

KEEPING A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL: REFLECTIONS OF A MATURE STUDENT

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- learning outcomes
- process skills development
- subject-specific skills
- professional skills development
- reflective practice
- feedback loop
- formative assessment
- summative assessment
- credit bearing

Summary

Reflective journals are used increasingly in Higher Education. Examples from an unstructured journal kept by the author in her role as a new Mechanical Engineering student raise issues of what thought to be in journals, how emotional effects should be dealt with and how the subjective nature of reflection may cause problems for assessment.

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Context

Many educational institutions are promoting the use of learning journals as a support for personal or professional development (see for example Moon, 1999; Brockbank and McGill, 1998). I was originally encouraged to keep a learning journal by the Open University as part of a Masters in Education programme, though the nature of this was not constrained in any way. Because I found journal-keeping beneficial, I decided to use it in a PhD study of how students acquire academic discourse, acting as my own guinea pig as a new student. The process was a pragmatic one not based on any theoretical perspective, but my study coincided with an increase in the literature about reflection and I also became aware of its role as an academic discourse in its own right. Reflective writing has an additional benefit in that it encourages student (or staff) writing and is akin to the freewriting (Elbow 1981) that is useful for unlocking the creative process.

Description

After completing an HNC in Mechanical Engineering at a Further Education college, I have a learning journal of around 50,000 words. It contains a mixture of facts and information, 'to do' lists and reflections on what I did. Unpacking some examples of the reflections now that I have completed the course may help to underpin the benefits and potential problems of journal writing. In the examples below, I provide the reflections as they actually appeared in the journal and then an analysis of these reflections. The analysis includes observations of other people's use of reflective writing as a process of personal development planning.

Example 1: First Reflection

9/9/97

Immediate observations

Problems with transposition, when 2-stage. Had to think about what was happening. Was going to substitute real numbers to check but felt under pressure to come up with answer.

Other students also struggled with this and were happy to say so.

Solution - to provide answers that could be used in substitution - one student commented that this didn't help understand transposition...

To my surprise, would like some visual models to help understanding - want to see what's going on.

When struggling, everything suddenly becomes a mass of letters & numbers and the only thing to do is write down for later. However, I didn't really find this session too difficult (despite arriving an hour late because of misinformation)

Some dangers: go for easy strategies to get by; number crunching without thinking.

The main impression is that I am no different from the majority of students entering a new subject who are obsessed with the question: "will I be able to cope with the workload?" The issue that interests me in looking back, though, is what I chose to notice. The memory of the discomfort at arriving an hour late is now very strong; I am surprised that I have not made more mention of this, nor of my fellow students. What a student notices at the time of reflection will depend on a number of factors: what made the strongest impression at the time, even if that changed in retrospect; what they feel they 'ought' to be noticing. I have been asked by a student on a professional course what she ought to be writing in her journal and I replied by asking whose "ought" this was. The answer to this question will be determined by the requirements of the course. If the reflective journal is to be assessed, then what goes into it needs to meet the criteria for assessment and these should be made very clear by the course documentation. If it is purely a personal document, then the student may need to be helped to define her own 'ought'. Many first reflections are then likely to be rather self-conscious - reflection will itself be characterised by the question: "will I be able to do this?"

Example 2: Reflection and Emotional Issues

My aunt had just had a stroke and my HNC class took me away from my worries for a time. I wrote this on the train immediately after the class, however, and the underlying emotional state re-emerged.

17/2/98

Time went quickly again and I got absorbed in the work - forgetting that was worried (about Janet) and this returned to me very strongly afterwards.

Possibly related (but not entirely sure) is a general feeling of inadequacy both about the HNC & the PhD. I found I'd forgotten much of the basic method for the assignment though it came back partly through looking for examples of the method and partly through reasoning (though that's still rather fuzzy). I began to feel that I may be rather stupid/slow on the uptake and that I've been able to get away with a lot because of having the right attitude, background, family connections etc. (Something I've often thought before.)

These worries about the 'halo effect' occur occasionally in the journal and are again very typical of a student coming to grips with a new subject. The journal clearly shows that concerns about my own abilities arise at times when I am tired, overloaded with other work or worried about something. In the case above, I rapidly recovered my natural optimism as my aunt made a full recovery and as I began to relax a little.

I did not really recognise the effects of a negative state of mind until it was pointed out to me by members of staff at the University of Glasgow to whom I made a presentation. They suggested that I sounded quite negative about my experiences and that a discourse analysis of my journal might be quite revealing. The observation was useful because it alerted me to the dangers of negative thinking. It did not prevent negative reflections arising - nor should it have - but it did provide an increased awareness of the emotional side of learning. This highlights one of the potential concerns about reflection, however. As Boud and Walker (1998) point out, reflection cannot really be constrained and its encouragement may bring out a number of negative emotions in students which their teachers may be ill-equipped to deal with.

Several years ago, when I worked at another university, I piloted a document that was designed to encourage reflection and personal development planning in 2nd year undergraduates. One question which was intended to stimulate thoughts about working practices that had been unsuccessful and possible changes to make for the next academic year, elicited the response: "I'll not allow myself to be used for sex next year." This response was unexpected, one I was not trained to deal with, and the circumstances of the pilot made it difficult to react to it anyway. Yet I felt some support should be available to this student. The example highlights the difficulties of the boundaries between personal planning and the evidence required or requested by the institution.

Example 3: Reflection-in-action

14/10/98 5:30 am

Will now spend at least an hour going over Mechanics, considering the question: where are the gaps in my knowledge?...

Questions

1. What does second moment of area actually mean?
 2. Is d both distance (perpendicular) from NA and diameter, depending on circumstances?
- 7:30 am
 have spent a lot of time on question 1 opposite and am not very far on. I think I've/we've been happy just to manipulate the figures - basically transposition and substitution - without following what's happening. To a certain extent perhaps this is necessary as we don't have the necessary calculus to really follow the concepts. I've also had to remind myself that these forces - direct stress and shear stress - have been described before. Looking it up in other books is dangerous because of the letters used.

The questions helped me to focus my learning, the results of which are not really recorded in the journal. The reflection at the end considers why I have a problem and also provides me with advice that I can look back over earlier notes. In this case, when I looked over earlier notes I discovered that I had been happily using the notion of 'second moment of area' the previous year without any concern about what it meant.

Sometimes the process of reflection-in-action was not immediately useful. I spent some time agonising over the meanings of enthalpy, heat and temperature which proved good grounding for a much longer reflection on entropy I worked through a year later. The benefits of reflection may not therefore be immediately apparent. There is a cumulative effect, which is why reflection is useful as a personal development tool but this does make it difficult to assess.

Resource Implications

At first glance, there are few resource requirements for keeping a personal reflective journal. The student needs a book and a pen - or whatever method of recording that suits them. (For some students, for instance, a dictaphone might suit their learning preferences.) The analysis above suggests that there may be a hidden resource issue in the need to support students with what emerges in their reflections. I do not have support formally built into my reflective practices, but I use colleagues, supervisors and reading to help me to make sense of what has emerged. A seventeen year old student without such a support structure might end up using the journal to reinforce negative beliefs.

The principal resource requirement, then, should be staff time allocated to explaining, monitoring and supporting the reflective process in students. In professional courses such as nursing or teacher education there may be a protocol to follow for reflections on practice and there will be associated printing costs.

Student Assessment/Feedback Issues

If I had thought my learning journal was definitely going to be assessed, then I would have undoubtedly written it in a different way. I would probably have tried to select incidents and reflections that showed me in the best possible light. While accepting that this could have had a positive effect, avoiding some of the dangers of reinforcing negative impressions, my main concern about assessing journals is that some of the benefits of reflection might be lost because of self-censorship or window-dressing. There are other concerns. There are major difficulties in ensuring validity and reliability in assessment of learning journals. While acknowledging this, Moon (1999: 92-93) says this is actually a reason for developing appropriate means of assessment. She claims that a system of assessment is needed because: it shows that reflection is thought to be worthwhile by staff; criteria will help teachers to help students; students will not undertake tasks that are not assessed; and if development of the reflective practitioner is what is wanted, then criteria for assessing that development should be explicitly stated.

Moon's arguments are powerful if reflective practice is to be taken seriously in whatever outcomes and processes are being used (and she makes a point of distinguishing between the two in relation to assessment). Perhaps my concerns about the effects of assessment can be overcome by empathetic feedback and assessment as exemplified by John Cowan (1998: 135). He records his difficulties in understanding one journal and his response to the student's comment: "I don't expect the first page meant anything to you - but it means a lot to me." This example encapsulates the difficulties of assessment, but Cowan's integrity in dealing with this difficulty and in finding other ways to authenticate the student's claims shows an understanding that we might not be able to guarantee in all teachers, especially those starting out with this method. Cowan has kept his own reflective learning journal and subjected it to both self and peer assessment; I believe that a teacher who has not had experience of doing this will find the processes of assessment and feedback very difficult.

Evaluation

It is difficult for me to evaluate my own process of writing a journal because of its intensely subjective nature. However, in a sense, I am constantly evaluating the reflections as I try to use them. Cowan (1998:41) makes the distinction between analytical and evaluative reflection. Analytical reflection is looking at "how should I do it?" and evaluative at "how well do I do it?" The same questions can be asked of the reflective process itself.

Key Advice

The analysis above raises the following questions. My advice to staff is not to proceed until the answers can be provided.

- Is there anything that the student's journal 'ought' to contain?
- Is there anything it ought not to contain?
- Should the journal have a specific structure and if so will this be provided for the student?
- Are you going to assess either the journal or a separate document based on the journal?
- How will you address the emotional aspects of writing a journal?
- Would it be appropriate to offer reassurances about confidentiality with respect to the journal?
- Have you made all the above clear to the students?
- Have you completed a journal - or the equivalent reflective document - yourself?

Conclusion

Some students might benefit from keeping an unstructured reflective journal, as I have. By getting into a regular habit of writing for few minutes without stopping, I have both a useful record of my own reflections and a way in to the more formal writing I am expected to do as a student and an academic. The process must, however, be set up properly for students who have never done it before.

References

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