

Enhancing work-place based learning using reflective journals

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Abstract

Cooperative education is strategically designed to blend formal academic education, practical work-place knowledge and self regulated learning. While the program design is clear and sound, the actual practice of bringing the different dimensions of this learning model in to being is complex. Among the strategies employed in the context of this paper was the introduction of journal writing. Through reflective journal writing students were invited to make meaning of their experiences, while interrogating some of the key assumptions that underpinned notions of effective practice across an array of workplace-based settings. To this end the reflective journaling process sought to ameliorate student learning by integrating the respective contributions of the university and work-place programs. This paper focuses on questionnaire data that was collected as part of a larger interpretive case study that explored student engagements with critical reflection in a higher education sport-based cooperative education program. Thematic analysis of questionnaire data exposed common threads pertaining to students' journal writing during cooperative education, while the discussion was underpinned with Dewey's philosophical writings on education, experience and reflective practice. Findings from this study show that students were initially faced with a dilemma as to what to write about, followed by when and where to write, how to go about reflective writing and what was expected of them. The paper concludes that while student reflective journal writing is a complex undertaking, its potential to connect learning across different sites warrants further educational investment.

Reflective journal, assessment, thematic analysis

Introduction

Cooperative education is a rich blend of formal academic education, practical work-place knowledge and self regulated learning. Fundamental to the design of cooperative

education is the demand for genuine connection to exist across the different learning sites that the program encompasses. While those that undertake to implement the cooperative education model readily embrace this aspiration they often find it more complex to operationalize (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010). Amplification of this complexity is readily observable in the aspiration that cooperative education undertakes to nurture critical reflection amongst its participants. Whereas development of the philosophy and practice of critical reflection is no stranger to higher education programs its translation is less commonly reported in work-place based settings. To be true to the principles of cooperative education, there exists a substantial challenge to transfer practice of critical reflection from higher education institutions to the work-place in ways that students find practical and developmental.

Journal writing is one such vehicle for nurturing the development of critical reflection and promotion of active learning (Thorpe, 2004) within cooperative education. Through reflective journal writing students are invited to make meaning of their experiences and while interrogating some of the key assumptions that underpin notions of effective practice across an array of workplace-based settings. To this end the reflective journaling process seeks to ameliorate student learning by integrating the respective contributions of the university and work-place programs. While it is common for the journal writing process to be a formal assessment task that contributes towards the credit gained for the qualification the student is undertaking, it is educationally important that students engage in the process within a developmental framework.

The reflective writing process can be particularly productive when dealing with complex situations (Moon, 2004) and therefore complements the self-determined learning approach espoused within the cooperative education model. This is particularly relevant to the workplace component of the model wherein the environment can be unpredictable and dynamic. However, there is limited research within cooperative education on students' experiences with writing a reflective journal as a vehicle to bring different components of the model into relation with each other. Rather, the education literature around the use of reflective journals tends to be very process focused,

highlighting how students learn through journals, the practice of student journal writing, how to prompt journal writing, and assessing journal writing (Bolton, 2010; Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Moon, 2006; Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2011; Thompson & Thompson, 2008). To contribute to this literature base, this paper pays attention to when, where, what and how students engage in the process of reflective journal writing and the implications this has for work integrated learning programs, like cooperative education.

Context

Throughout the final year of the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand) students take two consecutive cooperative education papers. This part time (typically 2 days per week or 350 hours across the academic year), unpaid cooperative education placement takes place with a sporting or sport and physical activity related organization/context that provides the student with the necessary learning experiences that support their chosen academic discipline. These disciplines include; coaching, exercise science, health and physical education, outdoor education, physical activity and nutrition, and sport management. This distinctive learning approach of cooperative education utilises unique forms of curriculum and pedagogy (Lester & Costley, 2010) such as individualized learning based on learning contracts, problem solving, reflective writing and project based learning. Through this pedagogy the students have the responsibility to control and determine their own learning in cooperative education whilst the educators role shifts more to one of facilitator/mentor of student learning.

Critical reflection is richly embedded within our BSR cooperative education program through a central platform of reflective journal writing that extends into other forms of academic writing and oral presentations. This reflective process aims to encourage students to integrate learning from both the university and the work-place. The pragmatics of journal submission requires students to write weekly journal entries in a private electronic journal within a learning management system (Blackboard), locally branded as AUTonline. Workshops and electronic learning resources provide students with background literature, guidelines and framework examples to support their reflective writing and learning. Reflective journal writing contributes ten percent

towards assessments for each semester paper. Academic supervisors are given access their students journals to provide students with ongoing formative feedback. The journal is graded on the frequency of entries and the quality and depth of the reflective writing. There is a paucity of literature focusing on how students in work-place based settings engage with writing reflective journals as a learning tool and a form of assessment.

The study

Qualitative case study methodology has been employed to gain deep insight into student's perceptions and experiences (Merriam, 2009). The strategic value of studying a case is to highlight what can be learnt from a single case (Schram, 2006). Qualitative case study research is often about the study of activity and changeability of everyday life while gaining great insight into the case. Stake (1995) argues that a case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within specific circumstances. To this end, the case is understood to be located within a distinctive context, is of significant interest and is bound by time. The highly contextualized nature of cooperative education makes it ideally suited to this methodological approach (Coll & Chapman, 2000a, 2000b; Coll et al., 2009). This particular case focused on understanding critical reflection within a sport and recreation cooperative education context. Findings from this study may be applicable to other contexts, though in keeping with the methodology generalization rests with the reader not the writer.

At the completion of their cooperative education papers an independent administrator invited BSR students, during their last on-campus session, to complete an anonymous questionnaire. This questionnaire included many open-ended questions about their experiences of reflection during cooperative education. A number of these questions were specifically orientated toward understand students' perceptions and engagement with reflective journal writing. Sixty students from a cohort of one hundred completed the questionnaire. Each completed student's questionnaire responses were allocated a letter related to their campus base and sequential number (as seen in findings section). These responses were coded using NVivo software to identify emerging themes related to journal writing. Thematic analysis of these questions was utilized to provide

flexibility for viewing data and potential for rich, detailed accounts of it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was underpinned with John Dewey's philosophical writings on education, experience and reflective practice as his work forms much of the foundations for current cooperative education. According to Dewey (1938) "to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind" (p 87).

Findings

This paper focuses on questionnaire data that was collected as part of a larger interpretive case study that explored student engagement with critical reflection in a higher education sport-based cooperative education program. The questions within the questionnaire explored many factors related to the ways students understood and engaged with reflective journal writing. Underpinning this process was an interest in developing a picture of how the students incorporated and undertook reflection of workplace experiences within their daily activities. The student perspectives are reported here with a view to contributing to wider discussions about the value and practice of reflective practice within cooperative education.

The following findings explore how students engage in the process of writing a reflective journal. Data will be presented around a number of key themes, namely what to write about, when the topic was identified, where the reflective writing occurred, and how to write a reflection. These themes are discussed within this section.

What to write about

A crucial challenge for students during the early stages of journal writing was, "thinking about what to write about" (A14) and "finding interesting things to think and reflect on" (A11). Students tended to look for an experience that would be of interest to others or that it "stood out in your mind" (A2). Further driving the selection of what to write about was a desire for it to be of personal benefit to take time to think about their actions or those of others.

Students described how their reflections were orientated to meaningful events, situations or ideas to frame their journal entries. They thought their writing should be based on “an experience that stood out, usually one I’d like to make improvements on” (A2). As time progressed and they gained more experience with the journal writing process, students tended to look for work-place opportunities for self-improvement. This is represented well in the following student comment about selecting what to write about, “experiences I have encountered that have had an impact on my perspective to something” (A52).

Students generally revealed that as they gained experience with the journal writing process their reflections became more personally focused and orientated toward their own professional development, based on their perceived strengths and weaknesses. This is illustrated in the following response, “Significant incident that I noticed on the job. They are significant to me personally opposed to others and are generally geared towards professional development” (A5). Building on this was a growing orientation toward future-orientated practice within the journal writing process, as seen in the following extract, “I tend to reflect on things I did well or whether it went wrong and I need to ask why and what could I do in the future” (A13). In the later phases of the cooperative education experience students declared that they tended to reflect on, “any positives or negatives that happened, that I can use in the future endeavours or assessments. Something that I need to remember” (A4).

When the topic was identified

Based on the questionnaire data it is fair to say that there is no one best time to complete journal writing. Some students indicated the best time to reflect was during or immediately after a certain event or experience and, “while the experience was still fresh in my head” (A4). Close proximity of writing to the actual event was seen to enable the details to be more easily translated into a written journal entry. Rather than directly after the event some felt that leaving it to later that day allowed time to “gather my thoughts” (A39). This suggested that for some students there was a need for some time in preparation and thinking required prior to writing.

While they generally grew to see the value of the exercise, the actual journal writing process tended to have somewhat of an instrumental existence. The students generally conceded that journal writing was initially something they would do because “it is a requirement for an assessment or I think it is necessary”(A52). The necessity to have a weekly journal entry was a common motivator for the writing of an entry, as they noted it was a “once a week requirement for co-op” (A14). In accordance with this criterion, many students revealed that they would undertake the process of journal writing at the end of each week, for example, “I sit down with my journal at the end of the week and decide what was the most significant experience” (A51). It would appear this was an exercise in recalling events that stood out and then reflecting upon them within a journal entry. The timing of when to write was also determined by “time constraints with other papers” (A22) and other factors within their lives. The following extract shows how one student managed the journal writing demand, “because of my uni co-op requirements I was doing a critical reflection blog once a week. I usually did this on Saturday or Sunday” (A15).

Interestingly, the actual process of reflection was seen to progress to being something that became an embedded part of the students’ professional practice, and took place distinct from journal writing. Many students described how they engaged in some sort of critical reflection as a matter of course immediately “after I have taught somebody or performed in front of others” (A6) or “after training sessions or a meeting” (A8).

Students conceded that they were reflecting as an “everyday habit” (A19) and “in all situations constantly” (A16). While the mechanics of journal writing was positioned separately, it seems that the actual practice of reflecting became a normal part of their professional practice, “I find myself reflecting on things all the time...it just happens” (A30). As a meaning making device the use of critical reflection was also seen to transcend the cooperative education context “I now use it regularly for many things in my life because it helps to solve problems in a logical way”(A31).

Where to write

Students recommended the most suitable for journal writing was at home, as it was a convenient location where they had the necessary requirements for writing. As one

student suggested “At home because it is quiet and distraction free. I feel I can write honestly here” (A15). Other places were considered, such as “over coffee and removed from the study environment to avoid distraction and allow focus” (A21). The location for reflective writing needed to be conducive to deeper focused thinking.

Some students felt that writing at the work-place immediately after an experience “most of the time I reflected at my work placement. Things are still fresh in my head” (A4). Students would think about their experiences anytime and anywhere; work, car, home, in bed, in the bush, as reflection was something that occurred internally initially and was only written when required. As exemplified by one student’s response: “In the bush because it is peaceful and my head is clear of unimportant matters” (A12). Generally reflection was a private practice that was performed in solitude, and as one commented, “alone...helps me think” (M4). It was suggested that “group discussions” (A8) about work-place experiences might be helpful to overcome not knowing what to write about when reflective writing was in early stages of development.

How to write a reflection

Once students moved beyond deciding what to write about they encountered “thinking past descriptive”(A4) requiring flexible strategies to assist with further development of reflective writing. Students identified specific models such as the “Gibbs model – this helped me to structure my writing better and made it easier” (A20) or they adhered to “a process, if I followed four basic steps it was easier” (M4). Models encouraged reflective writing through providing structure to base their journal writing upon. As stated, “we were given plenty of information about critical reflection” (M1) implying guidelines and support were available for students for guidance. Students’ felt reflective writing required a significant investment in time and practice, as amplified by the following, “Initially I thought it was a drag and took too long but what I learnt from it was worth the time spent” (M4).

Discussion

Reflective journals utilized in cooperative education appear to encourage a deeper appreciation of the work-place as a learning environment linking back to student

academic endeavors. While students admitted to initially not knowing what to write about, this progressed to students describing a wide range of journal entry topics, such as, an incident, an event, a failure or success, a situation, a challenge, a problem, an idea, a specific goal or a new experience. As this list indicates, what students considered significant enough to write about may have been a single moment in time or a series of activities contributing towards something taking place over an extended period of time within the workplace or university or both. Students on placement must develop observation skills to determine what contributed meaningfully toward their learning, personal development and professional identity. Identifying something to reflect on requires discipline to observe and think deeply about what is happening around them in a complex and dynamic workplace environment. According to Dewey (1938), the difficulties or highlights that present themselves within an experience may perplex or excite a learner to form the basis of a reflective inquiry. As Rodgers (2002) states, “The impulse to reflect requires an encounter with, and conscious perception of, the potential significance inherent within an experience. Not everyone has the ability to perceive this potential.” (p. 850). This may be especially true of students, in the early stages of cooperative education, who are new to work-place observation and the practice of regular reflection. “Dewey reminds us that reflection is a complex, rigorous, intellectual and emotional enterprise that takes time to do well” (Rodgers, 2002).

One reality of journal writing is the student-driven dimension of his or her learning. Students determine when and where to actively write a journal entry therefore the timing of the writing in relation to the experience can vary a great deal from, close to the moment; at the end of the day; end of the week; or possibly even further down the track. Unlike other forms of assessments with a compulsory time, date, and place, journal writing can fit in with the busy nature of student lives where they juggle co-op placement, other papers, paid employment and a social life. Students have the flexibility to write when it suits, as there are no hard and fast rules, providing they comply with journal entry requirements. Initially accumulation of grades provides a great motivation for journal writing for those students who struggled with this form of learning and writing (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011). However, with time, practice and feedback students may convert from initially not engaging wholeheartedly with reflective writing

to becoming advocates of this practice. Conversely, over time some students may find journal writing becomes tedious and efforts diminish.

Based on Dewey's (1910/1997) concepts of discipline and freedom, reflective journals can be paralleled as a gradual, continual exercise to practice careful, deliberate thinking (p 63). The progressive nature of writing reflective journals can be highlighted by the transformation of student attitudes towards, and practice of, reflection during their cooperative education papers. Journal writing is a different way for students to develop understanding and learning from one experience to the next across the university and the work-place, enabling links with their past and forming potential resources for their future career path (Rodgers, 2002). Rigid requirements to write regularly may mean events that stood out would be written up as a journal entry, with the possibility of missing potential learning opportunities that were left unnoticed or required a deeper level of thought. Student learning espoused within a reflective journal may be a token of the overall learning (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011).

The environment for reflective writing needs to be conducive to deeper thinking (Bolton, 2010). Irrespective of where the journal writing took place, whether it be at home, the workplace or elsewhere students needed be alone, free of distraction, comfortable and quiet to enable focused thought. Two clear steps formed the early part of their reflective writing: thinking prior to writing to reconstruct the experience (Holly, 1997) and the writing a reflection to uncover its meaning, what was learnt and any future action. Overall findings suggest that reflective writing was a solitary practice of a personal nature hence the importance of flexible structures and ongoing support.

Factors precipitating which experiences are recorded and reflected upon may include; an event that creates inner discomfort, a positive state where a desired outcome has occurred or where specific learning goals have featured. Reflective writing encourages recognition of personal attribute development and self-improvement through evaluating both positive and negative experiences. Learning grounded in workplace experiences is progressive through examining mistakes and solving problems, while ultimately assisting with similar future work based practice (Dewey, 1938).

Students begin cooperative education placements with personal base lines pertaining to ability and motivation to reflect. Recognizing individual variability among students, they should be encouraged to experiment with reflective writing to become more open-minded, enquiring and creative. At the risk of being prescriptive, guidelines such as Gibb's model and others, provide structure and support, especially for early stages of reflective writing. Using these frameworks within electronic journals provides flexibility for students to engage in journaling in creative and interesting ways while allowing supervisors to provide regular constructive feedback. Without good structures and feedback on journals to support students' development of reflection they may feel journaling is simply an annoying exercise to keep them busy.

Conclusion

Journals are commonly used as pedagogical tools within higher education, including cooperative education. This paper adds to the modest body of research that examines journals as a learning strategy within sport base cooperative education and is supported by a larger body of literature beyond this realm. Students must recognize experiences as opportunities to learn, although not all experiences are educative (Dewey, 1938). Academics need to be mindful that the primary motivation for student reflective writing to fulfill assessment requirements may change as their use of critical reflection transcends the cooperative education context. Given the variability of students' approaches to engaging in reflective writing, assessments need to be administered flexibly, while ensuring compliance to encourage development and desire for reflective practice. Given a fundamental premise of cooperative education is integration of theory and practice through reflection, there is further scope to examine how reflecting in the work-place environment may support connecting and extending what has been learnt in the classroom. In conclusion, student reflective journal writing is a complex undertaking; its potential to connect learning across different sites warrants further educational investment.

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