Moving beyond the diary: innovation in design and delivery of reflection

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Reflective practice is widely considered for its contribution to learning through experience (Caldicott, 2010). Current learning and teaching design across WIL often relies on reflective journals or diaries as the dominant form for documenting and assessing reflection (e.g., Clarke and Burgess; Stupans and Owens; McNamara, 2009). However, there are challenges inherent in this practice, such as what aspect of reflection is assessed and that the reliance on a particular genre of writing may be unfamiliar to both students and assessors (Winchester-Seeto, Mackaway, Coulson and Harvey, 2010).

Acknowledging the evidenced-based practice of the application of reflection in the design and delivery of WIL (Coulson, Harvey, Winchester-Seeto and Mackaway, 2010) this symposium accepts the challenge of exploring different and innovative ways of engaging with and documenting reflection. The paper opens the session with an overview of the role of reflection in learning through WIL, outlines the challenges of traditional approaches to reflective practice and presents the possibilities of moving beyond reflective journals or diaries to innovation in delivery through mediums such as art, twitter, dreams, dance, poetry, music, photography and video.

The accompanying workshop offers participants the opportunity to experience some of the innovative approaches to the practice and documentation of reflection. Processes using art, story and mindfulness will be briefly explored for their potential to engage the diversity of students in reflection for whole person learning (Yorks and Kasl, 2002), premised on the tenet that experiential knowledge is the foundation for all ways of knowing (Heron, 1992).

Keywords: Reflection, innovation, documentation, arts-based research

Introduction

Reflective practice has established for itself a pivotal role in Work Integrated Learning (WIL). Its application is expansive and well documented with 60 empirical studies alone included in one review of reflective practice for WIL (Coulson, Harvey, Winchester-Seeto and Mackaway, 2010). The widespread integration of reflective practice is a demonstration of the value held by educational communities of its potential to contribute to learning. Its role includes supporting learners to make sense and meaning (Schön, 1983; Rarieya, 2005) as they educe new learnings (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985) from their WIL experience.

Students, in the complex experience that is WIL, may be exposed to situations that require access to multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2004) and take them beyond their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), triggering stress and emotions and even challenging their values and beliefs (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985) creating potential for both cognitive and affective, or whole person learning (Yorks and Kasl, 2002). They benefit, therefore, from a well-developed sense of agency (Bandura, 2006), inclusive of self-reflexivity, as they engage, bridge and negotiate these challenges across the learning environments of their classroom and host organisation and interact and learn with their teachers and host supervisors. They are realising praxis as they integrate their formal knowledge, as theory, with its practical enactment. Their reflective practice supports this

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learning. The dominant form for documenting and assessing this reflective practice across WIL is the reflective journal or diary (e.g., Clarke and Burgess, 2009; Stupans and Owens, 2009; McNamara, 2009).

**Documenting reflection through diaries**

The documentation of reflection through journaling or diaries is a familiar form for students, teachers and host supervisors. This form can be simple to resource, easy to adapt to new contexts and flexible in structure and scope as the style and models possible are limitless.

However, there are also limitations with this language-based cognitive approach. A reliance on a particular genre of reflective writing may be unfamiliar to both students and assessors (Winchester-Seeto, Mackaway, Coulson and Harvey, 2010). As teachers we may aim to have our students achieve a deep level of reflection, but written reflections can become “mechanistic” and “reductionistic, facilitating mainly superficial” (McIntosh and Webb, 2006, p.1) and inadequate description (deFreitas, 2007, p. 340). Another challenge is around the assessment of written reflections, including should this written reflection be assessed, and if so, what aspect of the reflection is assessed? (Winchester-Seeto, et al, 2010).

Reflecting on the limitations of the written diary or journal for documenting reflection was the trigger that exacerbated the disjunct between our theoretical beliefs and our “theory-in-action” (Argyris and Schön, 1974). In-action, we have been conservatively limiting our students to the diary for their reflective tool. It has therefore becoming necessary to reconcile our beliefs and our actions. A diverse student body, engaging with diverse participation experiences requires the option of diverse and flexible ways of documenting reflection.

**Moving beyond the diary**

Reticence in offering innovative modes for documenting reflection rests in the culture of the academy. The influence of the scientific, positivist approach to our research results in a focus on evidence-based research which seeks the nature of truth through rigorous enquiry and validity (McIntosh, 2010). The WIL learning experience introduces a perspective of humanism with its nature on subjectivity “from within a given set of professional values and forms of thinking” (McIntosh and Webb, 2006, p2). We need to move away from the dichotomy between arts and sciences and agree that “…there is a need and vitality in synergising the use of conceptual, theoretical and methodological advances” (McIntosh, 2010, 179).

One advance is that of art-based research which provides a new conceptual framework full of possibilities for innovative reflective practice and documentation for WIL. Arts-based research is a “heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p.3), of our participation experience. Arts-informed researchers embrace the potential of art to inform scholarship (deFreitas, 2007, p. 339) by using art-based materials (Keddell, 2011) for the construction of knowledge. The outcome, or evidence, is a quality of insights that document practice together with the critical discourse that is an adjunct to the work.

We want to advocate for different approaches to reflective text. An arts-based approach invites us to “extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that would be ineffective ... to ‘say’ in that form what cannot be said in others” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p.1). This paper now introduces examples of innovative documentation of reflection: micro-blogging, dance, music, photography, art dreams and contemplation. These are reflective practices that encourage learners to explore their experiences and integrate the learning from both affective and cognitive perspectives. A more detailed discussion of each innovative form will be available in an aligned paper.

**Micro-blogging** provides an alternative form for journaling. It uses web based technologies such as social media to provide an avenue for a web log, a personal online journal. Twitter is a micro-blogging tool in which users post 140 character ‘tweets’ to their network of followers, who are able to reply or ‘retweet’ the message. As a journaling tool, twitter is a demonstration of reflection-in-action capturing the phenomenology of the immediate experience (Schön, 1987) or critical events (Cardona, 2005). For the participation student, micro-blogging from a distance, while at their host organization, can “nourish participant’s needs for relatedness, personal growth and transcendence and suggest the creation of strong social bonds within groups of participants in e-learning settings” (Pauschenwein and Sfiri, 2010. p. 24) and, we posit, in WIL settings.

Understood anthropologically as one of humanity’s oldest, near-universal mechanisms of storytelling (Hanna, 1990), an exploration of dance as a learning tool opens a rich avenue of reflection for WIL students and
teachers. It is particularly recognised for its transformative value in exploring emotional experiences, enhancing the development of key cognitive processes and communicating concepts otherwise “unsayable” through spoken or written language (Reason, 2010). While there is little research yet examining the use of dance as a learning tool in higher education, these qualities clearly situate dance as a particularly effective tool for reflective practice, especially in the potentially emotionally intense periods of adjustment and culture shock experienced by students participating in WIL.

A connection between music and reflective practice is also evident in the literature on reflection. Schön (1983) discusses jazz musicians improvising together as a paradigmatic example of reflection in action. The way in which music relates to the brain supports reflective ability. The right hemisphere of the brain is responsible for processes music and for our ability to discern paralinguistic aspects of experience such as ‘intent, attitude, feeling, context and meaning’ (Joseph, 1988, p. 633). Given that felt knowing and emotion play an integral role in reflective practice, music’s connection to the parts of the brain responsible for this makes it an ideal vehicle for awakening reflection.

There is a growing literature on the value of photography in research, community-engaged learning and reflective practice. Photography can serve as an important tool for reflection as “visual data represents human experience whether that experience is of the individual(s) in the image, the experience of the image maker, or the experience of the image viewer” (Harper, 2000, p.18). Evidence of the link between photography and reflection can be found in the work of Pritchard and Whitehead (2004, p. 235), who have argued that pictures facilitate a deeper reflection: “students can express insights, understandings, disappointments, questions, commitments and more.” In a separate study, photo-elicitation interviews of outdoor education students demonstrated how photography, through reflective practice, “can play a major role in how participants capture, record, share and make sense of their experiences” (Loeffler, 2004, p. 60), and by extension, of their WIL experience.

Experiments in neuroscience have recently identified links between art, imagery and emotional and cognitive functional integration and purposeful art making has been shown to encourage expression, understanding and integration of emotional reactions (Hass-Cohen, 2008). These results indicate potential for art-based reflective activities to support the processing of emotions arising from community-engaged learning experiences and affective learning. Bilateral art, where art making is combined with talking, has been linked to right and left hemispheric brain integration in psychotherapeutic settings (McNamee, 2003). Encouraging learners to share their experience of reflective art making with another (who is cautioned not to interpret what they see and hear) has potential to enhance integration of affective and cognitive learning.

Dreams offer pathways to the unconscious, bringing unbidden material to consciousness with potential for new awakenings (Balogh, 2010), thus are they of interest for reflective practice. Dreams, with their imaginative, often puzzling, sometimes bizarre portrayals of life, make natural stimulants for reflection. Dreams can play an important role in learning (Stickgold, Hobson, Fosse & Fosse, 2001). Students blogging their dreams demonstrated learning that internalised and synthesised course readings and experience (Tougaw, 2009). Innovative ways of reflective practice can be strengthened when offered to our students together with an approach that integrates contemplation: meditation, mindfulness, focusing and felt knowing. A review of research related to the integration of meditation into higher education (Shapiro, Brown and Astin, 2008) identified that meditation may contribute positively to enhanced cognitive and academic performance, mental health and psychological wellbeing and the development of the whole person. Mindfulness-based meditation in particular, has been found to contribute to “qualities that produce well-rounded persons, reflected in higher creativity and greater capacities for positive interpersonal behaviour and healthy social relationships” (p.24), attributes that support the learner through their WIL experience.

Conclusions

Moving beyond the diary, for example, to micro-blogging, dance, music, photography, art, dreams and contemplation, provides a response to the diverse needs of the WIL cohort. An arts-based approach to developing innovative ways of reflecting and documenting reflections on the WIL experience offers multiple benefits to students learning through reflection.

This approach encourages students to make connections with their practice (Samaras, 2010) of experience. An arts-based approach supports a development from reflection on experience to reflexivity in experience (McIntosh and Webb, 2006), offering a relevant capability for the student during their WIL experience. As
students interpret their innovative reflections, their metacognitive and reflective abilities develop, opening avenues for deeper and life-long learning. An arts-based approach can be more holistic, encompassing cognitive and affective domains. The experience of innovative arts-based reflection aligns with the experiential component of learning through WIL. We conclude by calling for ongoing explorations of innovative ways of reflecting and documenting reflections on the WIL experience, systematically investigating their strengths, challenges and methods.

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