

Reflective diaries as a means of facilitating and assessing reflection

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Abstract: *The ability to engage in reflective practice is basic to competent professionals, and training in reflective practice is therefore an important element in professional education (Schon, 1983, 1987). To facilitate the development of the process of reflection and reflective learning during training, many professional education programmes engage students in writing reflective journals as one of the learning activities (Conner-Greene, 2000; Patton, Wood & Agarenzo, 1997; Woodward, 1998). As an assessment method, reflective journals do not only provide evidence of understanding of content knowledge, reflection, professional judgment and application, but also enhance critical self-reflection and self-awareness (Biggs, 1999; O'Rourke, 1998). This paper discusses a case study where reflective journals in the form of reflective diaries were used to facilitate and assess reflection and reflective learning in a group of in-service Masters of Education students. As one of the learning activities, the students were required to keep reflective diaries of their learning in every session of a module. The students were also required to select and include two of their diaries as part of a portfolio to be submitted for assessment. Evidence from both the students reported experience and also the information in the diaries shows that reflective diary is a useful tool in facilitating reflection and reflective learning. Writing the diaries requires the students to reflect on the teaching and learning activities that have taken place, provides opportunity for them to search for and express their learning in a personal way, to relate and apply their learning to their own teaching and assessment practice.*

Keywords: *Reflection, reflective diaries, reflective learning*

Reflection in professional education

Professional education in general should develop in students their own conceptions and theories of the profession which allow them to generate best practice. To achieve this aim, professional education involves not only developing students' competencies in content knowledge and professional attitudes, but also provides opportunities for students to reflect on their experience and practice in order that they might see how their practice could be improved. In fact, developing reflective practitioners has become the core element in many professional education programmes such as medical, nursing and teacher education.

Reflective practice involves a metacognitive approach in which professionals observe their own actions, evaluate them in light of theory, and use that theory to generate and monitor improvements in their own practice. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as "the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light

of grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends.” (p. 7). Schon (1983, 1987) argued that reflection should be more tied to action, so he went beyond Dewey, and characterized reflective practitioners as being able to think while acting, *reflection-in-action*, and also subsequently after an action, to consider what has been done, *reflection-on-action*. Thus, for present purposes, to reflect, students need to question what they see, hear, read and experience, relate what they learn and what they are doing to a conceptual framework that interprets and enriches that experience, so that future decisions and actions are enhanced.

The focus of this paper is to discuss how reflective diaries were used as part of an assessment portfolio, and how they might both facilitate and assess reflection and reflective learning, and what are some of the implications for practice.

The effects of reflective journal on student learning

To facilitate the development of the process of reflection and reflective learning during training, many professional education programmes engage students in writing reflective journals as one of the learning activities (Conner-Greene, 2000; Patton, Wood & Agarenzo, 1997; Woodward, 1998). The literature indicates that reflective journal writing enhances reflection, critical thinking, integration of theory with practice, and promotes professional growth (Brown and Sorrell, 1993; Callister, 1993; Kea & Backon, 1999; O’Rourke, 1998; Patton, Sinclair & Woodward, 1997). As an assessment method, reflective journals do not only provide evidence of understanding of content knowledge, reflection, professional judgment and application, but also enhance critical self-reflection and self-awareness (Biggs, 1999; O’Rourke, 1998), and improve student assessment performance (Conner-Greene, 2000).

This paper discusses a case study where reflective journals in the form of reflective diaries were used to facilitate and assess reflection in a group of in-service Masters of Education students.

The context of the case study

The Postgraduate Diploma/Master in Education (PgD/MEd) in Teaching in Higher Education at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University is a course designed for in-service tertiary teachers with the overall aim of enhancing the students’ teaching through reflective practice. To achieve the aim, a student-centred approach to teaching and learning is adopted, where the students are encouraged to be reflective both in their own learning and in their teaching practice. The module “Assessment of Learning Outcomes” is one of the core compulsory modules, and its main aim is to encourage students to apply the educational philosophy and principles of assessment to their own practice through self-reflection. The specific objectives of the module are that students will

- (1) understand the different aspects of assessment of learning outcomes
- (2) reflect and critically analyze current practice of assessment procedures
- (3) design appropriate assessment procedures relevant to course/subject objectives.

The module was assessed by a portfolio consisting of reflective diaries and other self-selected items. The students were required to select and present evidence of their learning relevant to the module objectives in the portfolio.

The reflective diaries

Students were required to keep reflective diaries of their learning in every session of the module. As this was a relatively new experience for most of the students of the course, a prescribed format of the diary was given, and three questions, one before and two after the session, were suggested to provide a focus to assist reflection. There was also a self-reflection section in the diary.

The question to be answered before the session was *“What do I want to find out most from this evening’s session?”*. It was expected that to answer this question, students would have to go through the module outline which was distributed and discussed at the first session, identify their own learning and professional needs in relation to their previous experiences and interest. After the session, students were expected to answer the questions, *“What is the one big point I learned in this evening’s session?”* and *“What is the main question that has been unanswered in this evening’s session?”*. These two questions were designed to assist students to revisit and reflect on what they had learned during the session, identify area of learning that they had constructed through the various teaching and learning activities, relate that to their expectations before the sessions, and to identify further learning needs. The last and most important part of the reflective diary was a self-reflection in which the students were required to focus on their thoughts about the session, particularly on integrating and relating the content to their practice of teaching and assessing student learning outcomes. Students were required to select two or three of their diaries to be submitted as items in the assessment portfolio to provide evidence that they had achieved the module objectives, and how well those objectives had been achieved.

Assessment of the reflective diaries

The assessment of the diaries was based on the quality of the evidence presented in the selected items in relation to the three objectives of the module, and in particular the reflection on current assessment practice based on theories.

To explore the students’ perceptions and views on this new assessment approach, 18 students were randomly selected for interviews after the assessment. During the interviews, students were invited to talk about their views on the portfolio assessment approach, their experience in preparing the portfolios, and their perceptions of the effects of portfolio assessment on their learning. Details of the effects of portfolio assessment on the students’ learning have been presented in another conference (Note 1). This paper focuses on the students’ perceptions of their experience of writing the reflective diaries and the effects on their learning.

Students’ perceptions of the reflective diaries as a means to facilitate reflection

During the interviews, most of the students reported that reflective diary was one of the portfolio items that greatly facilitated them to reflect as one of them explicitly pointed out.

“... in diary writing, I had to reflect on what I had learned at the end of the day. It was very common that listening in lesson was followed by no action. Writing a diary did enable me to rethink what I had heard and had done after the lesson. Simply recording is still not good enough. I think preparation before lessons is very important. If there is no preparation before lessons,

there is not enough depth in thinking, it is sheer event record keeping... Yes I learned the single word 'reflection' in the whole process... Now I am not just asking reasons, but also reflect on alternative solutions and seeking further improvement... I have learned a lot through reflection, and now I can apply the knowledge in the future."

So from the students' perspective, writing reflective diaries was a very useful learning tool to facilitate them to reflect on their current teaching and assessment practice in light of the theories and concepts discussed in class. These reported perceptions were supported by evidence in the diaries presented by the students.

Evidence for reflection in the reflective diaries

In assessing the diaries, the focus was on how the diary content addressed the module objectives. Particular emphasis was also placed on the self-reflection section to see how students applied theory to practice to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Most of the diaries were written following the suggested format, and the students addressed the three questions and also completed the self-reflection section, while others adopted a more open format without adhering to the suggested questions. Whatever the format used, there is very concrete evidence in most of the diaries demonstrating students' achievement of the three objectives of the module: understanding theories, reflection on current practice, application of theory to practice, and formulation of action plans for change or improvement. Of these three objectives, reflection on current practice and suggestions for improvement are most explicitly evidenced by the diaries. The following extract of one of the diaries helps illustrate evidence of the student's achievement in these aspects.

Student Diary

In a diary on the session on "setting assessment criteria", the student wanted to find out more about the concept of constructive alignment in assessment. At the end of the session, the student developed a much better insight and understanding of the importance to "*start from the point of view of how and what to assess, keeping in mind the learning objectives of the subject, and then move on to setting up the teaching and learning activities accordingly*". However, the unanswered question to this student was the value and appropriateness of MCQ especially in addressing subject objectives which were trying to encourage deep learning. In the reflection section, the student applied what he learned to the challenge that he was facing in teaching large classes, the difficulty in assessing students as often as might be ideal, and the attempt to include assessment just for formative purpose but do not contribute to the final grade. Reflecting on his teaching practice, this student wrote:

"In many respects, assessment seems to run counter to the goal of developing deep learners amongst our students. It is very easy for assessment to become quite arbitrary, and in so doing it loses its relevance to the students. This may be the most common way in which the constructive alignment of a subject becomes 'unaligned'."

As a result of this reflection, the student went on to propose some actions for improvement of his own assessment practice.

"... I am anxious to make use of what I have learned about assessment so far. In the undergraduate subject that I teach, I have already paid more attention

to the assessment component than I did last year. I am introducing a learning portfolio, and I have planned three tests. I am wondering if three tests might have been a mistake. However, I hope to make them as formative in nature as possible.”

The above example helps illustrate the evidence of reflection presented by the students in their reflective diaries, and hence the effectiveness of reflective diaries as an appropriate means of assessing reflection.

Implications for practice

Literature has shown that reflective diaries are useful tools in facilitating reflection and reflective learning. The very nature of diary writing itself requires the writer to think back on events that have taken place and provides opportunity for expression of personal thoughts. Used in the academic context, reflective diaries provide opportunity for the students not only to think back on the learning activities, to explicitly and purposely identify what they have learned, but more importantly, to relate what they have learned to their teaching practice, evaluate their practice in light of theories, and formulate action plans for improvement. The very nature of a diary also allows students to search for and express their learning in a personal way, a learning that makes personal meaning and is useful in the student's own context.

The experience with the PgD/MEd course provides evidence to support reflective diaries as an effective means to facilitate and assess reflection. This experience is applicable to any other educational contexts where reflection constitutes the key objective to be achieved. Reflective diaries, whether as a stand alone task, or as part of a portfolio, could be implemented as a learning and an assessment tool through which facilitation and assessment of reflection could be effectively achieved.

Note 1

Effects of portfolio assessment on student learning. Paper presented at the Pacific Rim Conference on Higher Education Planning and Assessment. Hilo, Hawaii, USA. 3-7 June 2000.

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