Reflection in sport and recreation cooperative education: Journals or blogs?

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Reflection is a complex process well recognized for its potential to contribute to greater depth of understanding and learning. Within a cooperative education programme reflection facilitates the experiential learning process, as it transforms experience and theory into knowledge and enhances the transfer of theory and practice. The aim of this study was to examine procedural differences in reflection by sport and recreation cooperative education students by comparing two different formats: journals and blogs. A qualitative case study methodology was used. Analysis showed no differences in the frequency of entries, writing structure and level of reflection between the hard copy journals and blogs. In both formats the level of reflection was mostly expressive and of a descriptive nature. Higher levels of interpretation and analysis were rarely evident. It is recommended that further development of strategies, such as rubrics and frameworks, for improving the preparation and engagement of students in reflection are required. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2012, 13(1), 55-64*)

Key words: reflection, cooperative education, journals, blogs, sport

Reflection is a complex process, which is well recognized to contribute to greater depth of understanding and learning (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Moon, 2006; Lay & McGuire, 2010; Wolf, 2010). The concept of reflection stems from the work of John Dewey (1910), an American educator and philosopher, who founded the idea of "discovery learning" and suggested that "we learn by doing and realising what came of what we did" (Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001, p. xi). Reflection is considered as making sense of experiences through examining them. This concept has been well supported by a wide range of authors across many fields and over time. Reflection is more than simply pausing to think about an experience from time to time (Rolfe et al., 2001; Thompson & Thompson, 2008). Schön (1987), suggests reflection is a learned skill most effectively developed through an experiential component. Two distinct types of reflection are identified by Schön: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action occurs during the experience while reflection-on-action is analysis and interpretation of the experience retrospectively. Links need to be made between thinking and experience to result in learning (Rolfe et al.). Some of the benefits of ongoing reflection are that knowledge, skills and self-confidence can be developed (Thompson & Thompson).

Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning is commonly related to learning in cooperative education (Eames & Cates, 2004). Including reflection is a crucial component in facilitating the experiential learning process; it transforms experience and theory into knowledge and enhances the transfer of learning (Bolton, 2010; Kolb). Reflection is the second stage of the perpetual cycle and is followed by conceptualism, then action. Learning can be seen as a process guided by previous experiences leading to some change in action and transformation of knowledge (Moon, 2006).

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PURPOSE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Strategies to facilitate reflection are embedded within many learning environments including teaching, nursing, business and social work. The focus of this paper is the use of journals or blogs as a tool for facilitating reflection within a sport and recreation cooperative education context. Cooperative education can be closely aligned with experiential learning. It is "a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning, through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals" (National Commission for Cooperative Education, 2011). Encouraging structured reflection within a cooperative education experience can enhance 'conscious reflective activity' (Roberts, 2002), where the learner relives their own experience and makes connections between the experience and theory.

A significant contribution of the reflective process leads to the development of an awareness of professionalism within the industry environment (Thompson & Thompson, 2008). Smith and Betts (2000) highlight that the quality of the learning in cooperative education is often not dependent on the quality of the experience, but on the quality of the process of reflection. Previous work published in sport and recreation cooperative education has highlighted the importance of incorporating strategies within the curriculum design to facilitate reflection. Leaving the process of reflection for students to do themselves may result in reflection not taking place (Fleming & Martin, 2007; Martin & Leberman, 2005).

MODELS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

There are many models and frameworks of the reflective process, most of which may identify with four generic levels within the process. These include description, analysis and interpretation, meaning and application, and future planning (Moon, 2006; Pavlovich, 2007; Rolfe et al., 2001). In the context related to this study, students were asked to base their reflective writing on the Gibbs (1988) framework of reflection, that has a circular format similar to that of Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning. The Gibbs framework has six defined stages: description of the event; feelings and thoughts; evaluation; analysis; conclusion and synthesis; and formulation of an action plan. This framework has a strong focus of reflection on action; however, it can also be used for reflection in and before action.

JOURNAL WRITING, AS A STRATEGY FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The use of journal writing involving narrative description of tasks and reflective writing can be an effective reflective practice tool. It is expected that the students' journal entries entail more than just a list of their experiences; it is also expected to include re-visitation of feelings and re-evaluation of the experience (Boud et al., 1993; Gibbs, 1988). Ghaye and Lillyman (2006) reinforce the value of written work in developing reflective practice. The journal can create the footprints of the cooperative education journey. Through creating a written record of their learning during the cooperative education experience, it is easier for the students to remember where they have come from and to clearly identify the progress that they have made throughout the programme.

The language in journal writing can take different forms. Formal language is used in writing within education settings that utilise essays and reports to assess learning, while expressive language is a relatively informal writing style used in personal journals and in communication

where we explore our thinking around a topic or issue. There is a personal connection within the writing (Moon, 2006).

The term *blog* is derived from the phrase web log and is a website that can be frequently updated, generally taking the form of an online diary or journal. Over the past decade, blogs have evolved from simple online diaries to vast global (public) networks where all manner of material may be displayed and discussed. Blogs provide the opportunity to combine text and images as well as other media such as video clips. Blogs are currently used in nearly every imaginable genre. In education, the use of blogs has become more popular over the last few years as a flexible learning strategy (Wolf, 2010; Larkin & Beatson , 2010).

The aim of this study was to examine procedural differences in reflection by sport and recreation cooperative education students by comparing two different formats (hard copy journals and online blogs). In addition, through examining the documents, an understanding of the current level of student reflection, as per Gibbs (1988), was determined.

CONTEXT

The Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) is a three-year degree programme with majors in Sport and Exercise Science, Coaching, Physical Activity and Nutrition, Sport Management, Health and Physical Education and Outdoor Education. The cooperative education papers (Cooperative 1 and Cooperative 2) are structured so that the student spends the equivalent of two days a week during the two semesters of the academic year situated within one organisation. During Cooperative 1, the students complete 200 hours of workplace activities and 100 hours is allocated as academic time for the students to reflect on and critically analyse their experiences as well as to design a project that is beneficial to their organisation. During Cooperative 2, the students are required to complete 150 hours in the workplace and the remaining 150 hours allows time for the students to complete, evaluate and present their industry related project, as well as to evaluate the overall learning experience and critically reflect on achievement of their negotiated individual learning outcomes and graduate capabilities.

In the past, BSR cooperative education students were required to keep a hard copy written journal. The journal described the duties performed, work behaviour, and reflections on all activities that took place throughout the co-op experience and, in particular, in relation to their individualised learning outcomes. An introduction to the Gibbs model of reflection and the purpose of journaling was included in a preparation workshop for the students. The journals were assessed, at the end of the semester, for frequency of entry, expression of thoughts and the level of reflection. This year the students were given an option to either use hard copy or an online blog.

The online blogs were made available to the students through AUTonline. This is a system that supports online learning at AUT and uses Blackboard software. Blackboard software supports email to all users, discussion forums, delivery of documents and media, online tests and a gradebook. Private blogs were set up for students in the cooperative paper that had selected the online option for their journals. In addition, each academic supervisor had a folder containing the blogs for their cohort of students. This meant that only the student and their academic supervisor had access to the student's writings. The academic supervisor had the facility to communicate with the student regarding their entries, via the comments option

on the page. The student had the option to upload word documents, photos and video clips on to their blog.

Students who selected the hard copy journal option were able to choose a preferred format. In most cases this was a handwritten journal; however, a few students chose to type their reflections into a word document and print this document for their assessment.

METHODS

A qualitative case study methodology was used. Case study methodology permitted researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues of interest and a unique interpretation of events (Merriam, 1998). An intrinsic case study approach was used for this study as the design drew the researcher towards what was important about the case within its own world. Intrinsic designs aim to develop what is perceived as the case's own issues, contexts and interpretations (Stake, 1995). In case study research, the case needs to be determined, the researcher needs to have contextual material available to situate the case within the setting and the case needs to be bounded or constrained by time, place, events or processes. The case was the BSR sport and recreation cooperative education programme. The context was teaching and learning related to developing reflective practice and the event for the case was the journal writing process.

The primary data for this study consisted of hard copy journals and private online blogs that were submitted as part of the assessment for Sport and Recreation Cooperative. Ethics approval was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee and students gave informed consent for the analysis of the journals to occur after they had completed of all assessment related to this course.

Content analysis was used to examine the reflective journals and blogs. The individual student documents were coded and analysed according to the following:

1)   Frequency of entries.

The number of entries per week for each student was recorded.

2)   Structure of entry.

Word length of each entry was recorded. The addition of any visual attachments or diagrams was noted. The sentence structure was examined to identify spelling and grammatical errors.

3)   Use of language.

Each entry was examined for the type of language used by the student. The language was categorised using the following terms: formal, expressive, descriptive, analytical, or colloquial (Moon, 2006).

4)   Level of reflection.

Using the Gibbs model (1988) of reflection, the language used in the entry was examined and categorised according to the follow stages of reflection, description; analysis; meaning; and future planning.

5)   Evidence of progression from the beginning of semester to the conclusion.

All entries for a particular student were examined across the semester to identify changes in the written language that represented progression in their level of reflection.

The analysis of individual entries was combined to determine consistent themes for each format.

FINDINGS

In the cohort of 70 students, 21 chose to use the new online blog format. Thirty three students from the class of 70 gave informed consent for their journals to be analysed according to the categories stated above. From the participants, 9 used the online blog and 24 the hard copy journal.

Frequency of entries

The total number of journal entries, over the duration of the semester (12 weeks), ranged from 8-15 for the online blogs and 7–58 for the hard copy journals. There was a greater variation in the number of entries in the hard copy journals. Most students within the study averaged one to two entries per week over a semester. Some individuals made more frequent entries which are highlighted by the variation of the entry numbers. Generally, however, there were no consistent differences between entry frequencies of the two modes of journaling.

For the online blog, the entries were dated and timed for the entry or upload of material. Some students would upload the equivalent of several days of entries at one time. The hard journals were mostly dated for each entry and there was no ability to determine when the actual entry had been written.

Structure of entries

The entry structure was similar for both hard copy journals and online blogs. The entry length, within both formats, was generally brief with word counts of approximately 200. One online blog had an average entry length of 650 words which was not evident in any other document analysed. All students made some spelling and grammatical errors, even though spell check was available if the document was word processed or entered directly onto the online blog. Some students using a hard copy journal chose to type their journal entries, yet most in this group were hand written. In some examples, the script was illegible which made reading the documents challenging. The journals were generally written in one colour and did not indicate areas of greater importance through underlining or highlighting.

All the blogs were word processed, therefore there was no issue with reading the content. A range of the font sizes and styles were used by the student; however, no online blog showed evidence of the use of colour, bolding or italics for emphasis of content. This was the same whether the online blog was written in directly or whether the entry was imported from a word processed document. Although the online blogs had the facility to upload photos, video and other documents students did not use this feature.

Use of language

The language used and formality of the writing was similar with both writing formats. All students tended to write using expressive language with formal sentence structure for example:

> Today would have to be the best day on placement.

> My final day involved playing sport with the kids, taking the roll call, taking them to the movies and playing team building games.

All students wrote in paragraph format and in the first person. Bullet points were not used in either format. All students had a tendency towards using some colloquial language (e.g. "pretty good"; "to get the hang of how to") to describe their feelings.

Reflection and evidence of progression

Across both formats, the majority of entries demonstrated a descriptive level of reflection only. However, there were cases where a particular student demonstrated elements of analysis, interpretation, application and planning. This was generally evident from the very first entry for that particular student.

Example one, descriptive writing verbatim from student writing:

> This week was epic. It was a sucessful camp even though the trailor lost a wheel and the weather packed up preventing us from going snowboarding. I have a lot of respect for John who was able to adapt on the fly to sort out the trailor issue and get all the students and gear to the backpackers that we stayed at. Also how he sorted out a rafting trip for the girls instead of snowboarding with only a half a days notice.

Example two, higher levels of reflection verbatim from student writing:

> The session involved supervising and instructing a class of older adults in exercise training. The group has gradually become larger, thus making it harder to deliver. I felt that as the group was larger than what I had previously handled that I had to be well aware to pay close attention to the entire class. The most important aspect in this was that I has to ensure that the relatively new members were well aware of the correct techniques when using the equipment especially the free weight exercises and also the swiss ball exercises because of balance. Throughout the session I felt I paid close attention to every member although I felt that I may have been a little neglective of one individual as he was more experienced in the environment and I assumed I knew that he was aware of what he was doing. I should have acknowledged him and asked him more about his experience in the gym or fitness environment. Next time I think it may be appropriate to split the group in 2 separate groups and setup a circuit so there is a variety of structure to the class and in the near future introduce some other exercises that may be a bit more challenging. I felt the session was constructive as all the participants put in huge efforts and took the time to ask questions if they were not sure what to do. This reassured me that I was doing a relatively good job and gave me a lot of confidence.

There was no clear indication that there was development of reflective capabilities across the semester with either format. The amount of online feedback to the student on their online blogs by their academic supervisors was minimal. However, feedback and discussion may have occurred in face-to-face fortnightly supervisor meetings for students using either format, but this was not examined.

DISCUSSION

Journals and blogs are designed to encourage reflective practice and learning about one's own learning. They provide the student with many opportunities for self expression. Journals can be constructed and appear in various formats. The format identified in this study was classed as semi-structured, as the student was given the expectation that they would reflect on their cooperative education experience/s in a regular manner. The findings indicate there was no evidence of differences between online blogs and hard copy journals in the entry frequency, structure, language, level of reflection or progression.

All journal writing was structured with the use of full sentences and paragraphs. This may be an indication the student felt compelled to write in an essay style format (similar to other university assessments) and made an effort with their writing because the journal was to be assessed (Wolf, 2010). This factor may also lead to some form of censorship of their writing. Unlike most university academic writing, which is commonly in the third person, the use of the first person is encouraged within journal writing and this was adopted by all students. As Moon (2006) suggests, this is indicative of ownership and personalisation of the writing. The students demonstrated the use of expressive language which is relatively informal, "comfortable, ready to hand language" (Moon, 2006, p33.) used in situations where the writer is personally involved in the issue or situation.

A study conducted by Wolf (2010) examined the use of the reflective blog by public relations students in their placement environment. Wolf identified that the vast majority of posts were self reflective (using language such as 'I think that…'). Larkin (2010), in a study of business students, identified that journaling was mostly at description level which is consistent with our findings. Parkes and Kajder (2010) comment that blogs may promote reflection; however, the depth of reflection within individual posts may have considerable variation.

Learning from writing is one of the values of using a reflective journal as it takes time to write and forces time for reflection (Moon, 2006). This *reflection time* is also an important step in the process of experiential learning. The findings of this study identified that most of the journal entries were relatively short (200–300 word count) and the writing was predominately descriptive. This may be an indicator that little time was taken to write and hence reflection was not taken to any great depth. These time constraints may limit the depth of reflective writing but may not prevent inner personal reflection.

Shifting the journal to an online medium, such as a blog, could create opportunities for students to reflect more frequently, and have a richer and more meaningful interaction with their supervisors (Larkin, 2010; Wolf, 2010) especially those students with the technology readily at their disposal. The findings of this study do confirm that the way in which online blogs have been used to date compared to hard copy journals created no overall difference in the quality of student reflection. Although the depth of reflection is variable, this finding supports that the move to an online medium will not disadvantage the students' reflective

process. This finding is supported by other studies (Parkes & Kajder, 2010; Ray & Coulter, 2008).

Wolf (2010) suggests that writing for a more public audience may motivate students to put more effort into the journaling process. In the public domain, anything uploaded remains available forever. However, as the online blogs, through Blackboard, are private and not in the public domain, there is no concern regarding blogs being viewed by industry supervisors or potential employers.

The findings of this study confirm that the students are generally describing rather than reflecting on their experiences. This highlights the need to further develop learning resources and activities that will encourage higher levels of reflection. The development of reflective practice requires meaningful feedback and students need to be taught strategies for reflection. Reflection is not an innate characteristic of the student.

Strategies for improving reflective journaling include suggestions made by other authors. Fernsten and Fernsten (2005) recommend construction of rubrics to guide students and help them differentiate between process and product reflections. Schön (1987) suggests setting goals and expectations of reflection with the students helps them understand the requirements. The use of frameworks to characterise student reflection using a matrix of descriptors has been recommended by multiple authors (Rickards, Diez, Ehley, Guildbault, Loacker, Hart & Smith, 2008; Larivee, 2008; Sparks-Langer, Simmons, Pasch, Colton, & Starko, 1990). Establishing a framework that could work with the BSR students should be considered.

Supervisors need the time to give meaningful feedback; however, this increases supervisor workload. Written feedback on the hard copy journal occurred at the end of the semester, although some supervisors had conversations throughout the semester with their student regarding the content of their journals. However, online journals have the capacity to provide more frequent feedback to assist student development of reflective writing over the duration of the programme. Sharing blog entries with peers within teams, but still remaining relatively private rather than public, may be one approach to improve reflection by encouraging the students to critique and feedback on each other's writing.

CONCLUSION

 Overall, there were no differences in the entry frequency, structure, language and the level of reflection between the two journal formats. Writing was expressive, but generally descriptive rather than at the higher levels of reflection. Interpretation and analysis were rarely evident. This would indicate that there is a need for further strategies such as rubrics and frameworks to encourage the development of reflection skills. Students need to understand the reflective process and see what good reflection is. Prompts and questions may be used to guide the students' reflective writing. Continuing to develop the use of the blog in this context could provide valuable opportunities for increasing support and feedback on the reflective process using both peer discussions and supervisor comments.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

Cooperative education/WIL in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. More specifically, cooperative education/WIL can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education/WIL programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The editorial board welcomes contributions from authors with an interest in cooperative education/WIL. Manuscripts should comprise reports of relevant research, or essays that discuss innovative programs, reviews of literature, or other matters of interest to researchers or practitioners. Manuscripts should be written in a formal, scholarly manner and avoid the use of sexist or other terminology that reinforces stereotypes. The excessive use of abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided. All manuscripts are reviewed by two members of the editorial board. APJCE is produced in web-only form and published articles are available as PDF files accessible from the website http://www.apjce.org.

Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research. Essays should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to, and discussion of, relevant literature, and a discussion of the importance of the topic for other researchers and practitioners. The final manuscript for both research reports and essay articles should include an abstract (word limit 300 words), and a list of keywords, one of which should be the national context for the study.

Manuscripts and cover sheets (available from the website) should be forwarded electronically to the Editor-in-Chief. In order to ensure integrity of the review process authors' names should not appear on manuscripts. Manuscripts should be between 3,000 and 5,000 words, include pagination, be double-spaced with ample margins in times new-roman 12-point font and follow the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in citations, referencing, tables and figures (see also, http://www.apa.org/journals/faq.html). The intended location of figures and diagrams, provided separately as high-quality files (e.g., JPG, TIFF or PICT), should be indicated in the manuscript. Figure and table captions, listed on a separate page at the end of the document, should be clear and concise and be understood without reference to the text.