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Business students’ reflection on reflective writing assessments

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Abstract

This article analyses experiences of undergraduate business students undertaking reflective writing as incremental assignment tasks. Using Moon’s map of learning (1999) as an analytical framework, it explores values of reflective writing obtained by those students studying the Asian culture and business practice course during the first semester of 2017. Using a combination of focus group and semi-structured interviews, our study confirms that reflective writing enables the students to apply academic knowledge to future business practice. Also, the assignment tasks help the students develop logical thinking and general writing skills. To assist with the students with diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, additional and customised support will be required.

Keywords: Reflective writing, deep learning, business education

Introduction

This paper analyses reflection of business students experiencing critical reflective writing. Much literature demonstrates effectiveness of reflective practice for students’ learning. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985 p. 19) define reflection as an ‘important human activity’. Reflection will occur through consideration, deliberation and evaluation of learning experiences in the conscious mind. If learners are not conscious about their learning experiences, they are not able to judge and evaluate them. The awareness of learning experiences is an important component of learning (Boud et al., 1985). Reflection provides one such process that enables students to become mindful about their learning.

Reflective practice is increasingly used across disciplines that involve personal and behavioural change, such as education, nursing, psychology and social work. In business disciplines, reflective practice is only used in the field of management. Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) argue that reflexive practice helps students’ link knowledge with practice and develop a sense of ethical management. It will allow them to make self-judgement from an ethical perspective. In addition to the individual benefits, Gray (2007) and Blackman et al (2012) value reflective practice for collective decision-making and organisational change. Although reflective practice is used in the management education, it is not fully integrated in the curriculum of broader business education.

This paper analyses pedagogical aspects of reflection based on the experience of undergraduate business students undertaking reflective writing assignment tasks. We review literature to examine how reflective writing benefits students’ learning. After analysing business
students’ reflection on reflective writing assignment tasks, we discuss the benefits and limitations of reflective writing for business education.

**Literature review**

Reflection bridges between theories and practice based on consecutive thinking processes. Dewey (1910, p. 6) defines reflective thinking as ‘active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends’. Schön (1983) outlines the two-phase reflection for learning – “reflection in action” and “reflection on action.” The primary difference between the two lies in chronological consideration – whether reflection happens during an experience or event (in-action) or after (on-action) in order to encourage learners to relate their experience to theory. Ertmer and Newby (1996, p. 12) highlight the importance of this two-phase reflection ‘for transforming the knowledge gained in and on action into knowledge available for action’. Reflection, thus develops the capacity to think and make sense of learning (Cisero, 2006; Morrison, 1996).

Reflection also facilitates critical thinking. Proctor (1993) suggests that criticality is developed by reflection because it encourages students to widen their “horizon” of considerations to evaluate situations in professional and personal contexts. Oftentimes, the main purpose of reflection can be associated with criticality (Smyth, 1989) but here, criticality may indicate a critical view of the content of an action (Proctor, 1993) or “the self” or the “professional self” in particular contexts (Moon, 1999). In order to develop a critical stance, reflective writing needs to be employed, using specific topics to bring depth and precision - ‘continuous evaluation’ in its process (Moon, 1999). Reflective writing facilitates the development of critical thinking.

Reflective writing is regarded as an effective tool for facilitating student learning in higher education (Cisero, 2006; Clarke, 2004; Duffy, 2000; Gorlewski & Greene, 2011; Hickson, 2011; Krest, 1990; McCarthy, 2011; Morrison, 1996; Purcell, 2013). Reflective writing involves ‘cognitive, affective, social and meta-cognitive’ engagement (Randjelovic et al., 2003, p. 243). Cognitively, reflective writing can help students move from surface to deep learning, and it is a powerful tool to develop their confidence and cognitive ability (Randjelovic et al., 2003). Metacognitively, reflective writing requires students to critically analyse, organise, and consolidate various ideas into more coherent and better-structured knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1984; King, 2002). Emotionally, reflective writing is not just a way to express or display one’s own knowledge but it also allows students to reflect on what they know to clarify their thoughts and to stimulate and foster their ability to organize knowledge and reflect upon beliefs (Prosser & Webb, 1994; Vacca & Linek, 1992). Therefore, a deep and refined reflective writing skill plays an important role in the learning process, and its impact on learning performance (Cisero, 2006; Clarke, 2004; Morrison, 1996; Purcell, 2013).

Despite such effectiveness, several concerns remain for the choice of reflective writing as an assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Cohen et al., 2001). Creme (2005, p. 289) argues that unlike other genre of university assignment tasks such as reports and essays, reflective writing is ‘more open ended, questioning and exploratory, enabling exploration of connections between ideas encountered in the course and the writer’s experience’. Kember et al. (2000); Kember et al. (2008) also validate difficulties of assessing the levels of reflection from written responses.

An inquiry into the level of students’ reflection requires attention to Moon (1999)’s map and representation of learning. Developed by authors, Table 1 frames the cognitive structure of our learning mechanism by five stages of learning. These learning stages are hierarchical. Learning is progressed from surface to deeper learning. At the last two stages of learning, such
as working with meaning and transformative learning, students reach the culmination of deep learning.

Table 1 Map of learning and representation of learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of learning</th>
<th>Deep / surface learning</th>
<th>Explanations</th>
<th>Best possible representation of learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Noticing</td>
<td>Surface learning</td>
<td>The student registers the topic of focus as being interesting or important to further explore.</td>
<td>Memorised representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Making sense</td>
<td>Surface learning</td>
<td>The student thinks more about ‘it’ and seek coherence in the material perceived.</td>
<td>Reproduction of ideas, ideas are not yet well linked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Making meaning</td>
<td>Surface / Deeper</td>
<td>The student starts to understand ‘it’ reasonably adequately, to ask questions and to link ideas together. The material of learning is registered in the cognitive structure.</td>
<td>Meaningful, well-integrated and ideas are linked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Working with meaning</td>
<td>Deep learning</td>
<td>The student makes links with other ideas and events. They would refer to other research/literature. The thinking over things occurs until they organise the understanding towards a particular purpose.</td>
<td>Meaningful, reflective, and well-structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Transformative learning</td>
<td>Deep learning</td>
<td>The student with self-motivation has reached the point where they can formulate new ideas of their own. This stage can be repetitive without having contact with the original material of learning.</td>
<td>Meaningful, reflective, restructured by learner - idiosyncratic or creative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed by authors based on Moon (1999, p. 138)

In our research, deeper learning is defined as a process that students can reach sense-making and apply it to new situations. This can be equated to transfer of learning (Argote, 2013) or ownership of learning (Scott, 2015). As a result of “deeper learning”, students gain transferable knowledge (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012), that makes judgement of how, why, and when to apply such knowledge to deal with ‘ill-defined problems’ (Kember et al., 2008, p. 369). Reflective writing brings transferable knowledge which enables the application of their learning to their personal and professional contexts (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Our empirical research verifies that business students experienced deeper learning and knowledge transfer through reflective writing assignments.

Research design

This paper examines undergraduate business students experiencing reflective writing assignment tasks. Using a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the
data is collected from eight students who undertook a core business course titled the Culture and Business Practice in Asia in the first semester in 2017. These students are in the third year in the undergraduate business programs. Only one student has experienced a reflective writing assignment task before taking the core business course. During the 40 minutes interviews and focus groups, the students are asked about the benefits and limitations of reflective writing assignment tasks and how those assignment tasks enable them to achieve the course learning outcomes.

Considering unfamiliarity of reflective writing, teaching staff provide a range of learning resources to students. These resources called the reflective writing assignment pack include an assignment guide, rubric, writing sample, DIEP writing structure, workshops with learning advisors (Ichii & Dwyer, 2014). Table 2 lists the content and purpose of those resources. As listed in the table, the students are expected to use the DIEP writing structure with four sections including Description, Interpretation, Evaluation and Plan. On the DIEP material there are relevant questions and introductory sentences by each DIEP section. It helps students understand requirements of each DIEP section and structure reflective writing. These pedagogical interventions are a key aspect of introducing reflective writing assignment tasks to the business students.

### Table 2: Reflective writing assignment pack

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task outline in the course guide</td>
<td>Explicit requirements of the assignment</td>
<td>● Description of the assignment task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Linking the assignment to the course learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment guidelines</td>
<td>Explains how to address the assignment</td>
<td>● Checklist of important elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Annotated writing samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment rubrics</td>
<td>How the assignment is evaluated by tutors</td>
<td>● Matrix outlines elements of writing features with scales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Assessment criteria aligned with course learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIEP writing structure material</td>
<td>How to structure reflective writing assignments</td>
<td>● Explanation of the important elements of a written academic reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RMIT Study and Learning Centre,</td>
<td></td>
<td>● examples of introductory sentences by each section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>Introduce and explain the features of the reflective writing task</td>
<td>● In-class workshop by learning advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Powerpoint slides and a hand-out explaining differences between report, essay and reflective writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ichii & O’Dwyer (2014)

Our core business course applies an incremental process to reflective writing assignment tasks. The students experience short reflections (250 words) based on the assigned course readings four times and select one of the short writings to develop a long reflection (600 words). In addition, reflective writing is included in the final exam. These assignments are worth 80/100 in total (10/100 for one short reflection each and 20/100 for a long reflection and the exam respectively). All short reflective writing pieces are marked by teaching staff and reviewed by peers in class. The incremental assignment process gives the students an opportunity to develop reflective writing skills and to receive regular feedback from teaching staff and peers.
The sample of our qualitative data is relatively small. It represents about five per cent of the total number of the course enrolment, approximately 200 students. Although this small sample size may not represent all of the student experiences, the data is collected immediately after the course finishes. This increases validity of the data. Also, our research uses written course feedback survey collected by the university at the end of the semester. This survey completed by roughly one-third of the students complements the small size of our qualitative data.

Results and discussions

Application for personal and professional development

One of the significant benefits of reflective writing is the application of student learning into their future practice. The students are expected to use the DIEP structure, which is designed to encourage knowledge transfer in the process of writing. The application of the DIEP structure helps students to describe, interpret, evaluate and plan in a systematic manner. As Students H and C comment,

It's important because half the time you learn all of this stuff and you don't necessarily know what it means to you. And ... if you're literally told to think about it in that way, you obviously more inclined to find a reason as to why it's suitable for you. (Student H)

It is insightful as it teaches us how to apply what we learn during lesson to real life work[ing] situation in future... it is how we plan to apply it during work that is important and this course has allowed us to learn more efficiently... (Student C)

Subsequently, several students commented on meaning of learning through the reflective writing process. The use of the DIEP structure enables the students to interpret their new learning. They are able to see a focu[ed] topic from diverse angles, realising there is no single answer (Kember et al, 2001 & 2008).

It's all subjective... I don't necessarily believe that there is a right or wrong... it gives you the opportunity to justify yourself and kind of explain yourself on a deeper level. (Student H)

maybe you can shift the content to another topic, like you don't have to talk about that topic [itself] … or maybe you can link to something else, in the same sense… it's not about right or wrong, it's more about how you justify your answer. (Student C)

Student G also affirms this point as ‘...you have deeper understanding on the thing you're learning.’, and through the process, students ‘conceptualise and think’ about the topic on a deeper level (Student F).

In addition, the students mention their learning is transferable to cross-cultural contexts in domestic and international business spheres.

Approaching a business deal... and how you behave and what's considered respectful and what wasn't during the business meeting… Conferences that staff are sending you over, you kind of want to know where to look… How to research these cultural patterns so you don't do something offensive… most people could
relate it back to how they wanna apply this into their future careers whether it be internationally or locally. (Student D).

These student voices indicate a sign of deep learning that requires identifying specific, durable steps for students to transfer knowledge into the real-world practice. In the last section of the DIEP process, Plan, the students are able to explore how to absorb what they learned for their future practice. As Tuleja (2014) confirms, reflection enables students in the international business program to develop cultural intelligence and find a connection between knowledge and action. On this point, reflection indeed is a useful tool for business education.

**Heightened confidence through the improvement of thinking and writing skills**

Another benefit of reflective writing is to provide students an opportunity to develop their thinking and writing skills. Most students notice the supplementary benefit of gaining these skills. Student C, for example, highlight the ripple effect of reflective writing - initiating in-class discussions as well as developing logical thinking and writing skills.

I learned, just like practice of writing… and thinking skill… it helped me because I’m more engaged in [to] the discussion in class, because of the practical writing from this course… we had reflective writing and we get to discuss a lot, so I’m more confident to… discuss[ion] in other subjects as well…. you can use that as a practice to your writing skills… And when you apply that to an essay, the structure is a bit different but in terms of logical thinking it’s the same… (Student C).

As noted by Ryan (2011), Ryan and Ryan (2013), successful academic reflective writing must be taught with the structure. The student confirmed this, emphasising the usefulness of the DIEP structure which assisted them to develop writing skills.

[DIEP] helped me, definitely… I had that saved on my uni folder and open it every time… I did not know how to start one when we first came across this. (Student E)

**Difficulties of the reflective writing assignment for business students**

Despite various benefits mentioned by the students, they also talk about some difficulties in writing reflections. Student D explains that some students struggle with reflective writing, rather than the reflective practice itself.

DIEP… if the person can write really well, evaluation won’t be a problem but most students… Chinese students… some of my friends found that they struggled. [It’s more English rather than idea?] … They had the idea but how are they gonna write it. (Student D).

Another challenge is that some students hesitate to express their own personal ideas and using ‘I’, the first-person voice on their writing. Usually business courses require students to write essays and reports in the third-person voice to make their writing more analytical, which tends to be valued more highly than reflection (Hedberg, 2008). The student E also commented on the personal nature of reflective writing as students ‘are being very personalable,… vulnerable and open… not normal for me in an essay… rarely putting in facts’.

Most importantly, reflective writing requires a high standard of writing skill. Without existing knowledge on the theoretical frameworks and business practice, the students could face difficulties to express knowledge transfer in their writing. This is a significant issue for those from non-English speaking countries and those in an earlier stage of their study. The students need to develop the application of their academic knowledge to business practice in the third
Reflective writing in the business program

Our data shows a strong consensus that business students highly valued reflective writing. Although the majority of the students had not experienced reflective writing in their study, all of them highlighted the benefits of reflective writing. Unfortunately; however, the students cannot apply their reflective writing skill to other courses in their program. Three students talked about their frustration with standardised assignments in other courses and lack of applicability of their learning through reflective writing within their business program.

Normally business courses... to be honest, I don't really get what we learn in the class, how are we going to learn?... Teaching staff is really good in a sense that you're teaching how you're gonna apply it in a real-life situation... (Student C)

More importantly, introducing incremental use of reflective writing have significantly contributed to habituating reflective writing and their overall learning experience. The comment in the evaluation emphasised:

…I am a lateral thinker, I don’t do well with examinations however I do well when things are built up incrementally. With this course I was able to visibly see as each week went on I was actually improving … [the] feedback… always motivated me to improve my work and showed me where… I was falling short. (Survey comment 3, 2017)

The benefits of reflective writing were confirmed by the business students experiencing the incremental process of reflective writing assignment. Harnessing students’ ability to link their learning to real-life situations is a critical part of our teaching approach. Reflective writing is one such approach that enhances students’ deep learning (Moon, 1999). The value of reflective writing as an assessment task needs to be shared across business programs.

Conclusion

This paper analyses undergraduate business students' experiences of the reflective writing assignment tasks. Using a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, our study confirms that students value knowledge transfer, critical thinking and writing skills through an incremental process of reflective writing tasks.

Despite the benefits, the students faced difficulties to write reflections. Most of the business students have never experienced the assignment tasks in the other courses. Reflective writing requires more personal approach, coupled with a high standard of writing skill. This feature of reflective writing is significantly distinct from the traditional genres of university assignments, such as reports and essays which business students tend to be accustomed to. In addition, without having existing academic knowledge and business practices, the students are not able to demonstrate an application of the knowledge to business practice in the Asian context. These challenges are observed from those of non-English speaking background and in the second year of their study.

As our research confirms, reflective practice enables the students to transfer academic knowledge to business practice. This is a core capability of the business programs. The faculty need to work in a reflective manner that encourages students to be familiar with reflective
practice and achieve knowledge transfer across the programs. Finally, students will benefit from further evidence-based research and teaching practice on reflective practice in business education. We believe the contribution of our research marks the first step for this.

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References


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