

Developing Reflection: a practice framework

Susanna Chamberlain

Griffith University

Over the past few years there has been a great deal of discussion of the use of reflective journals and commentaries as an assessment tool within the context of Work Integrated Learning. One of the issues which has dominated the discussion is how to assess reflection, and what precisely could be assessed. This discussion has prompted me to share the experience that we have had over the past three years in utilising a curriculum approach to developing the practice of reflection, by teaching a framework of understanding the process which then forms the foundation of the assessment rubric.

Methodology

This paper is written as a retrospective review of practice which draws from Brookfield's 1995 model for evaluating and enhancing teaching through a reflection on practice which is engaged with the scholarly literature. To that end, I explore the literature on assessing reflection, and touch upon the uses of reflective practice journals in work-integrated or cooperative learning and briefly discuss the means by which critical reflection can be taught.

The practice which has been established over the past three years is then presented and further discussion indicates the parallels of the 6As mnemonic with the revised Bloom's Taxonomy. I also discuss the ways in which the practice has been refined over this period and the intentions for changes in the coming year.

Literature review

There are three distinct areas which intersect in the understanding of this practice framework: assessment of reflection, work integrated or cooperative learning and curriculum development.

A recent review of assessment practices in WIL undertaken by Winchester-Seeto et al (2010) from Macquarie University identified the assessment of reflective practice journals as one of the key assignments prescribed across the sector. They indicated that there were both strengths and problems with the use of journals, and in discussion (pers comm. 2010) reported that one of the significant difficulties was a lack of clear guidelines for "reflection" with many differing expectations emanating from the markers. The work of Moon (2004, 2006) and Bradbury et al (2010) focuses on the uses of reflection as practice, and offers quite generalised ideas on the assessment of what is seen to be a valuable learning practice.

One of the possible approaches lies in the use of critical thinking models which develop the student's ability to examine with clarity and decision the experiences and sources which stimulate them (Field and Leicester 2000, Leicester 2009). Here the student is taught a framework of reasoning which enables a clear understanding to be developed and articulated. This requires a development of a curriculum which allows the space for teaching such an approach.

The approach taken to developing a curriculum which supports work integrated or cooperative learning demands a foundation in sound pedagogical principles (Biggs 1996, Biggs 2003, Biggs and Tang 2007; Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall 2003; Ramsden 2003). In particular, there is an appreciation that learning has to be both integrated and reinforced in order to be assimilated into the continuing experience of learning beyond the academy. The core stream courses which I discuss below have been designed around a Problem-Based Learning approach, (Barrell 2007; Beard & Wilson 2002; Dewey 1997; Kolb 1984), with each course set up to pose questions (such as "why should I care?" or "how can I be an active member of a community?").

The task presented was creating a platform for work-integrated learning in an unusual context, although the university is committed to introducing cooperative education across all of its programs (Bates 2008, Griffith University 2006, Orrell 2004, Patrick et al 2008, Smith and Simbag 2008). The Bachelor of Arts is the oldest degree form and traditionally allows the greatest freedom of choice for the entering student. It is precisely this fluidity which created the greatest challenges in terms of developing a curriculum which was both responsive to a range of distinct fields of study and was in itself interdisciplinary (Brewer 1999, Hall and Weaver 2001, Petrie 1992, Woods 2007). The emphasis has been on developing and sustaining transferable skills (Betts and Kercher 1999, Fallows and Steven 2000) across the curriculum. One of these skills is an approach to reflective practice which can be utilised beyond the academy, but is also easily available to assessment.

Practice framework

Context

In 2008, Griffith University introduced a new format in the Bachelor of Arts which incorporated a core stream in Social Enterprise. The suite of courses consists of six courses, one in each semester. To date over 1400 students have undertaken at least the first year subjects, and 2010 has seen the first cohort to graduate, having completed the entire core stream. The core courses explore topics like human rights, social justice, social policy, the environment, community and international development. Over two years the students are offered the opportunity to explore the third sector of community and voluntary organisations, not-for-profits and social businesses. In the third year, students undertake a professional placement with an organisation which has social goals, and complete the final year by creating and managing a showcase event.

The curriculum for the core stream incorporates a range of skills, ranging from the fundamentals of academic practice to more specific areas of research, grant-writing, project /event planning and management. The courses provided are an introductory Academic Writing (formerly called Effective Writing) and Introduction to Social Enterprise in the first year; Thinking Ethically and Culture, Community and Enterprise in the second; and the final year comprises the Social Enterprise Placement and the capstone Social Enterprise Project.

The practice of reflective writing is introduced briefly as part of the varied writing exercises in the first semester course in first year, but becomes an essential element of the second semester course Introduction to Social Enterprise. It is in this course that the framework below is both taught and then used as the foundation of the rubric for assessment. In the second year courses, the practice of reflection is taken up in Thinking Ethically where students are required to develop a Personal Ethical Statement (which is considered formative) and an accompanying exegesis (which is considered summative and consequently is assessed).

In the third Year, when students are undertaking their professional placements, they are required to provide a Reflective Practice Journal as a major assessment item. Here the framework which was utilised in first year is revisited.

The Framework: the six As

<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>Research, stimulus, sources</i>
<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Meaning, comparison, examination of elements</i>
<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Evaluating the ideas or experiences</i>
<i>Application</i>	<i>Seeing the possibilities in alternative contexts</i>
<i>Action</i>	<i>What needs to be done</i>
<i>Articulation</i>	<i>Presentation, writing, referencing</i>

In Introduction to Social Enterprise (semester two, First Year) the students are introduced to the 6As as a framework for thinking through the practice of reflective writing. In the workbooks provided in the course there is a series of questions which enables the student to explore each of the “As” (elements) in some detail. While this framework could be used as template, my preference has been that it is more beneficial as a way to understand the process of reflection than as a simplified model.

Like the Revised Blooms Taxonomy (Bloom 1956, Biggs 1996), the Six As framework acknowledges the complexity of learning processes. The difference lies in the approach. The Revised Bloom’s taxonomy ranks from lowest to highest each of the competencies: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis evaluation and creativity. With the Six As, these elements are seen as parallel and often inextricable processes when applied to reflective practice.

The questions

Much of the teaching of this framework is formulated using a range of quite direct questions which enable direct engagement with each of the core ideas. The use of questions as the pivot on which each course is continuous

throughout the core stream: each course is built around at least one key question which is the nexus of engagement by student and teacher. I have included these here to demonstrate the pedagogical technique being used. This is by no means a complete or comprehensive list, but it does serve to show how the practice of reflection can be orderly and develop both self-awareness and reflexivity.

- What are the sources/ what was the experience?
- What prompted the observations?
- What was noticed or observed?
- Where did the material (or observations) come from?
- What research has been done?

Analysis

- What did the experience mean?
- What did you understand?
- What was the argument or the elements of the stimulus?
- What did the source (or experience) contribute to your understanding?
- How did you know what this meant?
- When did you realise or comprehend what was important about this experience?
- How do these ideas compare with others you have come across?
- How are they different?

Assessment

- Why was this material or experience important?
- How can you evaluate the experience/material?
- What particular or specific techniques of evaluation do you use?
- How do you know what is important in this instance?
- How can you tell what is useful or important about this experience?
- What kinds of values does this experience enable you to know you have?

Application

- How could you use these ideas (or values) in another context?
- What does this experience offer as an indication of what to do?
- What have you learnt that is useful?
- How could you use the understanding you have gained to trigger your own creative processes?

Action

- What do you need to do now?
- What further learning would be useful?
- What would be the ways in which you could use the learning you have gained from the experience?
- How would you know if a specific action is necessary and inevitable?

Articulation

- How has the reflection been expressed?
- Have the academic conventions been followed (referencing, spelling, grammar, format)?
- Has the language been carefully chosen?
- Is the text clear, concise and complete?

The framework is discussed in class, incorporated into the workbook for the initial course and is explored several times over the three years. This repetition allows for growing sophistication with each iteration, and for deeper discussions as to the possible questions that could be used to develop the particular skills.

Assessment

The assessment of Reflective Practice Journals is based precisely upon the SixAs format. Rubrics are drawn up and published, in the workbooks, on line and with the course profiles. The typical rubric reproduces the table above, with the inclusion of a range of possible results from Unsatisfactory to Excellent. As a significant element in the use of this model is the development of a life-long learning or work-integrated skill-set (Conway, Cohen and Stanhope, 1992; Fallows and Steven 2000), we use rubrics which match the expectations set by the taught framework. In this way the learning is reinforced and students recognise their own competency.

There are several advantages to using this particular framework, and possibly some disadvantages too. It allows for a clarity about precisely what is to be assessed but allows for the student to develop and utilise his/her own voice. There is a general encouragement of creativity in the exploration of the experience and sources or triggers, but not an invitation into the confessional mode which may disclose material which is not really appropriate to an academic or a work-oriented task. Marking expectations are apposite the year level of the student, but the practice can develop over time, and sophistication of conceptualisation is allowed for.

When exploring the disadvantages, the obvious one is that students use the framework quite literally and present the Reflective Practice Journal in discrete sections, each superficially addressing the “A” required. While this tends to occur more in the first year, over time the underpinning practices of reflection become ingrained and the overt use of the “A”s becomes subsumed in a more contemplative and deeper recursivity. This is evidenced in the third year showcase, in which students reflect on the entirety of the degree.

Discussion

There are a range of issues that deserve some discussion.

The structure of the Social Enterprise core stream or signature experience provides a platform for the work-integrated learning process. There are six courses so the student is engaged with the ideas that underpin the sector into which they are going on professional placement. This is not uncommon in a vocational course such as Pharmacy or Physiotherapy or Nursing, but highly unusual in a generalist degree which aspires to train scholars in the Humanities. Historians, analysts of literature or film, sociologists and philosophers all face the task of finding work at the completion of an undergraduate degree, but few universities prepare them for the workplace. This is precisely the task we have taken on. Integrating students into the Third Sector, or even raising the issues faced by the not-for-profit arena, forms a foundation for possible careers.

The issue of developing a reflective orientation which is both lucid and incorporated into ongoing practice is a significant element of the underpinning philosophy of the Social Enterprise stream. There is a strong element of performing the meaning in the ways in which the course structures (based on a model of pivotal questions) are reinforced by the use of questions to invite personal reflection. The central pedagogical thrust is towards an ingrained and articulate curiosity, both about the world and about the student’s relationship with that world.

The parallel process is invoked in the development of rubrics which match the taught framework. The use of Six As has been deliberate, as mnemonics are often a useful means of integrating a key to practice. It is also a deliberate choice not to locate the elements within a particular hierarchy, allowing for some individual learning styles or variations in thought process. Using criteria sheets which are specifically designed to allow for an assessment of the level of engagement with each of the aspects of the reflection process has enabled both the students and the teachers to engage with the practices of reflection without recourse to prior understandings.

Often this is the most difficult aspect of assessing reflective practice: what precisely do we understand reflection to be? One of the comments that I have heard repeatedly in fora where this issue has been raised is that teachers are looking for “honesty” from the student. What does this honesty consist of? For those in human services, for example, the “honesty” seems to be a transparent relationship with affect- what was the emotional response of the student to a particular experience or issue. There seems to be a different perspective on “honesty” when the reflection needs to be undertaken in either a medico/scientific discipline or in any of the pragmatic/engineering fields. Here the issue of “honesty” seems to mean a factual statement of event and interaction, without that emotional engagement of the human services.

In the Humanities, we have students whose fields of study can be either quite abstract (history, philosophy, literature) or applied (screen and film, cultural and sociological sciences). The “honesty” demanded in these fields is that of being able to apply academic and intellectual rigour to a problem, usually from an objective and relatively detached point of view. Developing a framework which enables the pursuit of that rigour while allowing for a personal subjective element of engagement has required being able to think across the range of expectations.

The Six As approach works well in the Humanities. It enables the application of rigour, trains the students in a method which can be applied across a range of experiences, and presents an assessable framework which can be drawn upon across the entire degree path. What I am curious about is how well it applies to other disciplines. At least one experiment has been tried where the framework was shared with engineers, and I look forward to hearing how it fares in other disciplinary contexts.

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