analysis and critical observation of their teaching decisions in their journals helps student teachers to ‘critique and modify their practice’ (p.4) and a recent study of Australian pre-service teachers of mathematics supports this claim. Kaminski (2003) found that keeping a reflective journal about teaching strategies and the learning responses of students during field placement facilitated the teaching of mathematics well ‘beyond technical rationality levels’ (p.30).
**Self-assessment**

Whilst the advantages of interactive journals are well established in the literature, it is important to mention the work of Bain, Ballantyne, Packer and Mills (1999) who found that student teachers can still develop reflective skills without intensive outside feedback, depending on the opportunities for self-assessment frameworks and the initial reflective abilities of the learner.


**Portfolios**

The creation of portfolios and e-portfolios as a form of assessment and professional preparation is becoming more prevalent in teacher education programs. Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy and Nosworthy (2004) refer to the Ontario College of Teachers (1999) professional standards in their support for this reflective activity tool.

Portfolios, as described by Wolf and Dietz (as cited in Whitton et al 2004), are a collection of structured professional ‘artefacts’ that demonstrate accumulated knowledge, skills and practice about teaching that is underpinned by critical reflection. They can be paper based or electronic and are considered to be an important new way for student teachers to portray their higher level cognitive thinking and self-reflective growth upon graduation.

Examples of artefacts often chosen by beginning teachers include a reflective statement of their teaching and learning philosophy, unit and lesson plans, student work and feedback, videotapes of their teaching, photographs of classroom displays, reflective comments from parents, mentor teachers and peers, formal appraisals from university supervisors and self-evaluations throughout their course.

Evidence of a professional journal is an essential component in any portfolio and can be included intact as a way of demonstrating continuous professional reflective ability, or used selectively as desired.

**Group dialogue and yarning**

*Group reflection* as a scholarly reflective tool is identified by Priest and Sturgess (2005). They claim that reflection in a group setting provides a richer experience by enabling ‘the individual to subject their personal beliefs to critical analysis in a safe environment’ (p.2). Collective reflection, whether formal or informal provides a scholarly experience for practitioners that also builds community.

The advantages of shared group discussion as a useful form of professional reflection are also described by Clarke (2004) who offered final year ‘internship’ student teachers opportunities to debrief and share their teaching experiences through group discussion as well as journal writing.
Clarke (2004) analysed the type and depth of reflection from both groups according to the Professional Learning Cycle model by Dietz (1998), and found that the structured collegial sharing environment generated safe reflection on common teaching practice issues which resulted in greater confidence of action amongst student teachers.

The significance of *yarning* as a means of deep learning in a cross cultural context is described by Power (2004). As a non-Indigenous researcher in an Aboriginal community she found that that yarning, or deep but informal dialogue, provided the opportunity for ‘profound, complex and subtle understanding’ (p.37).

**Mentoring**

*Mentoring partnerships* have a long tradition across cultures and life contexts. Whilst they often emerge informally within families, amongst friends or ‘on the job’ (Carr 1995 p.5), in recent years they have become more formally recognised by the workplace as playing a crucial role in the personal and professional lives of successful employees and their leaders.

Malcolm Anderson (2003), Indigenous Australian community elder and leader in human services provision, defines a mentor as ‘a friend, a person we can walk alongside, a guide, an achiever and someone who we can look up to as an example’ (Introduction).

Mentor teachers have a significant role in the development of reflective practitioners for the future. According to Moran and Dallart (1995), mentors in the teaching practice classroom facilitates the development of reflective skills by both modelling reflection on their own practice and by direct challenging and affirming the critical thinking process in the student.

Hine (2000) suggests that one of the prime benefits of a mentoring relationship is the development of ‘more self-reflective, meta-cognitively aware and self-directed learners’ (p.1). She claims that by talking, sharing discussion and problem solving and ‘jointly constructing knowledge and meaning’ (p.3), both the mentors and ‘mentees’ are learning to reflect in ways that will ultimately transform their teaching practice.

As Malcolm Anderson reminds us, ‘people are the most important resource to guide our development and to provide inspiration for our growth and learning’ (2003 Introduction).

**Electronic dialogue journals and blogs**

One relatively recent tool that encourages interactive reflection is the online journal format called a ‘*blog*’. Oravec (as cited in Williams and Jacobs 2004) describes the weblog or blog as an educational vehicle for student voices which empowers students and encourages them to become more critically analytical in their thinking. Writing a blog can serve many of the purposes of a dialogue journal but needless to say they have a much larger, unknown audience.
According to Williams and Jacobs (2004), blogs challenge students to confront their beliefs and critically analyse how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by their audience. The blog is already gaining favour in teacher education programs in areas where reflective practice is already established as a professional learning tool.

Kerka (1996) has also written about the uses of electronic journals in distance education and places importance on the support aspect of the journal relationship for geographically isolated students once the extra difficulties of access, equity and technical skill are addressed.

Like each of the above forms of reflective practice, the electronic version of communal discourse serves as an important tool for professional growth in the contemporary teacher education setting.

Educators now have a range of tools through which to foster reflective skills and by varying their approach from course to course, they can offer their students’ additional deep learning experiences which will benefit not only their university studies but their future professional practice.

References


