

Reward through collective reflection: An autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an exemplar to teachers and professionals for engaging with collective reflection techniques for vocational development and identity consciousness. Drawing on concepts of collective reflection and autoethnography, this paper explores the journey of our academic teaching team through a combination of individual reflections, diaries and recollections that occurred during the application process of a teaching and learning award. This salient journey enabled us to reflect on 'what we do' and challenged us to deeply consider 'why we do it'. This experience has consequently had considerable impact on how we conduct our internship programme, how we view ourselves in relation to others and insights into how we learn.

Keywords: Collective reflection; vocational development; autoethnography.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate through example the possible rewards of engaging in collective reflection. This paper is about the journey of our team upon enlightenment of our vocational practices and personal strengths instigated by an award application process. Coming from dissimilar backgrounds, this passage would confront our differences and channel our priorities rewarding us through the growth and trust we now foster as a team. It is upon reflecting on this experience that we noticed a shift in our attitudes, behaviour and even our language due to the nature of our learning.

Drawing on concepts of autoethnography – a research technique in which the individual becomes the phenomenon (McIlveen 2008) – this paper explores the collective journey of our Internship Programme team through a combination of individual reflections, diaries and recollections of events that occurred during the development of the teaching and learning award application. This paper firstly presents collective reflection, vocational development and the style of autoethnography. The reader is taken into the narrative of the journey to the first experience of insightfulness and to the collective and individual learning which now inform our practice.

It must be recognised at the outset that throughout this paper we refer to ourselves as a team, taking a 'collective approach' to reflection (Reynolds & Vince 2004). Our collaboration in this journey affords merit to uniting our thoughts, feelings and insights to examine our learning and identify the key factors that have shifted our pedagogical knowledge and informed our practices. Although we were not successful in winning the award, reflection aided the realisation of our reward, our burgeoning learning experience and outcomes that we will here illustrate.

Collective Reflection and Autoethnography

Reflection has long been acknowledged for its credence in learning from experiences in professional practice. Through reflective activities, such as diarising and debriefing, a practitioner may discover a new knowledge which can inform their practice. Historically, reflection on practice can be seen in the early works of Kolb (see Kolb 1984) through his principles on experiential learning. Dewey was among the first to highlight the importance of reflection in professional development for teachers. Dewey (1933) promoted reflection as a means by which teachers can act with foresight and plan for the future based on their learning from past classroom experiences. Schön (1987) furthered the notion by describing two main forms of reflection used by professionals, reflection in-action and reflection on-action. The notion that reflection is fundamental to the professional development of teachers is reflected heavily in the literature (Hole & McEntee 1999; Zeichner & Liston 1996; Clark 1995). Moon (1999) stipulates a list of behaviours which may characterise reflective practice. These may include, the mental processing of reflection; a critical element; self-development or professional development; emotional involvement; or, enhanced by the sharing of reflection with others.

However we took a collective approach in our journey using reflection for learning. Collective reflection is the means by which two or more people embrace the reflective process together, thus resulting in collective knowledge. Reflection can be a social, relational and collective process (Reynolds & Vince 2004). Collective reflection has been seen in the literature of organisational learning and professional development (Reynolds & Vince 2004) and as a means by which practitioners can foster career development strategies. Collective reflection in experiential learning has also been connected to freedom, democracy and social justice as possibilities and actions of society and of the individual (Garfinkel 1967). However through this process, learning is both personal and collective (De Lawtyer & Sosin 2000) as parties consciously and

unconsciously engage to learn with each other. In our journey the outcomes that arise from the experiences are essentially that, a combination of both personal insights and collective knowledge.

While we have used collective reflection as the tool for our learning, the outcomes of our learning is largely focused on our vocational development within our roles. While vocational development is largely contextually dependent, theorists also identify social interactions as a critically important to this process (e.g., Krumboltz & Thoresen 1964; Vroom 1964). Continuous vocational development though, is important to ensure that our practices are improved and we are satisfied in our work. Reflection enables us to critically examine what we do and why do it and as seen in the literature of professional practice (Schon 1987). Through reflection we can gain a better understanding of ourselves and our roles and identity in the workplace. Gerwitz et al (2009) endorses a need to better understand teachers working lives and lived experiences as well as how to better enhance teachers' professional practice.

The structure and style of this paper extends Duarte's (2007) autoethnographic journey on the scholarship of teaching and learning however from a collective reflection perspective. Autoethnographic writing begins by presenting a descriptive account of events and activities from which a reflective analysis takes place, uncovering new ideas and enhancing sensitivity towards the process that evolved (Duarte 2007). Autoethnography is typically seen in anthropology, sociology, and education (Anderson 2006; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Etherington 2004). This qualitative research method is not simply a story-telling, rather it is a form of critical enquiry embedded in theory and practice (McIlveen 2008), in this instance utilising the theory of reflective learning to inform our vocational practices. The examination of self as a methodology has been criticised by some as self-indulgent (Coffey 1999; Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Autoethnography can be seen as pushing the boundaries of traditional academic research (Sparkes 2000) however as Ellis (1997) explains, this genre breaks through academic discourse which fundamentally camouflages the author. Autoethnography is a reflexive writing genre which provides an avenue to learn through exposure and vulnerability (Ellis 1997). Jackson (1989, p.17) describes the research process as embodied in the researchers journey, that our "understanding of others can only proceed from within our own experiences, and this experience involves our personalities and histories as much as our field of research". Other authors extend this idea by agreeing that the traditional objectivist perspective is to look backwards (Ellis 1997), however they regard the writing process as inseparable to the process of inquiry (Richardson 2000; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Van Manen 2002).

While autoethnography is defined as an individual or personal account, this paper explores autoethnography through a team of two people. Therefore both our methodology and writing style embraces an explicit collective approach for the critical analysis of self. This paper describes our journey, what we have learnt and how it has informed our practice.

Narrative of the Journey

Throughout 2008, with endorsement from senior management at the University of Wollongong, we set out to develop an internship programme in the Faculty of Commerce which represented an initiative in pursuit of work integrated learning (WIL), regional development and social innovation. The Faculty had cemented a commitment to WIL as a core requirement in curriculum development earlier that year and our programme would become the flagship for this objective. Policy initiatives can have a considerable impact on the emotional well being of a teacher (Sikes 2009) and in our case the endorsement from the Faculty to develop this programme, brought us the opportunity to create an innovative programme and become excited, challenged and rewarded in our roles.

After a pilot of the programme in Spring 2008, we were excited at the recognition of being nominated by our students and peers for a University of Wollongong Teaching and Learning award. The process we were to undertake in the following seven months however would take us on a rollercoaster of frustration, excitement, insight and progress. Although the programme had a successful pilot completed, we were busy tripling the number of placement opportunities and increasing awareness of the programme amongst students at the time of nomination. Programme development and coordination, although goal focussed, relied on daily instinctual and almost reactive processes. Due to the escalating opportunities that the programme was encountering, we had not taken the time to stop and reflect on documenting and appreciating what we had achieved. The award nomination facilitated this transition.

'AHA' Moment

On a scheduled afternoon to work on the award application, we decided to take a break instead and grab a coffee as the day had been an onslaught of back-to-back meetings. Walking down to the coffee shop on the other side of campus, we had a discussion that would bring about insight and enlightenment. The conversation led us to discuss our backgrounds and eventually to an 'Aha' moment, where we realised that we had different approaches as a result of this.

Our stories in how we came to the university and into academia are quite different, and to understand our thought processes we had to first look back. One author, from the management discipline, comes from industry and has years of experience in supply chain management. This author thinks on the larger scale, seeing the bigger picture and has strengths in innovation, structure and positioning from a process oriented perspective. The second author has come through the marketing discipline and, with little industry experience, has had ties with both creative arts and commerce faculties. This author is a creative thinker, an artist, with a primary focus on people engagement and other details.

These differences in foci had implicitly led us to take on different roles when developing the programme. Building the programme from scratch, the first author with industry and academic experience, took on the primary role of organisational relationships, selecting and recruiting potential organisations to host students for internships, and curriculum development including reflective assessments. The other author, who only in the last few years has graduated, felt an unidentified affinity with students and took on the role of coordinating and nurturing students, as well as administrative and marketing tasks.

Reflecting on our differences helped us to 'find our common language' (Gadamer 1992). What resonates with us both is our interest in teaching, learning and team work. An abstract from our submitted award application reflects this;

"...The internship team has been brought together through our shared passion for learning; that is learning ourselves and encouraging others to learn. For this reason the programme serves as a vehicle to nurture student learning... However, the operationalization of our philosophy is furthered through our commitment to collaboration. We see participating as a team as core to the success of our programme, with the commitment we show internally in regards to teamwork, mirrored externally through industry partnerships, collegiality and our dissemination of knowledge."

Coming to this realisation, we decided to use these skills, which we implicitly found in our roles of the programme, to our benefit for our practices in the workplace and also

for this award application. We both recall feelings of satisfaction and confidence as our differences could be, and should be, used as complimentary strengths.

Award/Reward: Collective Learning Outcomes

While our application was unsuccessful, the internal letter with feedback from the judging panel focused on the need to have sustainability of the program which is valid and accepted. During a coffee debrief we brought up the award decision. Initially we both felt deflated due to the enormity of work dedicated to the application, and with pen in hand, we decided to make a list of all the things we had learnt. We decided that we would look at the experience and our journey in putting together the application and how much value it had brought to us personally, to the programme and to our team. In retrospect, it was here that we were using reflection as a tool for personal and professional development (Moon 1999). This process of reflection on our journey throughout the application process came about as an activity we consciously engaged in to make meaning of what we had been through. If the learner does not intend to learn, then experiences can not be transformed into learning (Eraunt 1994), therefore we entered into the process with the intention to reveal what we had learnt and what this meant for us as individuals, and as a team.

We both felt as though it was an important process to go through to gain new insights and to reflect personally on our own teaching and learning philosophies. Collaboratively, the application asked us to comment on our philosophies which led us to one layer of personal learning. Building on this however, through the process of reflecting on our journey, we enhanced our understanding of our personal philosophies and entered the realm of higher-order cognitive learning and identity. For instance, the award application process describes how we support student learning and engagement through the integration of reflective assessments, so that students gain the practical internship experience and also have the opportunity to create meaning from their learning. We ask students to reflect on the knowledge and skills transferred from university into the workplace, and, during and after the internship, the knowledge and skills transferable from the workplace to university, job seeking and future employment. The following section outlines our learning from this journey.

New Approach

This journey has caused us to reflect on 'what we do' and 'why we do what we do'. As a result of this reflection, our learning can be seen on two levels; the first level as vocational development and identity, and the second as a collective, what we have discovered as a team. During a feedback session of our programme, we asked our students' post-internship whether they would use reflection, either formally or informally, in their future professional practice. One student made the following observation;

"No, I probably won't. I like to separate my professional and private life and didn't really enjoy the 'bleeding' that occurred between the two from the formal reflection process. I will critically think about my professional practice."

Unlike this student, we found that this experience, which occurred in our professional sphere, did provide insight into our personal philosophies as well as professional practices. As a diary entry of the second author denotes, "today during a workshop we were told that we were allowed to include pictures and that there wasn't standard formatting. I'm excited to include our recent photos from the shoot and those media articles. I feel it will really enhance the application". In retrospect, this entry reflects the creativity that was contributed to the application. From a personal perspective this author can now identify why those feelings of excitement and contribution were

aroused and useful in a personal sense of being able to tell a story and will aim to integrate this creative passion in the workplace and in conducting the programme in the future.

Although the first author openly admits here that creativity is not their forte, we now each have a better understanding of what excites us. The first author during a casual discussion, made mention that it is the chase and challenge that excites them. Setting up the programme, becoming nominated for an award, recruiting organisations, all these things which we understand are those big picture activities which are essential in this role. Reflections of this author indicate a new learning framework:

“The realisation that making connections inline with the different types of reflective practices, enables me to take a fresh approach to program design. I have adopted multiple types of practice rather than have a singular focus. My focus is now on learning is for learning’s sake rather than recognition of learning as typically identified by students’ outcomes”

In terms of our vocational development as teachers we have a better understanding of our own learning through reflection which means we can become better educators of reflection for the benefit of our student’s learning. In the programme our assessment tasks include keeping a daily log and a final reflective journal at the end of the student’s internship. Keeping our own formal log and investigating reflective theory has enabled us to understand and empathise with our students engaging in reflection on practice. We now feel more of a connectedness to teaching and learning, in that we feel we are doing great things for our students and for the community.

Reflecting together has further allowed us to bring about a shared understanding and grown our professional relationship. De Lawtyer and Sosin (2000, p.9), propose the following on collective reflection:

“Collective reflection holds the potential to create a new language for speaking about new and shared understandings grounded in experience. It has a quality that warrants communicating more about a quality of being consciously open to difference and other-ness”

From frustrating dissonance to vocational development and insights into identity, sharing this experience has allowed us to find our common ground (Gadamer 1992) and grow our professional rapport. Technically, we now notice that we use a lot of the same words in our vocabulary and communications, words such as ‘us’ and ‘team’, ‘opportunity’, ‘reflection’, ‘learning experience’ and ‘development’. However we also have a greater understanding of each other’s roles and strengths within the team and the greater university community. We are now also borrowing from each other’s way of thinking. Considering bigger picture synergies, structure and relationships or paying more attention to detail. With this awareness comes a mutual respect for that way of thinking and we can better anticipate the other’s motives and reactions.

In the broader context, our experience contributes to the body of belief that reflection can facilitate vocational and professional development and uncover issues of identity. It has lead to the development of deeper cognitive knowledge as well as new knowledge, promoted a broader understanding and appreciation for others, and created greater consciousness of self (Osterman & Kottkamp 2004). It helps challenge current beliefs and confronts ideals, and in our instance it illuminated our teaching and learning pedagogy and philosophy. It has also assisted in identifying how our current beliefs and personal styles impact upon our decision making and thought processes.

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